



Blackwater

Book One: The Siren Seal
By Lucid

Chapter 1

Varis

Varis was the last real vestige of the Grenaldian empire's claim over the ocean, and this was Sivan's last night in his homeland.

Tomorrow he would wed the man seated far across the long table. As the third child of the Earl of the Spear, Sivan should have been grateful to marry higher than his status. His fiancé was a pale man with straw-colored hair and contrasting sideburns so red one wondered if he dyed them. He was not a particularly attractive man, but certainly thought he was with the way he strutted around the manor like a proud peacock.

This was Prince Gregor, the second prince of the Vheltan empire. Sivan had only known him for a few days, but they had been communicating through letters for weeks as his fiancé made the long trek south to the Grenaldian capital to retrieve his groom. Sivan wasn't sure what he had expected. He had heard the rumors about this man, that he was a lech who left a long line

of scarred servants in his wake. But he was determined to give the prince the benefit of the doubt, and he had been encouraged by the elegant script and flowery writing in those letters.

“How old are you now, darling?” Gregor asked through sloppy mouthfuls of roasted duck.

Ugh, he was already calling him pet names. Sivan swallowed down the gag that threatened to escape his tightly clamped jaw. “Seven and twenty, your highness,” he said politely despite his internal disgust. Evidently the letters had been a facade, or more likely, they were written by one of his retainers given the task of wooing the broken Grenaldian lord.

“Hm. You sure did take your time to get married, huh?” Gregor smacked his lips loudly, not even bothering to restrain his unbridled belch. The so-called prince was at least several years older than Sivan, yet he still felt the need to cast judgement on his age. Even Sivan’s father was unimpressed by this man, his stern face twitching at the prince’s utter lack of manners.

“My son’s effort in the war delayed any search for marriage prospects until this year,” his father said coolly. If it weren’t for Gregor’s complete lack of awareness he would have picked up on the icy chill in the earl’s tone.

No matter how strict Sivan’s father was with him personally, Earl Tristan Montgomery was still proud of his son. He was a stern looking man, albeit still good-looking for his age. His dark gray beard was streaked with white and trimmed severely, which only added to his dour appearance. Sivan’s mother had always teased his father that he sacrificed all his sweetness to become so handsome.

The earl was the admiral who commanded the Grenaldian empire’s once massive naval fleet. Sivan was the first to enlist when the war started; it was expected of the third child who had more dueling medals than swords. Sivan’s rise in the ranks

was greased by his talent and status. He led sailors to battle, the wings of victory at their heels. No other commander could match his tenacity, his fearlessness in the wake of an unstoppable force.

Until he couldn't.

Gregor made an attempt to wipe his mouth with his napkin, but missed so widely he ended up smearing grease on his already stained sleeves. "No doubt, Sivan's naval background is impressive, impressive. A shame you had to give up even though the war is still raging, isn't it, darling?"

Sivan had to dig his nails into the pads of his palms under the table to keep from leaping up and driving a fork into the prince's eye. Years and years of etiquette training allowed his face to remain placid, even gracing the prince with a tense smile that looked vaguely natural.

The scar on his right arm throbbed, an angry red split across his copper skin that had not faded since he had received it. Sivan hadn't *given up*; he had nearly been killed when he tried to kill the king of the Uncharted filth they had been at war with for nine years. His entire battalion had died in front of him. Sivan was helpless to stop it. Not a single one had survived.

By all rights he shouldn't be alive. He shouldn't be breathing when his fellow sailors were at the bottom of a sea that was no longer theirs. But he had somehow survived, washed ashore of a Grenaldian trading post and sent back to his father in Varis. Sivan sometimes wished he had died back then. Ever since, he had not been able to lift a sword without pain lancing up his arm, and his nightmares were plagued by the visage of that monster of a king. The ocean he had known all his life, the one he grew up on, the one he fell in love with, was now his enemy. He couldn't even be near the water without his insides churning.

Not given a response, Gregor barreled on with the conversation by himself. "Nonetheless, your talent as a linguist makes you

quite valuable. Vhelta will be pleased to add you to our collection." He paused, looking at Sivan at length before continuing, "as will I. You are still quite beautiful despite your age."

The prince chuckled to himself, rather pleased with what he thought was an admirable courting attempt.

Sivan did not snap. He did not jump up on the table and trample over the elegantly presented food to crush the prince's throat with his bare hands, the greasy man's face turning purple and swollen as the life was squeezed out of him. He did not.

But he imagined it in great detail.

What a start to a beautiful marriage.



The rest of the dinner went by in a blur. Sivan did not eat much. His tightly contained rage fed his stomach. The prince left, complaining of how full he was and that it was too hot here to do anything other than retire early.

Sivan waited until his father stood, reminding himself that his own title of lord was ranked lowest amongst the three of them.

The earl walked over to a window overlooking the capital. Dusk was falling, enveloping Varis in a haze that its citizens felt to their core. The dull golden light filtered through the glass, casting both Montgomerys' copper skin with a soft golden hue. Inside the manor was carefully maintained luxury, the dining room a glittering picture of their country's past wealth and might. But outside their people were feeling the effects of this long and arduous war.

"Follow me," his father said solemnly, although his tone was always solemn, even on the rare chance when he praised Sivan.

Sivan followed the earl down the hall and into his office.

The room was in disarray in comparison to the dining hall. They had lost most of their servants in the last few years, and only a few of the most loyal remained despite the downgraded pay and increase in work. They somehow managed to keep the heavily trafficked areas of the manor presentable.

In the middle of the office was a war table. Sivan's mother tried to protest when his father had brought it home several years ago. She wanted keep the war out of the house, but the war was everywhere. There was no escaping it. She couldn't escape it when one of the Uncharted-driven plagues wiped through the city a few years ago.

Sivan looked at the table, his golden eyes dull in the dim light of the room. Even so, he could see Grenaldia was not faring well. It had been some time since he'd been in here. His father had stopped asking for his tactical opinion ever since he came back broken and scarred.

The country of Grenaldia was represented on the table. Their ancestors knew that if they controlled the seas, they controlled the continent. They had focused their conquest along coastlines and on islands. The resulting country resembled a winding snake, guarding the rest of the land from the dangers of the ocean.

The tiny silver Grenaldian ships representing the naval fleet were few in number. Only a few remained around the capital and sparse trading posts. There were once hundreds of these tiny ships, but most of them were packed away along with their hopes of winning this war.

Sivan was surprised to find that while the silver ships dwindled, the obsidian ships had grown in number. These were not Uncharted ships, but the Royal Navy still regarded them as an enemy. "Pirates," the earl would spit, knocking away a silver ship to replace it with the black that represented the growing criminal

empire. They were a wildcard in the war, sometimes pillaging Grenaldian ports, and sometimes ripping through an Uncharted barricade to free the same ports.

The equally small ruby red Uncharted ships decorated the vastness of the ocean with their enormity. So many cities had fallen since Sivan had last been in here. It was disheartening, seeing the reality of their situation on display. He wanted to shove all the tiny ships to the ground, wiping it all clean.

The red ships glinted cruelly, their shine reminding Sivan of the feral smiles of the Uncharted. His mind spun back to the last battle against them, the overwhelming pressure of the enemy's viciousness suffocating him. The scar on Sivan's arm burned at the memory, causing him to clench his jaw and fist simultaneously.

His father broke him out of his pained flashback with a pointed cough. Sivan straightened immediately, rearranging his face into an unfeeling mask. His father had caught him spacing out like this several times. He never said anything about it, which Sivan appreciated. The earl didn't know how to address any emotion other than anger, and his son didn't want to make their already tense relationship worse by having a heart to heart neither of them knew how have.

"What do you think of the...prince?"

Sivan tried to not laugh at the pause. Tristan Montgomery was a man of selective words, and one had to understand what he was really saying by the space he left for words that were too improper to speak.

"He's...fine," Sivan said flatly. He touched a silver ship with a finger, his fingernails chewed down to the nail bed. It was a nervous habit he had when he was a child, one that infuriated his father and teachers until he was mature enough to learn impulse control.

This last year he had started doing it again, in his sleep. The

nightmares came, and by morning his fingernails were ragged.

Sivan pulled his hand away from the ship and looked at his father. “He doesn’t think I deserve him. Inlanders no longer respect Grenaldia, with us losing a war for nine years.”

The earl made a quiet, angry noise in his throat, turning to the window. Beyond the glass he could see the queen’s castle, pristine white arches showing off their forgotten greatness.

“Some of them think the war is being fabricated by the queen. We tell them we’re fighting sirens and monsters who crawl out of the sea. It sounds like a fairytale. They don’t believe the Uncharted even exist.”

Sivan let his face scrunch up a fraction before smoothing it over once more. “They do, though.”

“Mm,” his father hummed, and that was the closest Sivan ever got to a comforting word over the matter. “At least Vhelta is far away...you’ll be safe there.”

Sivan nodded, forcing his right hand to unclench when the pain receded. He had requested this, he asked his father to find him a husband that was as far away from the ocean as possible. But he still felt a pang of sorrow, for being sent so far away from his homeland.

Fixing his posture, he looked at the earl head on. “What are we getting in return?”

“Food. Enough to feed Varis for a year if we keep rationing the way we have been.” His father averted his gaze, knowing he’d sunk low enough to sell his only son’s hand for bags of grain.

Sivan nodded slowly. The situation was dire, people were starving. The inland countries were unwilling to help Grenaldia. Many of them still harbored resentment for having their coastal land snatched away centuries ago.

“I understand. I will fulfill my duty to my country.” Sivan’s

words were short, without feeling. He knew this was his duty. He wanted to help his people. He just wished he didn't have to marry a man who couldn't tell his sleeve apart from a napkin.

Sivan waited until his father dismissed him with an errant wave of his hand before leaving. He fled the manor as quickly as possible without breaking out into an all out sprint. All these gilded paintings, the intricate moulding cast into pillars of marble, the plush carpet meticulously maintained. It was all so opulent, and it left a sour taste in his mouth.



Sivan walked through the city, forgetting he was dolled up to meet his future husband. He was wearing his nicest tailored suit, embroidered with silver and gold on a gray sea of flowing tails. His fringe of silver hair fell in front of his face, and it hid the stares, the pointing and whispers. At least he could walk out in public still. His father and sisters got jeered at openly. The people of Grenaldia only maintained some fragment of respect for him because he'd been celebrated as a war hero for so long.

But he was no longer a hero. He was just a broken man, sold off to the highest bidder.

Sivan bumped into a child so filthy he thought they were part of the ground. He apologized, but was unable to look directly at the gaunt face of the child. Everyone in the city was starving, with the exception of the nobles. They controlled the intake of food, so they believed they should naturally get their fill first.

He sped past once lavish market facades. These used to be brimming with customers and life, glittering almost as brilliantly as the manors of the nobles. Now they sat mostly abandoned, windows and doors boarded up, paint chipping off the walls,

trellises barren and broken.

Sivan made it to the docks and a breeze off the ocean stilled his senses. He hated the ocean, hated how nervous and weak it made his heart feel, but he still felt drawn to it. It was the only place he felt like he could breathe. How would he find air like this after he was sent inland?

He felt like a fraud, being carted off to safety while his people were stuck here, starving and waiting for the Uncharted to attack.

They had never attacked Varis directly. They would starve them, send them plague-tainted goods and pests. But for some reason they left the capital alone. The earl once speculated this was because the Uncharted king wanted to draw out their suffering. He wanted the country to die slowly, its extremities shaved off as its heart was still allowed to beat and keep it limping along.

He opened his eyes and was greeted with the enormity of the ocean.

Sivan couldn't stop them from attacking Varis. It was an inevitable event. He tried once; he spent the last nine years trying to win against an unstoppable force. But he realized now that his value to this country was not the useless sparkling medals that decorated his lapel, but in doing his duty and marrying a man he didn't want in order to keep them fed in their final days.

Sighing, he settled down on an overturned bucket, not bothering to care how the filth muddled his pristine coattails. He pushed up the half moon glasses which had slipped down his bridge as he sat.

"Any luck today?" a grisly-looking white-haired old man asked the fisherman pulling in to the dock he was sitting on.

The fisherman grunted listlessly, frowning at the empty haul inside his net.

It was like this everyday for the fishermen of Varis. The fish

disappeared when the Uncharted declared war on the country. No one was sure if It was because the Uncharted scared them away or if the sea life chose the side of the enemy. It had the same effect either way: it crippled Grenaldia's main source of food and exports, which slowly starved the country of resources and wealth.

Slowly, the fishermen returned home for the day, all of them empty-handed and worn out. Fewer and fewer of them returned with each passing tide. Some of them caved in and attempted to find another trade. Others were simply passing victims of the war.

The last ship to arrive was, at first, an unassuming black dot on the horizon. It gave off the air of just another passing ship. The closer it came, the more its shape took form, and the more Grenaldia's citizens took note. Sivan inhaled sharply when he could finally make out the flag it flew: a shredded black tail with a bone-white barracuda skeleton swimming in the dark waters.

It was the flag of the pirate lord, the devil of the notorious Blackwater: Captain Black.

The more citizens who recognized the flag, the louder the people on the shore became. They excitedly rushed to the dock it approached, welcoming it with more fanfare than a returning naval fleet.

"Praise the gods! It's been so long since the pirate lord has sent us a gift," a fisherman cheered, impatiently waiting to reign the boat in. When the ship came within distance the people at the docks jumped on board, gleefully opening the crates strapped down to the small boat.

The common folk awed at the bundles of produce and grains within the crates. They began passing out the food, showing a surprising amount of restraint for a city at the brink of starvation.



An old woman, stern and dressed in black, frowned at the people digging in to their so-called gifts from the pirate lord. “Don’t eat that!” she tittered, glaring at a young man biting into an apple. “It’s dirty, who knows what its poisoned with.” The crowd dismissed her, but she continued on. “My sister’s town received one of these so-called gifts a month ago. That night the pirates attacked, pillaging and plundering against the gods’ will.” “Quiet down, lady!” a haggard-looking fisherman protested.

“The pirates have never attacked Varis in all nine years of the war. We should be grateful.”

The stern-looking old woman huffed and turned away, ignoring the rest of the crowd’s jeers. It was true, the pirates had left the capital alone almost as much as the Uncharted had. Occasionally a captain-less boat flying the barracuda flag would wash ashore, brimming with badly-needed food. Yet they never made a move on the city, letting it exist while they haphazardly took control of whatever port they felt like elsewhere.

Sivan’s attention was drawn to two boys having a conversation over a bushel of apples they had gotten from the mad dash for the pirate food.

“I heard the Blackwater doesn’t have sails. It’s hauled by Captain Black’s giant pet kraken.”

“No, no, the captain *is* the kraken.”

“Then how does he captain his ship while hauling it?”

“Hm...mind control, most definitely.”

This type of conversation was not uncommon to hear in Varis, especially after a Blackwater shipment washed ashore. Some were more suspicious, but nonetheless just as fantastical.

“Did you hear they took over Port Marie?”

“They *saved* that port from an Uncharted attack. It’s only right they take control after that, right?”

“They didn’t *save* Marie. There was a hurricane, and it washed away the Uncharted.”

“They did! The hurricane was created by the captain! He’s a sea witch, y’know.”

“No, no. He *sold* his soul to a sea witch for dark powers and immortal strength.”

Sivan no longer wished to overhear the wild speculation and abandoned his spot on the docks. The rumors surrounding the pirates were not entirely baseless. He had spoken to fellow

sailors who had survived a battle against the Blackwater pirate lord. They talked in low voices, as if the captain would be able to overhear them in the medical bay. He was apparently ruthless, vicious and unforgiving in his attacks. The captain was deadly with a sword, and even more dangerous without one. His strength was otherworldly, tearing out the throats of Uncharted and humans alike with his bare hands.

Sivan shuddered at the memory of their words. The way they spoke of him made Sivan remember his battle with the Uncharted king. He was equally as vicious and equally as brutal. Sivan recognized the look on the sailors' faces as they recounted the man. He himself knew what it was like to witness the manifestation of death at sea, and he knew without a doubt that they had seen that mark in Captain Black.

He turned his back on the docks and let his feet automatically guide him back to the manor that held his future Vheltan husband. It was not a union Sivan was looking forward to, but their marriage would be his ticket away from all of this. Away from the sea that made his bones uneasy. Away from his father who couldn't bear to look his broken son in the eye. Away from the Uncharted, from the pirates, from the unending misery the war had set upon his homeland.

Chapter 2

Varis

Sivan slipped into the same nightmare he'd been having for the last year. Ever since his return from the war. The wind roared in his ears, rain and seawater hitting his face relentlessly. His eyes stung, even with his glasses partially protecting them from the deluge. Just beyond the sinking ship he clung to was the ocean, frothing and angry, peaking in untamed waves that crashed onto the already mangled graveyard of once proud Grenaldian ships.

Desolation lay across the surface of the water, littering his nightmare with a familiar scene from the war. Bodies floated amongst the debris, the bloody husks of his battalion occasionally being dragged under the water by the current or the sharks who were drawn in by the stench of death.

Sivan struggled to his feet on the slippery slope of the sinking ship and threw up a saber to defend against the Uncharted who launched itself at him. The creature was speared on his blade,

dying with a sickening rasp of breath. He threw it off, grimacing at the grotesque mask of death on its already misshaped face. Its skin was a mottled mix of black and green scales, bunching into ridges on its body to form hard, spiky frills. Gills shivered on its neck, somehow still trying to filter out the air and water even though the creature was dead. Instead of hair it had many scaly horns which curled around its vaguely humanoid skull. Sivan knew how the Uncharted would sharpen those horns, and he knew how they would feel when they pierced tender human flesh.

Black, lifeless eyes stared up at the swirling sky. Razor sharp teeth, dark as pitch, jutted from its mouth, dangerous and glinting in the moonlight.

He pulled his sword out of the creature, feeling no satisfaction in killing a monster so low in the Uncharted ranks it wasn't even given a weapon. The handle of the silver saber curled around Sivan's knuckles, golden filigree elegant despite being covered in black blood.

Another similar-looking Uncharted attacked from the mast of the ship, its black claws easily splintering the wood as it pushed off. Sivan spun instinctively to block, slicing open the gilled neck of the creature with another saber, the twin to the one in his other hand. He moved elegantly and with total assurance of his skills despite his body's roaring complaints at fighting for so long against an unrelenting enemy.

The lower ranked Uncharted were not hard to kill, but there were so, so many of them that they overwhelmed the Grenaldian sailors easily. His battalion had fought against them many times, and they had established a reputation for being quite good at dealing with the nasty little creatures.

Yet they were not the only things in the water. The Uncharted were more diverse than their human counterparts, ranging from tiny fish with razor sharp teeth and an intelligence to match their

ferocity, to huge sea giants, emerging from the water and eating ships whole with their gaping maws of unending teeth.

But the worst of them was the sirens. From the waist up they were humanoid, enchanting sailors with their beauty regardless of gender. Their humanity ended at the hips down with a long, winding tail. They were wicked fast and impossible to kill. Magic thrummed through the legendary creatures' veins, giving them unnatural healing abilities and sway over the ocean.

The remaining sirens were few in number, but human and Uncharted alike feared them more than anything.

Sivan pushed two Uncharted off the ship, knowing it would be fruitless as they would just climb back on, but he needed the reprieve. He was panting, breathing hot and hard. How many hours did this make? Twenty-eight? He had no time to rest, and the Uncharted seemed to realize that it was far easier for them to fight humans when they did not give them time to rest or eat.

His knees buckled as the sinking ship suddenly dipped, something huge making the broken deck creak under its weight.

Sivan turned around slowly, dreading the presence behind him. His stomach dropped at the sight of a long, pearly white siren tail winding its way around fragmented masts of the ship.

Standing before him, deathly pale under the moonlight shining through the clouds, was Jhaeros, the Uncharted king. His upper torso was far more human than his Uncharted underlings, but it did not make him any less threatening. The white scales reflected the blue of the water the higher up they traveled, ending as a deep cerulean against skin so pale he looked bloodless.

The king would have been considered beautiful, with high cheekbones an elegantly sculpted face, framed by long, jet black hair, strung high up upon his head, behind his crown of silver bones. He looked like a statue of a god, carved out of marble and given a cruel and miserable soul.

Jhaeros smiled at him, his teeth razor sharp. "Here we are, young Lord Montgomery," he crooned, his voice low and mocking. "I have heard stories of your tenacity from the front line, so I just had to come see it for myself."

Sivan jolted a step back. Had this attack been coordinated simply so this man could see him fight? His entire battalion had died in this battle. Every single one of the sailors who called him admiral were struck down by the unending might of the Uncharted.

"Come, now," Jhaeros practically sang, "I didn't have all of your subordinates killed just for you to get cold feet."

Rage bubbled up Sivan's throat, making him nauseous with the force of it. He yelled, brandishing both sabers as he made for Jhaeros's heart.

His blades collided with the siren king's golden sword, which had flown up to defend too fast for Sivan to see. The siren king pushed back, flinging off his attack like it had been a sheer curtain. Sivan scrambled to maintain his footing as Jhaeros struck back. Each blow was like taking a hurricane, cruel and violent and so forceful it ripped the very breath from Sivan's lungs.

A pained scream tore out of Sivan as the king's blade pierced his side, just barely missing his lungs. The twin silver blades slipped from his shocked fingers, piercing the ocean with a splash that couldn't be heard over the wind and Sivan's screams. His feet slid out from under him, his body limp, but he didn't fall into the water with his swords. Another searing force snapped into his right forearm, breaking the bones instantly. Sivan blearily blinked through the pain, which was growing ever the stronger as blood seeped out of his arm, skin burning at Jhaeros's touch. His glasses were gone, the blur of siren just visible enough to see his cruel expression. The blood red crackle of the Uncharted king's magic lapped around his peripheral, panic and pain danc-

ing into Sivan's heart.

"Mehmi aen'le lyedi na' gaerr la'dinyaetk la' vsinnh."

He was just cognizant enough to realize the man was speaking Uncharted. Despite his talent with language, Sivan was never able to pick up on Uncharted. It was too foreign, the words didn't fit in his mouth.

"Pisyevl I'rr negi ha'oi zaeny di, degi ha'oi db msaevi..."

Sivan's stomach churned at the words even though he didn't know what they meant. The ocean and sky spun around his head, and he woke up with a sharp, painful intake of air.

It took him a few minutes to realize that memory had been from over a year ago. He wished he could call the visions he had when he closed his eyes nightmares, but he always remembered that battle in perfect, undiluted detail.

The scar on his arm throbbed. It had been months since the wound had fully healed, but despite Grenaldia's best healers' efforts, the phantom pains would not leave Sivan alone. He couldn't remember how he survived that fight with Jhaeros. Somehow he'd miraculously washed ashore a nearby Grenaldian fortress and was able to call for help.

He rubbed his face and got out of bed, feet hitting the marble floor unsteadily. Judging by the moon hanging outside the tall windows, he guessed it was just past midnight.

Knowing he would not be able to sleep another wink after waking up from one of those dreams, Sivan dressed in a casual yet finely tailored set of linen trousers and blouse. He paused at the mirror and closed his eyes, willing himself to return to his closet and find a frock coat with any modicum of gilding. The last time his father had caught him on one of his insomnia-induced late night strolls, Sivan had been wearing nothing but pants and a robe, and he had been forced to take another etiquette lesson at the age of seven and twenty.

With no one around to chastise him for making rude faces, he let the barest hint of a frown form on his face at the velvet coat, embroidered with delicate silver leaves. Even when he was at his weakest, trying to find reprieve from his mind's torments, he had to dress and play the part of the untouchable lord.

He roughly put on the coat and pinned the dangling golden collar chain across his chest before slipping out of his room.



The Royal Library of Varis was a maze of spires and marble arches. Sivan's ancestors thought scholars should reach towards the heavens in their learning and reflected that in their architecture.

He walked speedily through the familiar hallways, his boots clicking on the pristine white floor. Sivan spent a lot of time in this place as a child, barely any time here as an adult, and a lot of time here again as an invalid. The dramatic ceilings and the smell of carefully preserved old books gave him an instant feeling of sanctuary.

Sivan walked past a painting of a Grenaldian noble from centuries past. The noble appeared to be speaking to a host of followers, intricate strands of words translated into each individual person's language flowed out of his mouth and into their ears. Building a country off of procuring the coastline of many other countries meant that Grenaldian rulers had to speak many languages to keep their reign in check. While a common tongue had developed in the last several centuries, the art of language was still a valuable skill to have amongst politicians and merchants.

Past the painting was an open doorway leading to a spiraling staircase. This was the language tower, and it was Sivan's favor-

ite.

He had started learning languages out of requirement. Since he was young, Sivan was told that as the youngest his duty was to become a proper husband to someone higher than his status. While his older sisters were taught how to manage an army and grapple for dominance in the upper echelon of nobility, Sivan was taught how to manage a household, the proper etiquette for every conceivable thing, and language. Not that he minded. His eldest sister was in line to take over for their father, and his second eldest sister was meant to be her second set of hands. Sivan didn't want to be an earl. Historically, he didn't have any particular feelings about being a husband.

If someone had asked a younger Sivan what he wanted to be, he would have replied "a linguist!" Then his father would have frowned at him and shoved a sword handle into his hand. Languages were meant to be tools in getting a better marriage proposal, not passions of a young lord's heart. Fencing, drawing, or music were seen as suitable hobbies for the youngest child. Anything that made him appear too much like the dusty scholars hidden away in the university would sour his pristine spousal vitae. He was not meant to be anything other than a husband.

When the war started, Sivan's marriage prospects were long forgotten. Despite his reluctance, his years of fencing had earned him a name as the Northern Spear's gilded saber. He was no longer expected to sit there primly and wait for a qualified noble to propose to him. He was then expected to take his sword to battle, to fight against an enemy that would not speak his language.

And so he had. And it had cost him.

The scar on his arm throbbed, but just the sight of the open books laid out on the tables soothed his suffering. After Jhaeros had ended his career as a soldier, Sivan had snuck back into his study of language. He let the words of the world wash over him,

their intricacies distracting him enough to at least let his physical wounds heal.

He brushed the tips of his fingers over the fine texture of the pages, the nearly imperceptible bumps and grooves of the printing just barely detected by his touch. It was home to him, but it was a home he had been away from for too long. Sivan wasn't sure if he had a place here anymore. He supposed it wouldn't matter come morning, when his Vheltan prince whisked him off to a land that was not and would never be home to him.

His golden eyes landed on a jade cylinder set inside a glass case. This had not been there the last time he was here a few nights ago.

Walking over to the pedestal the case was on, Sivan saw that it was an ancient cylinder seal. It was covered in tiny, raised letters and glyphs. The characters were mirrored; the seal was meant to be inked and rolled out onto parchment to reveal the written message. Sivan was a little stunned to find something like this had made its way to the Varis library. Cylinder seals stopped being used millennia ago, so finding one like this, especially one so well preserved, was a rarity even when the country was not at war. Sivan was mostly surprised it hadn't already been sold off to another country for a few loaves of bread.

He noticed the placard freshly engraved into the pedestal. It read: "*The Siren Seal.*"

Sivan gasped upon reading this. His eyes eagerly flitted back to the cylinder, trying to make sense of the backwards characters. Pressing his fingers to the glass, he leaned in when he recognized a handful of words written in ancient Oltinish. He *knew* that language. If there was something else on this seal written in Sirenath, he might be able to translate the dead language.

"I can't believe it...I could actually translate the old tongue." The words slipped out of Sivan, giddy in his excitement.

Sirenath was the tongue of the sirens, back when there had been more pureblood siren than the Uncharted ancestors they mutated into. It had died as a functional language millennia ago, and there were very few surviving sirenath artifacts left. There were no known examples of sirenath being used in conjunction with another language, so if this seal was transcribed in both sirenath *and* a language presently in use, it would be a priceless item to the scholarly world.

However, its worth to the warring world was next to nothing. Breaking the dead language was a purely indulgent task, meant for times of peace when frivolous knowledge was allowed to grow. Sivan sighed, reluctantly stepping back from the seal. He yearned to at least take it out and make a copy of the engraved text, but to what end? He would be shipped off to a landlocked country the next day, where he would at most be asked to translate for visitors from the few neighboring countries Vhelta had. Unlocking this dead language would do nothing to broaden his horizons.

Sivan jumped when he suddenly heard a muffled explosion from outside the tower. Rushing over to the glass doors and throwing them open, he walked out onto the veranda overlooking Varis. Far below, he could see fire burning around the docks, a candle to light the chaos the capital was descending into. Distant screams could be heard, the terrified citizens were being attacked, pillaged.

At the docks, beyond the fires, was a huge ebony ship. Its dusky flags were drawn, but its colors were flying high and proud. A long, winding black flag flew the highest, like a sea serpent crawling through the night sky. The flag was just large enough for Sivan to make out what it bore: the Blackwater's mark, a white barracuda skeleton snarling at the sea.

It was *pirates* who had come to attack the city, and Sivan was

embarrassed by the short wave of relief that washed over him. This relief was for the simple fact that it wasn't Jhaeros and his Uncharted legions. But the relief was quickly turned into rage at the sight of his homeland on fire. Whether or not it was the enemy Sivan feared the most, they were still attacking his people, and he had to do something about it.

He rushed back inside and looked for anything he could use as a weapon. The head of the library liked to collect ornamental pieces and display them amongst the old and dusty books. Even if it was ornamental, as long as it was sharp Sivan would make do.

Luckily, a pair of thin sabers, their blades delicately engraved with filigree, were hanging above the pedestal where the seal was. Sivan wasted no time in reaching up to free the swords, and was pleased to find that while they looked elegant, they were actually decently forged.

His grip on the blades tightened as he realized the glass case the Siren Seal had been in was now empty. Out on the veranda, Sivan had been distracted, but he had not even heard a shuffle from the room.

A familiar, cold dread pooled in his gut, and Sivan felt the black shadow before he saw it. Reeking of unholy power, it bled out from a dark corner, taking form into something like a man, something huge. Sivan swallowed the panicked fear that instinctively bubbled up his throat and pulled his swords on the shadow, the blades trembling slightly. He hated the fear that welled up inside him, his battle-honed senses wasted in the wake of this living nightmare.

But the shadow coalesced into a man, a huge hulk of a man, and it was not Jhaeros. The siren king was shorter, leaner. This man in the shadows was different. Sivan could have sworn there was something more to him, but it must have been a trick of the

eyes. As the man emerged from the darkness of the room, all traces of unnatural power were gone.

The shadows dripped off his form, revealing a strikingly handsome face. His irises were such a deep green they were almost black, and they glinted at Sivan with dark intent. Long, flowing raven locks were tied back from his face with a scarf around his forehead, but the untamed hair otherwise ran rampant across his shoulders and back, occasionally caught by beads of gold. The dark hair seemed to merge with his clothes; he was drenched in the color of night.

Sivan instinctively took a step back, faltering at the presence this man exuded. His presence felt bigger than he appeared, as if the shadow was part of his physicality. Sivan found himself wondering if this man was human or not, but he had to be - Uncharted couldn't hide their power or appearance, not even Jhaeros. And yet, something about this man made 'human' feel like a false description.

Surprisingly, the man bowed to him. Deep green eyes looked up through thick lashes, pinning Sivan with their intensity.

"My lord," the man called. This was the proper way for commoners to address Sivan's status, but the man said it in a way that was so sharp and significant that it unnerved the lord he said it to.

"Who are you?" Sivan demanded, adjusting his hold on the swords in case the intruder decided to attack.

Sivan had not really expected him to answer, but the genuine frown that flashed on the man's face was not something he anticipated.

"You don't *know* me?" the shadowed stranger asked quietly. He shook his head, a snarl forming briefly to reveal razor sharp teeth. His expression was going through wildly confusing turns, going from unbridled rage to nearing on petulant tears. Then his

fist came down on a nearby desk, the wood splintering clean in half at the force of his rage.

Sivan's face didn't betray anything, but his thoughts were along the lines of *what kind of man is so callow he throws a tantrum if someone doesn't know him?*

The man flexed his arm, his knuckles not even bloodied at the force of the punch. Sivan then noticed the sleeve of his overcoat had pulled back during the movement, and it revealed a skeletal barracuda tattoo, black ink on pale skin.

Sivan inhaled, remembering how the sailors who had faced the dreaded captain of the Blackwater had described the pirate in detail, right down to the twin barracuda tattoos on his arms. He was supposed to be a feral beast, with combat techniques so wild and unstoppable he was believed to be a demon in human flesh. *This* pouty brat was him?

"You're Captain Black," Sivan stated, hoping this acknowledgment would sate the pirate's rage.

Unfortunately, this seemed to sour his expression even more. "Yes," he spat, "I'm the *dreaded* pirate lord, the demon of the Blackwater." He announced his title with sour tone, clearly still upset Sivan didn't know him at first glance.

"What do you want?" Sivan slowly started to walk carefully towards the stairway. Maybe if he caught the pirate off guard he could get enough of a head start to escape. There was no way someone that large could be faster than him.

The captain of the Blackwater laughed bitterly, seeming to recollect his thoughts as he glared at the floor. "I'm here for two things," he muttered. Then he shifted his weight and pulled back the front of his coat, revealing the Siren Seal shoved none too carefully into a pocket. "And I've already got the one."

All thoughts of escape left Sivan at the sight of the forgotten seal in the hands of the pirate. There was no way he could let him

leave with that. It was too valuable a piece, the key to unlocking an entire language long thought dead.

“That’s an artifact of history, what would a pirate want with it?” He doubted he could persuade the man to let it go, but maybe he could stall for enough time to think of a plan.

Black let his coat fall back over his broad chest, the seal disappearing from sight. “That’s none of your concern right now.” Then he smiled, wicked and wide and full of teeth too sharp to be human. “What you should really be concerned about, *my lord*, is the second reason I’m here.”

Sivan narrowed his eyes, forcing gold to meet green despite the fear that lay beneath his skin. “And what is that? What else are you here to steal?”

The pirate lord drew his sword, a longer than usual cutlass, black as pitch, so no matter how much blood it was drenched in it would never be stained. His eyes landed on Sivan’s throat.

“You.”

Before Sivan could even process that answer, Black attacked with surprising speed. With the man’s bulk, he had expected his movement to be a little encumbered by it. However, Sivan just barely had enough time to jump back, nearly avoiding being decapitated.

The pirate turned on him, swinging again. This time Sivan was ready, and threw up both sabers to block the blow. His feet skidded on the marble floor at the force of it, and his mind was suddenly thrown back to his battle with Jhaeros. Luckily, his instincts took over, a lifetime of training with swords saving him when his bravery faltered.

Sivan continued to habitually block, completely unable to return any attack in his current state. Black’s fighting style was as wild and unstoppable as the rumors described, but at its core was a foundation of elegant footwork and proper fencing technique.



This was different from the irregular manner Jhaeros used to rip into him, overpowering him through force alone. Realizing this contrast calmed Sivan down enough to return to the present, and he ducked instead of blocking when Black's cutlass came down next, cleanly missing Sivan entirely.

When not in a haze of his past terrors, Sivan was faster than the pirate. He had been perfecting his footwork his entire *life*. He had lived through nine years at the frontline of a *war*. There was no way a villain like this bratty pirate lord was going to get the upper hand tonight.

With two swift steps Sivan darted behind the pirate and slashed, both blades aiming to dice their target.

Black stumbled onto the veranda, and a meager plink was heard on the marble floor.

Sivan's eyes glanced down and saw that he had sliced off an ample lock of the pirate's long hair, and a single gold bead had weighted it to the ground. His sabers bore no blood. Sivan had not actually injured the pirate.

The captain blinked, holding up the single lock of hair that had been chopped to his chin. Sivan had been *close*, at least. Then Black smiled wide. "No one's ever gotten that close to killing me with a sword before."

Sivan readied his sabers, prepared to try again. "I have two swords," he retorted.

The pirate laughed loudly and rushed towards him, their blades colliding with a resonant metal clang. Sivan couldn't take his eyes off Black now, the man was smiling at him emphatically, like he was enjoying this far more than he had any right to. The city was catching on fire behind the pirate, framing his mass with an orange glow. He was beautiful, wild, and dangerous all at the same time.

What was the second reason Black was here again?

In his moment of distraction, Sivan's hands had lost their firm grip, and the pirate's cutlass had struck across the blades forcefully, throwing them out of his hands. Weaponless, the fear crept back under Sivan's skin, freezing him in place.

The scar on his arm burned, it had been burning this whole time, but his adrenaline allowed him to ignore it. Now it reached a peak, and he couldn't help but clutch at it with his other hand.

Black's smiling face was gone now, and he looked at Sivan with a strange expression, something bordering on distress. Maybe he was disappointed this fight had come to an end so early.

Sorry I couldn't give you a better battle, Captain Black. I'm no longer in prime condition.

Sivan's scarred arm was then yanked up, held above his head for Black to see. His hand was so big, it fully encircled Sivan's forearm even though it was held at an angle.

The hand around his arm burned, right over the mark the Uncharted king had left on his body. It didn't hurt, but it felt hot, and Sivan quickly felt his body go limp, passing out under the touch of the pirate.

Chapter 3

The Blackwater

For the first time in a year, Sivan did not dream about the Uncharted king. He instead slipped into a different memory, and he wondered if he'd lost the ability to dream normally.

At least it was a memory that remained precious to him. He was sixteen again, dressed in lighter but still appropriately elegant clothing. It was hot, the cicadas shrilly crying in the summer sun.

Sivan was on the Northern Spear again.

The Spear was an appropriately shaped island on the outskirts of Grenaldia's controlled waters. His father had been assigned to turn the place into a harbor and training facility for the Royal Navy several years ago, and it had been progressing well. Sivan was fourteen when he moved there with his family. The earl had a manor built for them on the Spear. It was smaller than the one they had in Varis, and Sivan preferred it that way.

There was a shaded courtyard Sivan liked to relax in be-

tween his daily etiquette lessons and fencing training. He was there currently, sipping iced tea and reading a book in Oltinish. A trellis covered in vines and blooming white flowers arched over the set of table and chairs, providing additional protection from the glaring sun.

Sivan looked up when he heard footsteps approaching. His attendant, a younger boy with striking bright eyes, approached him. He was panting, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. His exhaustion did not prevent him from bowing properly, however.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, my lord!" The boy shouted at the ground.

Sivan held back a chuckle at his state. His attendant never forgot the basic gestures and words to address him with, but he would still unconsciously raise his voice when he forgot himself.

"Don't worry, Nereus," Sivan said in a kind tone, trying to dissuade the boy's worries. "Eliza had you helping her in the kitchen, didn't she?"

Nereus stood up straight again, nodding almost violently, sending his black hair, sun streaked with silver, flying. "She made me something special this morning, so I couldn't slip away."

"Ah yes, it's your birthday, isn't it?" Sivan smiled at him and reached for the long, slim box he had left on the table. "I didn't forget. I've gotten you something."

The boy waved his hands so fast in front of him he nearly fell over. "M-my lord didn't need to get me anything!"

"Nonsense," Sivan clicked his tongue at the thought and handed over the box. "Well, open it!"

Nereus nodded vigorously and tore at the bow, freeing the box. He gasped when it opened it, bright eyes instantly glittering at the sight of an elegant, thin sword resting in plush blue velvet.

"I-I can't accept this my lord, it's too much. You've already

done too much for me, I don't deserve—“

Sivan stood up and yanked the top of the box out of his hands so he couldn't cover it back up. “Yes, you do. And you will accept it. Every attendant should have a sword to protect their lord with.”

Truthfully this was partially to save Sivan's own sense of propriety. If he had been in the capital he would have had an attendant who had been properly trained and outfitted. There were well-funded boarding schools in the Grenaldia mainland that groomed attendants for the noble class. Nereus was not from one of these schools, much to the earl's chagrin. He had come from nothing and had earned his way into the position through hard work and a bit of saving Sivan's life. Sivan had tried to explain this to him when he bought clothes and necessities for Nereus, but the boy was stubborn and would always find ways to return items he thought were ‘too much.’

“But I don't know how to use a sword,” Nereus said flatly, clearly still in shock at his gift.

Sivan laughed, light and airy, and patted his head. “Well, I haven't been training with them all my life all for nothing. I'll teach you!”

Nereus's face seemed to turn red and green at the same time over the prospect. He clutched the open box to his chest, like he could hide it from the older boy who had given it to him. “My lord!” he hissed, “But it'll impede your training—“

“So what if it does? It's not like it's doing me any good other than winning fencing competitions.” Sivan pointed a finger at him when Nereus opened his mouth to protest again. “Which are much more boring than you seem to think they are. Let me do this, it'll make me feel like my skills are useful for something other than parading around like a peacock.”

It took a moment, but eventually the boy nodded, and Sivan

took it as a silent victory. “Thank you, my lord,” Nereus said sincerely, bowing as best he could with the oversized box still in his arms. He finally let himself look at the sword in the case, his light, viridescent eyes glittering at the blade. Unable to restrain himself any longer, he plucked the sword out from the box, brandishing it clumsily, slicing off a few hanging flowers in the process. “Then I’ll protect my lord at any cost!” he shouted at the same time, too loudly, but brimming with earnestness.

Sivan laughed, but motioned for the boy to hold the blade down. “Very good! But maybe don’t do that here. Eliza uses these flowers to cook with and she’ll be very upset if she finds out you’re using them to train on.”

Nereus’s face went green again, fear replacing his excitement.

The pleasant memory faded into gut-wrenching visions of Nereus’s betrayed face as Sivan fled the Spear. The guilt rose from there, and Sivan wallowed in it for the rest of his dream.



The first thing Sivan saw when he woke up was something he did not expect. Not that he could have many expectations when coming out of unconsciousness, but when he looked back on it, he still found it confusing.

Above him was a map of the Great Sea, huge and surprisingly detailed for something that was stuck to the wooden ceiling with many small knives. The knives were ominously collected along the coastline of Grenaldia and its surrounding islands. However, there were a fair number that had ventured into Uncharted waters. Sivan’s second thought after confusion was that it somehow reminded him of his father’s war table. It was just that instead of tiny boats, whoever was responsible for this map

decided to use knives. Which would have had to be thrown up there with unreal accuracy, as the ceiling was quite high from the bed.

He groaned, disoriented and feeling slightly nauseous. His dream had not helped with this. An old, familiar guilt swelled up in his heart, battling with the roiling of his gut. *Nereus would be dead by now, and it's your fault*, the guilt kindly reminded him.

The bed he laid on was comfortable, although a bit hard. It was made neatly, corners of the sheets covering him tucked in securely. Sivan sat up, nausea getting worse as he righted himself. He dimly heard the crash of waves against a ship outside the small porthole windows.

Ah, he was on a ship, that's why his nausea was so bad. Sivan had grown up on the water, and he had never been prone to seasickness, but ever since his battle with Jhaeros he had turned into an inlander who had never stepped foot on a boat before. He counted to ten, willing the instinctive panic back down his throat. The nausea subsided enough for him to realize there was another person in the room.

"You're not allowed to throw up on the Blackwater," a severe-looking, olive-skinned woman warned from the stool she was perched on in the middle of the room. She had short-cropped black hair, dark eyes, and was also decked out in black clothes from head-to-toe. Sivan vaguely wondered if wearing all black was a requirement to be a pirate.

He swallowed and righted himself in bed, turning towards her sharply. "Rest assured, I have it under control." Probably. As long as he wasn't made to lean over the water.

The woman huffed and stood up, folding up the map that was laid out on the table she had been sitting at. "My name is Hayes, and I'm the second in command of this ship. The captain has tasked me to inform you that you are now a captive of the Black-

water, and you will stay in this room unless otherwise instructed.”

Sivan glanced around the room. Maps and what appeared to be battle plans were everywhere, carefully pinned to the wall or laid out on a table or rolled up for storage. This room must have been used as a navigation room, although Sivan found it odd that there was still a bed here.

“This is my room, so don’t touch anything,” she warned, pinning Sivan in place with a sharp look.

This was her room? If she truly was the first mate of the pirate lord she didn’t have very luxurious tastes.

“Am I taking your bed then? Don’t *you* need to sleep?”

Hayes narrowed her eyes at him. “I only sleep when we make land,” she said flatly.

“O-oh.” Sivan felt very small, like he was a child again and one of his older sisters had just scolded him.

“The captain will send for you later.” She turned on a heel and left smoothly, leaving Sivan in the expanse of the room. The lock clicked after closing, and Sivan knew he had been sealed in the room until further notice.

Sivan got out of bed tentatively. He was still wearing the simple linen clothes he had donned before leaving his own room the night before, but the overcoat he had been wearing during his battle with Black had been hung up on a hook beside the bed.

At least I’m not in a jail cell, he thought.

He went up to a porthole, looking out to find the wide expanse of the ocean. It was daytime, most likely just after noon. Sivan was surprised he had slept that long, even if had been knocked out by whatever powers the pirate lord was wielding. He couldn’t see the shore at all, no matter which side he looked out. This didn’t surprise him necessarily. The Blackwater was well regarded as the fastest ship on the Great Sea.

As a sailor in the Royal Navy he had been trained in a code of conduct for these exact situations. Upon capture a sailor was to first assess if they had any means of escape and assess the risk of that means. Sivan was on the Blackwater, locked away in a room with nothing but portholes as windows to the outside. Even if he could fit through them all it do would drop him into the ocean.

You'd drown before you reached land.

Sivan was once an excellent swimmer. You had to be if you grew up in Grenaldia, the kingdom along the coast. But after his battle with the Uncharted king he could barely tread water without sinking like a dead weight.

The next thing he was supposed to do if there was no means of escape was to make allies with his fellow prisoners. To get them to rally and push back against the enemy.

I have no fellow prisoners, or at least not ones I'm in contact with.

If that failed, he was supposed to try making himself seem sympathetic to his captors. Tell them about his family, stall them from killing him off for as long as possible until the Royal Navy came to save him.

Trying to get pirates to feel sympathy for me probably isn't going to work. Besides, it's not like I'm still an active commander. The navy has no responsibility to send their already depleted ranks out to save me.

He tried to remind himself that his father was still the admiral of the Grenaldian navy. If he chose, he could send out a few ships to save him. Sivan liked to think he would do that, but he wasn't even sure if Black had sent out a ransom for him or not. For all he knew his father probably thought Sivan had used the chaos of the Blackwater attack to escape his wedding to Prince Gregor.

Sivan sighed and dragged himself back to the bed, unsure of where else he was allowed to sit. He then noticed the scar on his

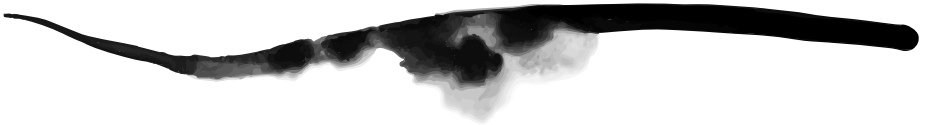
arm had changed. The angry slash of red that never seemed like it would fully heal was now obscured by a large black handprint. It didn't hurt, not even when Sivan rubbed at it, trying to get it off. The handprint felt like another scar, and Sivan dimly remembered the pirate lord wrapping his fingers around his arm before he had passed out.

He wondered what Black was planning. He had stolen the Siren Seal, something only scholars should find value in. Sivan doubted Black was a scholar in the traditional sense of the word. Maybe that's why he had captured Sivan. To find value in the seal, whatever the pirate thought that might be.

Paging through his hazy memories of the battle the night before, Sivan couldn't reason why Black had captured him other than this. Besides being the youngest son of an earl he held minimal value as a prisoner. He hadn't been in the Navy for over a year; he had no up-to-date secrets that would be of use to Black.

The last part of the code of conduct was a rule: never give in to your captors, and never give them any information that would assist them in acts against the Grenaldian empire. If the pirate lord really wanted him to give him information about the seal, would he even be able to do it?

If not, what would happen to him then?



Sivan spent the afternoon pouring over the many, many maps Hayes had in her room. He was hesitant at first, but he grew so restless after a few hours of seclusion. The maps were exquisite, ranging in language and accuracy, but spanning the whole world. All of Grenaldia and the inland countries, the Great Sea, the western continent, countless rogue islands, and even a surprising

number of Uncharted territory. These maps were written in Uncharted, and Sivan wondered if Hayes could actually read them.

A resounding click from the door made Sivan scramble to fold up the papers, trying to make them seem natural. Unfortunately, by the time the door was unlocked and opened, the table resembled the garbage bin of discarded paper that Sivan's own desk usually looked like.

Thankfully, Hayes wasn't the one who walked in. A scruffy-looking older man with a silver beard and a sun-scorched face entered. His clothes were simple, but they were all in hues of black or gray. Evidently wearing the color of their flag actually was a requirement to serve on the Blackwater.

"Oh, don' worry about those maps there. Hayes always be houndin' us to look a' them with 'er, so she'll likely be happy ta see them bein' used." The man had a distinctive accent, a dialect of the common tongue that Sivan only heard come out of the islands surrounding Grenaldia.

"I see..."

"Oh, me name's Brand. Th' captain sent me ta bring ye ta his cabin ta have dinner with him," Brand explained.

Sivan pursed his lips minutely. What was Black up to? He hadn't seen his main captor since he had woken up on the ship and now he wanted to *dine* with him?

Another person stumbled through the door loudly, and all the blood in Sivan's body ran cold. He instinctively reached for his sabers, but grappled with air at his waist. He was weaponless, and the black eyes of the Uncharted woman who had just entered struck fear into his heart.

"Oi, Brand, Black wants him to wear this," she announced in startlingly clear common tongue.

She was of higher class than the horned creatures that littered the masses of the Uncharted army. She was more hu-

man-looking than the grunts Sivan faced the most in battle. Her hair was made of many fine, pale tentacles which were piled in a mess on top of her head, lazily twisting themselves together. Her skin was a dusky blue, mottled in places by more tentacles which emerged from her body only to wrap themselves back around her limbs. The Uncharted woman's eyes were black, there was no escaping that, but they had a strange glint of liveliness to them that Sivan was not used to seeing in her kind.

He clutched at the scar on his arm, those eyes reminding him of its existence. Backing up a step, Sivan knocked into a chair, the loud scrape of the wooden legs on the wooden floor alerting the others to his distress.

"You're Uncharted," he accused, eyes hardening.

"Ugh, and you're mainland scum, I get it." Her voice was harsh, sounding annoyed as she rolled her eyes and aggressively tossed the bundle of clothes she had brought onto the table.

Brand held out a hand to settle the situation. "Careful, Vivianne. Ye know wha' th' captain said."

The Uncharted woman growled and turned on a heel. "I *know*. His fancy human lord better learn to keep his mouth shut, though. I don't know if the rest of the crew will be as rational as I am."

She stormed out of the cabin, slamming the door behind her loudly.

Brand let out a small sigh as he turned to Sivan. "Ye will 'ave ta forgive our quartermaster. But she's right. Th' Blackwater be crewed by a mix o' human and Uncharted alike. Best keep quiet if ye can't get along with 'em."

"Sorry, *what?* You sail with *Uncharted?*?" Sivan gaped at him.

"Well, yes," Brand said and picked up the clothes Vivianne had brought, handing them to Sivan.

He took them tentatively, not bothering to look at them in fa-

vor of staring down the old pirate. “But you’re Grenaldian, aren’t you?”

The man smiled thinly, probably having expected the esteemed war hero of the Grenaldian navy to have questioned his loyalty to his country. “I used ta be. Until th’ nobles’ war starved out me hometown an me wife died.”

Sivan remained silent. His initial feelings of betrayal had quickly turned into guilt and shame.

“Captain Black picked me up with a few other o’ me brethren. Piracy weren’t me first choice, but it keep me daughter fed.”

Sivan nodded and looked down at the clothes he was supposed to wear to dinner. He couldn’t even protest about wearing these now. He knew the islanders of the country were the worst off by far. The earl had stopped sending ships to support them years ago. Too many ships were downed by Uncharted attacks while docked at the harbors, and Sivan’s father had determined it a ‘waste of resources.’

Brand left him to change into the clothes. Sivan wasn’t sure what he had been expecting them to be. Maybe the same black leathers and gray linens the crew of the *Blackwater* seemed to adore. However, as he looked at himself in a mirror, Sivan could only see a reflection of himself from the past. A light cream tunic was snugly fitted around him by an out-of-fashion golden vest with a high collar, folded around his chest in gentle pleats and waves. He thought the gray pants were a size too small until he remembered that had been the audacious style of nearly a decade ago.

He was confused at first. Why would Black want him to wear this? Then he realized it was probably something the pirates had raided from a Grenaldian manor. Sivan reasoned Black got some kind of sick pleasure in dressing him up like a doll with the clothes he had stolen. Just like he had stolen Sivan.

Tugging at the vest to straighten it, Sivan exited the cabin and was met by a rush of cool night air, the salty wind whipping at his hair. Brand was outside waiting for him, and motioned Sivan to follow across the deck.

Sivan kept his head high, needing above all else to appear strong in front of the rest of the crew. He tried not to make eye contact, but he couldn't help but point out every Uncharted who was sweeping the deck or tying a rope down. Some of them stared, some of them whispered, but no more than the other humans on the ship. Sivan was surprised to find that each group was almost equal in number, and they both seemed to work in unity.

He couldn't fathom a crew like this working. They would have to be the worst of the worst to find common ground together.

Then he realized: they were pirates.

Sivan let these thoughts occupy him until they reached the other side of the ship. He did not look out at the water, refusing to even acknowledge it. He would be *fine*, he would *get used to it*. He just hoped he wouldn't have to do any serious fighting while on the ship, otherwise he would be at a serious disadvantage.

They reached a set of tall wooden doors, the ebony molding carved with sea serpents. The light inside glowed warm behind red curtains. Brand stopped at the doors and opened one of them before stepping back, motioning for Sivan to step inside.

Sivan swallowed, straightened his vest once more and entered, ready to dine with the devil.

Chapter 4

*The Blackwater:
captain's Quarters*

The captain of the Blackwater was seated at a long table, waiting for him. A decadent meal was set out before him, the dishes displayed on gold and silver platters, gleaming in the candlelight. Sivan could smell the spread of fine food, and it made his mouth water.

Black raised his eyes to look at him, dark green eyes looking solid black in the dim light. “Sit,” he commanded, gesturing to a chair placed on the other side of the table.

Sivan tilted his head in recognition and pulled the chair back, taking the opportunity to scan the room before settling in to deal with the captain.

Paneled windows filled the walls, red curtains drawn, thankfully hiding the dark expanse of the ocean from view. As one expected from a captain’s cabin, it was full of ornament and splendor. The furniture was wooden and finely carved, framing plush, velvet upholstery. Baubles overflowed from coffer of

silver inlaid with rubies. Set into a wall was a large bed, partially hidden by thick red curtains. There was a ridiculously large clawfoot bathtub peeking out behind a screen, an overly plush daybed against the starboard window, a high-backed armchair and footstool in front of a fireplace. The armchair and bed appeared to be the most used out of everything. The rest of the room held a pristine character reminiscent of the opulent pre-war households Sivan grew up in.

The cabin seemed to scream of a greed born from a past of deprivation. Men such as Black, who were egocentric enough to call themselves a 'pirate lord,' were prone to such greed. Once they finally acquired the wealth they had been seeking, they lived only to bask in it, to keep it ever within their reach as a reminder that they were now worth something.

Sivan sat in the chair, noting that a glass of wine had already been poured for him. There was so much food on the table, yet a plate was already prepared, sitting underneath a silver dome. Smelling the food was almost too much for the lord. He hadn't eaten since his dinner with his crude fiancé the night before, and even then he hadn't eaten much.

Thankfully, Black seemed to want to get started as well and lifted his own dome off the plate of food. Sivan followed suit, and was met by an elegantly laid out fare on a large dinner plate. Fresh sautéed greens glistened with butter. A huge fillet of fish was steaming and so loaded with seasonings and herbs Sivan could hardly see the meat itself. Saffron-infused rice, crusty bread, grilled mushrooms individually stuffed with melted cheese. Whoever the Blackwater employed as a cook was incredibly talented.

Sivan couldn't restrain himself and dug in, absolutely ravenous. Which, for him, was elegantly picking up a fork and knife and precisely cutting the fish.

The food tasted as good as it looked. Yet it was also strangely familiar, reminding Sivan of years long gone by. He actually couldn't remember the last time he had a meal like this, and he wondered where on earth the pirates were getting their food. Some of these ingredients were out of reach for even the wealthiest noble this late in the war.

Regardless, if he could eat this every day for the rest of his life he would be happy.

"Is it good, my lord?"

Sivan's grip on his utensils stiffened. He had completely forgotten about the pirate captain who was evidently watching him instead of eating his own food. Black's eyes were grinning, clearly bemused by Sivan's enthusiasm. In this light the man was



ridiculously stunning, dark locks cascading down his shoulders and broad chest to frame his handsome face. Entire wars were fought over faces less beautiful than the pirate's in front of him.

He wasn't wearing the large overcoat that he had on during their fight. Just a simple tunic, cut open low, so low, to reveal his muscled chest and thick neck. Sivan noticed he had a shadow of a beard, the stubble dark on his jawline.

He swallowed, realizing he hadn't answered the man's question. "Mm," he nodded, "it's acceptable."

"Acceptable..." Black repeated, his tone empty. A shadow crossed over his face before he laughed darkly to himself. The pirate suddenly stood up, chair skidding across the floor with an unpleasant grinding noise.

Panic rose in Sivan's throat as the man picked up a carving knife and proceeded to drag it along the edge of the table, wood whining as it was dug into. Black's eyes flashed a bright green as he passed the candelabra on the table and approached Sivan. It made his sinisterly handsome face seem all the more dangerous.

"I bet you've had dishes like this all up and down the coast of Grenaldia," the pirate muttered. He lunged for Sivan, pushing the flat of the blade against the delicate skin of the lord's neck. "Yet mine is only *acceptable*?"

The fork Sivan had been holding clattered to the table when the metal of the knife met his throat. The fine hairs on his arms rose at the proximity of the knife, the pirate, and Black's stormy eyes.

Sivan steeled his thoughts, forcing himself to maintain eye contact with the captain. He feared that if he showed weakness Black would use it as an opening to do something awful to him. He couldn't figure out what insane thoughts drove this man. Why was he so upset that Sivan hadn't complimented the food better? Why did it even matter what Sivan thought? He was a

prisoner; he was grateful to be fed at all.

“The food is delicious,” Sivan managed to say carefully. The cold metal of the knife jumped against his skin as he spoke.

“I bet it is,” Black spat, eyes not dimming at all despite hearing what he supposedly wanted to hear. “I bet you’ve enjoyed all kinds of delicious *meal* with that pretty mouth of yours.”

Sivan’s face did not budge, but internally his mind was screaming at what the pirate just said. He had absolutely no idea what kind of insanity Black was going on about, but he knew it was making the back of his neck flush and his throat go dry. One of the pirate’s oversized hands rose, a thumb finding its way to the corner of Sivan’s mouth to push at his lips.

His heart jumped.

A flush crept onto Sivan’s face, threatening to expose him, but before that could happen a searing pain burned through his right arm. He couldn’t prevent himself from wincing and automatically clutching at the scar, heedless of the knife at his throat.

Sivan missed the startled look that Black gave him, seemingly shocked back into reality. He quickly withdrew the knife and schooled his expression as he stepped back.

The pain on Sivan’s arm receded faster than it usually did. Normally, the pain would linger, turning the lord into a disoriented shadow of his former self. Yet it passed almost as quickly as it had come, turning into a spreading warmth on his skin. A warmth in the shape of a large hand. Black watched him as Sivan pulled his sleeve back, revealing the black handprint that now obscured the scar Jhaeros had given him. Sure enough, when Sivan touched the black mark it was warm, warmer than the rest of his skin. He didn’t know how, but he got the feeling that this handprint was absorbing the pain.

Sivan’s gaze flicked back to Black when the pirate suddenly turned back towards the end of the table and sat down. He

stabbed the table with the knife, the metal ringing as it settled, standing upright. The captain's face was complicated, an odd mixture of anger and quiet regret.

"Why am I here?" Sivan finally found his voice again to ask. "What do you want with me?"

Black's dark eyes met his, and all the anger that had been raging on his face before was replaced with long overdue exhaustion. Sivan knew that exhaustion. It was the bone-tired feeling of fighting a war for almost a decade. A war they could not win.

"How many languages do you know?" Black asked, answering his questions with another question.

"Thirty-two," Sivan replied hesitantly. "Although I'm not fluent in seven of them."

"You must have a good memory, being able to retain all those languages," Black muttered under his breath. A shadow of bitter spite flashed across his face before the pirate continued. "Do you speak Oltinish?"

Sivan paused before answering. So he *was* here to translate the seal. He wasn't sure if he should answer truthfully. He didn't want to aid the pirate in whatever dark deeds he had planned with the seal, even if he couldn't fathom what those could be. However, Sivan felt like he had no choice but to go along with this. He was a prisoner, and even though Black had just threatened him with a knife to his throat, he had been fed well and not thrown in a dirty brig to rot.

"I do, yes."

Finally, Black seemed to be pleased with his response. "Good. You're going to use the seal I took from your city to translate the old tongue for me."

"Am I?" Ire tickled at the back of Sivan's throat, but he swallowed it down. Even when the pirate was happy he had a special way of speaking to him that made Sivan want to shut him up.

“May I ask, Captain, why do you want to understand Sirenath?”

The man’s eyes flashed bright green for a fraction of a moment, but Sivan wrote it off to the flickering candlelight.

“The old tongue is an ancient language. It was spoken before the Uncharted existed, back when the sea was home only to the sirens of long ago.” Black said this like it was all the answer Sivan needed.

“And why does a pirate lord want to understand a language that has been dead for millennia?”

Black grinned, sharp canines glinting at Sivan from across the table. “Have you ever heard of the Corseque of Estes?”

“Of course I have.” Sivan couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes, although this relatively rude action did not appear to upset the capricious pirate lord. “The Corseque is the legendary weapon forged by the first siren king.”

“Indeed.” Black began to pick at his food. “Have you ever tried to kill a siren?”

Sivan frowned at the jump in topics, but played along. “Yes... I’ve been at the front line of the war for the last nine years.”

“Have you ever succeeded?” There was no mockery in Black’s voice. If he knew about Sivan’s fall from glory from his one encounter with the siren king, he was not using this to jab at Sivan’s pride.

“No,” Sivan answered. “The only thing that can kill a siren is time.”

“Time...” The pirate’s fingers twisted in the fish fillet on his plate and pulled out the spine, ribs and all. “...and the Corseque of Estes.”

The juices from the fish dripped down the fish bones, coating Black’s fingers in grease. Sivan tore his gaze from the strange example the pirate offered him and looked at his face. The anger in those deep green eyes was terrifying. It was not directed at

Sivan, but at the fish spine and, by association, any siren.

“I have a map that will lead me to the Corseque. But, it’s written in Sirenath.”

“So you want me to translate the map. To find the Corseque of Estes.” Sivan spoke slowly, rolling over this odd proposal in his head.

“Precisely,” Black grinned.

Sivan narrowed his eyes, directing suspicion at the pirate from the other side of the table. “And why does a pirate lord want a weapon to kill sirens with?”

Black tossed the fish skeleton over his shoulder and pointed at Sivan. “Not just any siren. I’m going to kill the Uncharted king.”

Sivan blinked, genuine surprise crossing over his face. He knew the lord of the pirates had a penchant for vigilantism, but going so far as to end the war by killing the Uncharted king? Or perhaps killing Jhaeros was just the first step. Maybe Black intended to take the Uncharted legions for himself and just continue on warring with Grenaldia.

The war had gone on so long that Sivan barely hesitated before deciding that he’d prefer fighting against this pirate over the current Uncharted king. At least Black was human.

“I’ll do it,” Sivan said, meeting Black’s sharp gaze head on.

Sharp teeth flashed white, and Sivan hated himself for how that dangerous smile stirred something inside him.

“Good,” Black practically purred before leaning back in his chair and kicking his feet up on the table. “I’m almost disappointed. I thought the high and mighty Lord Montgomery would have taken more convincing to do my bidding after being kidnapped.”

Sivan lifted his chin and picked up his utensils before beginning to cut into his fish fillet once more. “I’m in full support of any agenda that involves killing sirens.”

Chapter 5

The Blackwater

Sivan had to admit that while the company of his dinner had left much to be desired, the quality of his meal had done a great deal to settle his stomach. He fell asleep that night thinking he could get used to being on a ship again, even if it was a pirate ship.

His dreams weren't even haunted by inhuman enemies nor was he woken up by the searing pain in his arm.

He was woken up by cannon fire.

Jolting out of bed at the noise of chaos unfolding just outside his door, Sivan pressed his face up against the porthole to get a glimpse of the ship attacking the Blackwater. He'd seen his fair share of smuggling ships, but none could compare to the great beast that was now coming down upon the Blackwater. It was twice as long as the pirate ship and twice as gaudy. Huge, intricate animals were carved into the sides of the ship. Everything from tigers to the mythical krakens that were rumored to lurk at

the bottom of the ocean. Smugglers were known for their indulgent tastes and lifestyles, and their vessels reflected that.

The Blackwater shuddered as the smuggling ship brushed up against it. Spiked wooden planks latched onto the deck, giving the smugglers a bridge to board the pirate ship. Sivan could hear them clashing outside his door, the sound of metal clanging against metal ringing true with the harsh battle cries from both sides.

Part of Sivan thought he should join them. He did not think his prospects of survival would be any better with the smugglers. Black found value in his linguistic skills, and he doubted the smugglers would have the same respect for that. Although he was far from his former glory as a solider, Sivan had no doubt he could at least outstep a smuggler.

If only he had a sword.

The door suddenly burst open, and a dead Uncharted pirate fell into the room. A greasy-looking human man stepped over the body and entered the room. He carried a knife in each hand, and each were dripping in black and red blood.

Their eyes met and Sivan once again reached for his swords at his belt, only to once again find nothing but air. The smuggler lunged at him, and Sivan just barely missed having his face sliced open with a knife. Sivan rolled over a table, sending maps fluttering to the floor. He thought he'd try for the door, hoping the smuggler wouldn't try throwing a knife at him, but when he turned around he was seized and cold metal was held against his throat for the second time that night.

"Where's the map?" the smuggler hissed into Sivan's ear.

Sivan glanced at the many maps now in disarray in Hayes' cabin. "Which one?"

"Don't get funny with me." The knife pressed harder at his throat, threatening to carve open his skin. "The Sirenath map.

Where is it?"

The smuggler's rancid breath reached his nose, and Sivan had to will himself not to vomit. "I don't know. Ask the pirates, I'm just a captive."

The smuggler laughed harshly behind him. "I know you've been translating it for him. Why else would the captain of the Blackwater kidnap a broken little lord?"

Gods, even smugglers knew about Sivan's fall from glory. Did these people seriously have nothing better to talk about?

Fed up with this situation, Sivan decided to risk it and brought his heel down on the man's toe. The smuggler cursed behind him, and Sivan took the opportunity to spin around and knee him in the chest, knocking the intruder back. One of his knives clattered to the floor, drawing both their attentions to it.

Sivan went for the weapon, but the smuggler was fast. Faster than he anticipated. The smuggler's hand knocked the knife as Sivan grabbed it, and it ended up in his hand blade first. Sivan inhaled sharply as the knife sliced deep into the palm of his hand. He managed to transfer it safely to his other hand before the smuggler could take it back.

Blood ran down his hand heavily, and Sivan tried to staunch the bleeding by making his hand into a tight fist.

The smuggler lunged again at Sivan, brandishing his other knife. Sivan faltered as their knives met, the all too familiar tremor of weapons clashing reverberating through his arm. This was the arm that bore the scar Jhaeros gave him, and now the handprint from Black. Both scar and handprint burned now, as if this confrontation caused this pain to plague Sivan.

Then he saw an opening.

The smuggler pulled back to strike him, but before he could finish fully arcing back his arm, Sivan attacked. He rotated his shaky hand holding the knife and slashed it across his opponent's

throat.

Blood poured profusely from the diagonal cut. He'd aimed for the smuggler's artery, so no matter how hard the man tried to hold the wound shut he would still bleed to death. The smuggler collapsed to the floor, his blood seeping into the cracks of the wood floor. Sivan ignored his desperate gurgling noises, choosing not to focus on how he knew the man was choking on his own blood.

He collapsed to his knees, clutching his right arm to his heaving chest. The knife clattered to the floor. The red scar had burned with every strike he made, making his movements shaky. It was a wonder Sivan was able to fend off the smuggler at all.

Warmth then suddenly spread from the black handprint on his skin. Sivan gasped at the sensation. It was like the new mark was intent on burning away the pain his old scar inflicted. He traced a point of where the two marks overlapped, a dark red meeting a stubborn pitch.

Black had not said anything about the mark during dinner. Sivan wondered if he even remembered making it.

Maybe it was something he did to all his captives.

Sivan pushed thoughts of the pirate out of his head. The clamor from outside his door was still raging on. His head now free of pain and pirates, his years of instinct from fighting battles kicked in.

He could sit here and wait for another smuggler to catch him off guard...

A glint of steel from the dead Uncharted pirate next to him caught Sivan's eye.

Or he could join the fight.

Sivan snuck out the door and into the chaotic night, an unfamiliar sword unsteady in his sweaty palm.

Left and right, pirates battled the invading smugglers. The massive smuggler's ship clung to the Blackwater like a pest despite the relentless cannon fire. The pirate crew was outnumbered, but the majority of the blood strewn on the deck was not spilt by them.

Most of the pirates were fighting with swords or knives. A whip of pale light snapped against the face of a smuggler, sending her flying back from Hayes, who was wielding a whip made of pure magic. Magic users were rare in Grenaldia, but their skills were fiercely coveted during the war. It was no surprise that the pirates had secured their own mage.

Sivan made another mental note to not get on Hayes's bad side.

A bearded man with a dark expression set eyes on Sivan and chased him away from the door. He wielded a large, rusted sword that looked like it hadn't been sharpened in ages. He lunged at Sivan with a ferocity that needled pain into his scarred arm. Yet, with a groan of pain, Sivan managed to block the attack with his own saber. He stepped quickly to the side and with a decisive twist of his blade flung the bearded man's sword off the side of the ship and into the water.

The man looked at him dumbfounded for a moment. He clearly hadn't been expecting this prim looking noble to disarm him.

Then he reached to his scabbard and unsheathed a second, larger sword, a wild grin creeping onto his face.

Sivan swallowed, but didn't back off. It'd been ages since he'd seen battle regularly, but his recent duel with the Blackwater captain had given him the confidence that he still retained some of his skill.

The bearded smuggler advanced, hitting Sivan's blocks with rattling force. His blows weren't as powerful as Black's had been, but while the pirate seemed to have had fun toying with Sivan, this smuggler only appeared to be after Sivan's death. Blow after blow forced Sivan back, his heels hitting hard against the steps to the helm. Pain lanced up his leg and into his arm, forcing him to drop his sword.

He fell back onto the stairs with a grunt. The smuggler looked gleeful as he approached Sivan, his blade angled with intent. The scar on his arm throbbed, and the pain seized his whole body in agony.

Battles now always ended with Sivan being wrecked by a fierce and dreadful pain. This was why he was taken out of the Royal Navy. This was why he couldn't even stand on a training field with any confidence. This was why he was going to die on a pirate ship, alone and far away from home. The smuggler raised his sword, aiming at Sivan's throat, and the once mighty Grenaldian hero was helpless to even try to stop him.

But before the blade came down, a large shadow materialized behind the smuggler.

Sivan heard the clatter of the smuggler's blade drop on the deck before he saw the wicked black cutlass jutting out of his attacker's chest. The man gurgled, choking on his own blood as he died. Captain Black stood behind him, his sword remaining firm in the smuggler's chest. The dark shadow of the captain's form was broken up by his bloody hands and enraged face.

Black watched the smuggler die, his expression intensely savage. Sivan would have guessed Black had known this smuggler personally due to the sheer emotion on his face.

After his last death rattle, the smuggler was dropped to the floor, instantly forgotten. The pain in Sivan's arm slowly receded. First from a warmth around the black handprint, then it seemed

to suck up all the pain the scar had caused.

Sivan looked at his arm, awed at how quickly the pain had left him. Usually with an attack like this it grew gradually worse until he passed out, and then he'd have to spend one or two days bedridden. But it was gone so quickly and left him just as clear-headed as he'd been before.

He was so astonished by this that he failed to notice the pirate captain leaning down to him. So when Sivan was scooped up off the deck he let out a rather undignified squawk.

Black carried him across the deck, heedless of the raging battle going on around them. A smuggler attempted to gut the captain as he passed, but he was quickly struck down with a blasé slash from Black's cutlass. He marched over to his cabin and threw open the door.

Inside was another smuggler. She was rifling through the papers on the war table, clearly caught in the act of searching for information.

Sivan thought he had seen the full extent of the pirate's anger before, but this was something far beyond the playful glares and temper tantrums he had been witness to in the last two days. Black's presence seemed to expand in the cabin. His shadow darkened, appearing to grow out from him and seek claim on all the light in the room. Sivan remembered the dark shadows that the pirate had emerged from in Varis. He had almost forgotten them amidst his capture, too preoccupied in the mess he had been thrown in to reflect on that particular terrifying detail.

Black set Sivan down and faced the smuggler as she attacked. She was faster than the others, and managed to dodge a few of Black's slashes before one caught her on the arm. She screamed as her bicep ripped open, flesh hanging from flesh.

Then, with a mighty swing of his cutlass, the pirate cleaved the smuggler in two. She died with an aborted scream on her

face, her agony interrupted by Black's sword. Blood sprayed the pirate's face, his expression chillingly blank.

Seeing him now, Sivan was sure of it. There was something off about Black. Some dark magic possessed his very being. It lurked under the dark green of his eyes, and revealed itself in the shadows he cast. Sivan hadn't the faintest idea what it was, but he was certain that it terrified him.

"You're hurt," Black said quietly, forcing Sivan to look at him through sheer presence alone. He took a step towards him, but Sivan couldn't help but flinch at his approach. The man was covered in blood, from boots to head. His clothes were all black, but Sivan could still see where the blood darkened the fabric into pure pitch.

Unbelievably, the pirate had the audacity to look disappointed at Sivan's reaction. Truly this man's mind was warped if he thought that the person he kidnapped should always welcome him with open arms even though he had just split a woman open in front of him. He might have just saved Sivan's life, but that didn't mean Sivan had to be grateful to him.

Black turned and strode to a cabinet against the wall. He opened it, retrieved whatever it was he wanted, and returned to Sivan, who was watching him apprehensively. On the table he placed medicinal alcohol and clean bandages before extending his hand out. "Give me your hand."

Sivan held his hand closer to his chest, childishly turning away from the pirate. "No," he muttered. "I can do it myself. You should be with your crew, defending your ship...Captain."

Black frowned and stood next to him, reaching for his hand. Sivan was prepared to wince, to feel pain when the man wrenched his hand towards him, but instead the gentlest touch rested against his knuckles. It did not pull, it did not hurt. Black's touch was so soft that Sivan was shocked into cooperating.



He let the pirate lead his hand away from his chest, coaxing him into opening his clenched fist with a light prodding of his fingers.

“The crew that sails with me are no strangers to unprovoked late night attacks. They have done fine without me in the past, and they will do fine now. I am where I should be.” Black’s voice was low, reassuring.

Sivan wasn't sure what he meant by that. The pirate wordlessly cleaned and bandaged the cut on Sivan's palm. He did this with such care that Sivan barely felt any pain. Only the sting of the alcohol as it cleansed his wound.

When he finished treating Sivan's hand, Black bent down to pick up the smuggler's corpse. He left a few organs scattered on the ground, but he still lifted the body like it weighed nothing.

Sivan remembered the rumor he'd heard about the pirate lord. A rumor that he had sold his soul to a sea witch for dark powers and immortal strength.

Black left, leaving Sivan to wonder if these rumors really held some truth to them.



The smugglers were exterminated quickly, and the Blackwater took the ornate ship for their own. One more obsidian ship to add to his father's war table.

Sivan peered out the porthole just in time to see the body of a smuggler fall into the ocean. He wasn't sure if the person had been dead already, but the sight of them disappearing into the dark water made the lord's stomach sink in dread.

He could still face a sword point, albeit poorly, but the thought of being lost to the deep sea paralyzed him.

A hurried knock at the door broke Sivan out of the nauseating tailspin that sight had sent him into. Sivan found the courtesy odd, since his captors had always just barged in before. This wasn't his room, after all. Nothing was private for him here.

"Come in..." Sivan said, a little hesitant.

The door opened and a tall Grenaldian man entered the

room, holding a covered tray of what Sivan supposed to be food. His hair was a dark grey, his skin deep copper, and he was clad in the black uniform of the Blackwater crew. The man closed the door behind him, making sure it was shut all the way before doing a cursory glance around the room, as if he were checking to see if anyone else was there.

He set the tray down on a table and surprised Sivan by bowing to him. "Lord Montgomery, I do not have much time."

Sivan's golden eyes widened. It had only been a few days since he had been captured, but no one had addressed him this politely since he boarded the Blackwater.

"My name is Renalt Dubois," he continued. "I have been a mole for the Grenaldian military for some time. I infiltrated the Blackwater's ranks months ago."

"Oh!" Sivan's surprise settled into distant understanding. He felt like he should have been told that his father had sent someone to spy on the pirates, but then again he hadn't been part of any war dealings since his battle with Jhaeros.

"I apologize for not being able to come to you earlier. I am only here now because the captain is distracted at the moment." Renalt gestured towards the smuggler ship currently being raided by pirates. "Unfortunately I cannot help you escape right now since we are en route. However, I have been in contact with your father."

Sivan gave him a nod, although it was paired with a sharp stare. He was not sure if he should trust this man. It should have given Sivan hope that he'd been given this lifeline to his father, but for all he knew this could be a trap Black was using to play with him.

"Where exactly are we heading?" Sivan asked. It was suspicious that Renalt revealed himself before actually being able to help him. A Grenaldian mole on the Blackwater was convenient,

and Sivan had trained himself to be distrustful of anything easy.

“Lissandry,” Renalt answered.

“The pirate capital?”

Renalt nodded, and a shiver went up Sivan’s spine. Calling it a capital was generous, but the old Grenaldian trading post had been treated as enemy territory since it had been lost years ago.

“The captain wants to show off the new acquisition-“ Renalt nodded at the smuggler’s ship.

“Then how exactly do you plan on helping me escape? Lissandry might as well be a fortress for how many pirates defend it.”

Renalt grinned, as if he’d been waiting for that question. “For now, yes. But the captain is planning on sending the majority of the fleet to the western shore in a week’s time. Some type of supplies run.”

“Supplies,” Sivan repeated. So that was how the pirates had been able to send rations to Grenaldian cities. The West refused to trade with Grenaldia to avoid the wrath of the Uncharted, but they couldn’t refuse a pirate’s sword to their throats.

“The Admiral intends to send a portion of the Royal fleet then to crush Lissandry and rescue you,” the supposed spy reported near breathlessly.

“Okay...so what does my father want me to do until then?” If Renalt wanted him to do anything risky Sivan would be more suspicious of him.

A strange frown crossed over the man’s face. “He told me that he wants you to comply with the pirates, to any reasonable degree...” There was hesitation in Renalt’s voice. He was holding something back.

“...and? What else did he tell you?”

Renalt bowed again partially, using the angle to not look at Sivan’s face. “He said you’re in no position to fight back, in

your...condition. It's best if you just wait patiently."

"Ah," Sivan breathed. So Renalt really was a spy. Those words sounded like they came directly out of the Earl's mouth. Tristan Montgomery had lost faith in Sivan's ability to fend for himself, and would only admit it to another if deemed completely necessary.

At least he cared enough to send an armada to rescue him.

"Forgive me for the harsh words, I am merely relaying what I've been told." Renalt looked at him earnestly, like he really cared about hurting Sivan's pride.

"It's nothing I haven't been told before. But, tell me, why are you risking your undercover position to help me?"

Renalt smiled at him, stood up straighter and saluted him. "There are still those in service to Grenaldia who still respect the Two-Headed Viper."

Sivan nearly choked on his own tongue when he heard the nickname some of the sailors had given him during his time as a commander. He earned this moniker because he wielded two swords and was faster than most. Anyone who had been in the war for as long as Sivan had were bound to be gifted a fanciful nickname or two, even if they did not want them. He always loathed the name, he found it too romantic. It gave everyone a false sense of Sivan's image. They expected him to be this grandiose figure, as imposing and regal as he was deadly. The reality of Sivan's quiet, controlled demeanor always fell short of their vision of him. Especially now.

Composing himself, Sivan frowned at Renalt. "Please do not call me that."

The man merely smiled wider and bowed respectfully. "As my lord wishes."

Sivan was about to dismiss him when he realized the spy could help him more. "Before you go, can you tell me why Black

wants to kill the Uncharted king so badly? He captured me to translate a map. He thinks it will lead him to a weapon that can kill sirens.”

Renalt looked surprised. “That’s why he captured you?”

“Mm, I was in the library when he stole the Siren Seal. He needed a translator, and I was just there at the wrong place and the wrong time.”

The other Grenaldian man looked hesitant, like he was again deciding whether or not to tell Sivan something sensitive. “I’m not so sure, my lord. The way Black talked about Varis...he had been planning this for years. Like it was some great prize he was working up to.”

Sivan was surprised. The seal was not a well-known treasure even within scholarly world. There should be no reason Black waited so long to go after it.

“When I heard he’d captured you, I assumed the two of you had some sort of run in during the war. That he kidnapped you as part of his revenge.” Renalt was troubled by this, as was Sivan. If Black had gone into Varis with the intent to kidnap him specifically, what could possibly be his motivation behind it?

“I assure you, I have never met this pirate before.” Sivan said. “I would have remembered such a powerful man in the trenches of war.”

“I see,” Renalt spoke quietly, clearly racking his brain for an answer. “Regardless, please be careful around Black. Do not do anything rash, do not anger him.”

Sivan remembered the pirate’s anger from the night before. He did not know what drove this man’s fury, but he knew it was palpable and dangerous.

“Yes, I am well aware of his anger by now,” Sivan said quietly.

Renalt stepped forward, motioning as if he wanted to take

Sivan's hand, to implore him to listen. "Black is the worst of them all. I have not known the man but for a few months, however I have seen firsthand the depths of his ruthlessness. He is unyielding. He never forgets, and he never forgives."

A flash of Black's gentle hand, cleaning and dressing Sivan's wound, crossed his mind. Sivan was startled, he couldn't fathom why this was what his brain chose to remember upon hearing confirmation that Black was a heartless criminal. Yet it lingered, and he gripped the bandage still neatly wrapped around his palm.

Chapter 6

Lissandry

The voyage to Lissandry was short but turbulent. Sivan barely managed to keep himself from becoming sick all over Hayes's precious maps. Whenever the waves surged and the ship made a rocking motion that reminded him he was far out at sea, Sivan would close his eyes and meditate. It was less a method of mentally centering himself and more of an attempt to distract his senses from the storm.

So when the pirate capital appeared on the horizon, Sivan was happier to see it than he should have been. He just needed to put his feet on land once again. Maybe then he'd have a better handle on this situation with Captain Black.

Any remnant left of the old Grenaldian port had long been lost to the pirates's takeover. They'd turned Lissandry from a simple dock and collection of buildings into an extravagant fort patch-worked together by thievery and sheer spite.

Lissandry was now a fortress, high walls and lookout posts

loomed around the once peaceful dock. As the Blackwater sailed between two massive floating monoliths, Sivan could see they were lined with a multitude of cannons up and down the structure. Had they been not welcomed here the cannon fire would have surely sent them to a watery grave. But their arrival was met with cheers and the metal signing of pirate swords clanging against the stone walls.

The pirate capital welcomed the Blackwater with open arms, sharp as that embrace may be.

From his porthole Sivan could see a multitude of pirate ships in varying shapes. Far more than were represented on his father's war table. A mixture of dread and confusion crept under his skin. Black's fleet was far more powerful than Grenaldia knew.

The Blackwater made port, followed by the smuggler's ship. Sivan watched as a mixture of human and Uncharted pirates unloaded the ship of its treasures. They looked positively gleeful with great armfuls of gold and fine silks.

Grenaldia was losing a war, but pirates were still pirates.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour of waiting, Brand opened the door.

"Th' captain be wantin' ta see ye," he announced in his thick accent.

"Naturally." Sivan stood up and straightened his vest primly, like he hadn't spent the last several days trying to keep his insides from escaping through his mouth.

Brand led him outside and off the ship. He was not surprised to find that the Lissandry port was as raucous as his father's home had been subdued. Every store they passed seemed to sell drink and pleasure, and business was plentiful.

Yet amongst the debauchery, death crept in. Just outside the docks was a noose, a long dead man swinging from the rope. None of the crows even paid him attention, his flesh having long

turned to leathered skin and bone in the sun.

Brand seemed to notice Sivan's appall and nodded at the corpse. "Tha' be th' last lord before Black.

"Oh. Wh-?" Sivan didn't know how to ask his question. He'd never heard of a noble being executed. Even when murder had been involved the unspoken rule amongst nobility was to quietly sweep it under the rug.

"Ah, yar. Lissandry ain't like Varis, me lord." He swept a look around to the pirates around them. "We decided pirates be better fitted ta chose our own leaders. An' if they do us no good we be findin' a new one."

Sivan struggled to wrap his mind around this, but one question surfaced above the others. "And...what did this one do that was 'no good?'"

Brand scratched his beard, trying to recall the answer. "Huh, tha' be so long ago...oh! He tried ta side with th' Uncharted king years ago. Black didn't like tha' much, so..."

"I see."

Sivan kept silent the rest of the way to their destination. He wasn't sure what to think about the pirates' style of governing, but he was thankful Black had stopped them from siding with Jhaeros. Grenaldia would have been crushed years ago if the pirates sailed under an Uncharted flag.

Brand took him to a larger manor amongst the taverns and inns. From the outside it looked like any one of the manors Sivan had grown up in. But the inside was dark and dreary, any sign of opulence long since stripped from the walls. Brand led him up a curved staircase that creaked with every step.

Yet the room Brand led him to was well maintained and retained the splendor the rest of the manor had long since lost. It was pure opulence, similar to the captain's cabin on the Blackwater.

Blackwater | Chapter Six

After the opulence, the second thing Sivan noticed was the man standing at a washbasin, drying off.

It was Black.

Shirtless.

Sivan couldn't help but stare.



He had known the man was in good condition. No one could look at Black and not understand that powerful, well-built muscles were hiding under his clothes. But seeing him now, his wide chest, the dusting of hair, the massive landscape of sinew and brawn that made up his body.

It hit Sivan in the gut, low and hot, and bubbled right up to heat his face.

“Ah, I did not expect you so soon,” Black said. He appeared to notice Sivan’s reddened face and flashed a grin at him.

Sivan looked away, angry at himself for allowing his body to react like that. He had been something of a late bloomer, not quite figuring out where his attractions lay until he was well into his military service. By then there was no time for romance or flirtations. Any experience he had with another man had been abysmal and more often than not a result of worn nerves after a long battle.

He had prided himself in being able to control his desires, just as he had been able to control his actions and expressions in front of others. Maintaining an air of dignity untouched by carnal needs was expected of a noble. Yet here he was, blushing like a maid at seeing a man partially undressed.

“So sorry, Captain! Hayes said ye be still dealin’ with them — th’ survivors,” Brand stumbled on his words.

“Hayes is on the ship, as always. She can’t see everything from there,” Black said patiently, no real irritation in his voice.

Sivan’s eyes were drawn back to Black as he finished drying off his hands. The towel he had been using was stained red. The pirate had clearly been washing off the blood he had gotten on him during the attack. Sivan did another, better prepared glance at Black’s torso, his neck, his face, back down the twin barracuda tattoos that jumped from his back and swam down his arms. He didn’t have a single scratch on him aside from ancient scars. All

the blood had been from other people.

Black dropped the towel and quickly reached for a pair of gloves near the wash basin. Sivan caught a glimpse of his hands in the brief moment before Black pulled on the gloves. He could have sworn they were somewhat deformed, mottled with a dark pox that had not been there the night before.

Before Sivan could ask what it was, Black had the gloves on and tugged on a gray linen shirt, stained dark at the collar where it had been exposed beneath his overcoat. Sivan wondered if that coat was really black, or if it had just been stained with blood so many times it merely simulated the color.

“That will be all, Brand, thank you.” Black dismissed him with a wave, and Brand left with a nod.

The remaining pirate motioned for Sivan to sit at a table near the window. It was made of mahogany, the carved legs gilded with gold. A great crater was carved into the top, miniature hills and mountains thoughtfully placed within the crevice. Then the concave surface was filled with what appeared to be crystal clear deep sea green glass, giving it the appearance of an ocean landscape.

It was extraordinarily beautiful, but like everything else in the room it left Sivan with a crawling feeling of excessive luxury gained from unethical methods.

On the table sat the Siren Seal, some paper, ink, some writing tools, and a candle. So Black wanted him to get to work.

“I’m taking it you want me to start translating the seal already,” Sivan said.

Black took the ink off the table and uncorked it. “Yes, I do. I’ve wasted enough time on these smugglers.” The man’s voice was tired, like having such a swift and powerful victory over a massive smuggling vessel had been nothing but a tedious chore. “We had planned to take over that ship at some point, but it was

not a priority. Them attacking the Blackwater simply forced our hand.”

“Translating a dead language holds priority for you?” Sivan asked.

Black picked up a brush and the seal. He dipped the brush in the inkwell, letting the bristles soak up the ink. “Finding a way to kill Jhaeros and end the war has always been the priority,” he said quietly before taking the seal and painting it with ink.

Sivan was too distraught by the pirate putting commonplace ink on a priceless linguistic artifact to ponder over why Black wanted to end the war so badly. The Royal Library had archival methods to use seals like this one without actually having to risk damage by physically inking it. Watching Black haphazardly roll the Siren Seal, dripping in ink, onto a piece of parchment was almost too much.

The words bloomed onto the page cleanly, rolling out familiar, upright characters Sivan recognized as Oltinish. Beneath that scrawled strange characters Sivan guessed to be Sirenath. He had only seen the language a handful of times, but he seemed to recall its odd spindly nature.

“Give me a quill,” Sivan ordered, unable to take his gaze off the two languages sitting side by side.

The requested quill was placed in his hand, and Sivan grabbed for the ink and parchment himself. He began translating the Oltinish passage into the common tongue.

This is what it said:

It is with great pleasure we announce the anticipated union of Lady Hestia Tin'ay and Lord Na'becate. The Selka port will be closed for the wedding on the fourteenth day of the pale moon cycle. The Siren Lord extends an invitation to all of Oltin as a thanks for cooperating in this manner. He wishes all to celebrate his union with his beautiful bride.

The passage went on for awhile after that, going on about the

details of the wedding and how the merchants would be recompensed for the interference. Sivan read over what he had written several times, making sure it was correct. The structure of the note read clearly, but the context didn't make much sense to him.

"It's a wedding missive," Black mused, apparently having read the parchment over his shoulder.

"Between a Siren Lord and an Oltinsh noble? Unheard of." This was the part Sivan couldn't parse. No self-respecting noble would cavort with sirens, let alone marry one. Even if this was thousands of years ago it did not make sense.

"That Royal Library of yours really does edit their history, hm?" Black mused, a pitying frown on his face.

"Excuse me?" Now Sivan was offended. "That library has books that are thousands of years old. Tomes that are much older than this chunk of stone."

Black sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, barracudas intertwining. "Then Grenaldia has been editing history for millennia. Outside our great country's border it is common knowledge that the Uncharted are a direct result of sirens and humans interbreeding."

Sivan opened his mouth to dispute that, but for some reason this argument made him think of the nature of the Uncharted language. It was a hard, lilting tongue, difficult for humans to speak, but not impossible. The fact that Uncharted were descended from the ancient sirens was irrefutable-- that was evident from the way they looked to the way they spoke. But part of the reason the Sirenath language died out was because no human could speak it. It was even difficult for Uncharted to speak, so it was not often passed down.

Perhaps the reason the Uncharted did not retrain their ancestral Sirenath tongue was because they were in fact too human to speak it.

“What do you make of the seal?” Black’s deep voice broke Sivan out of his internal speculating. “Can you translate the old tongue?”

“Potentially. Even with the seal it will take quite some time for me to parse a dead language into the common tongue.”

“Why? Is it not a simple translation?” Black didn’t sound annoyed, despite Sivan expecting him to be.

“Not at all.” Sivan shook his head. “I have no way of telling how Sirenath is structured. It likely does not share the same syntax as the common tongue, or even Oltinsh for that matter. They don’t even share the same alphabet.”

“That’s disappointing,” Black said. “How long do you think it will take?”

Sivan hesitated, reluctant to give the pirate more disappointment. “It could take years.”

Black frowned, eyes fixed on the Sirenath passage. “I don’t have years.”

“Neither do I,” Sivan murmured under his breath.

He thought of the passage, of the Oltinsh lady to be wed to the Siren Lord. He thought of their odd life together, of the children they would have, how those children would have children, and how eventually, if what Black said were true, their ancestors would become the Uncharted.

The Uncharted who had long forgotten their forefather’s tongue.

“Unless,” Sivan said, hope trickling back into his voice. “If we can translate this Oltinsh into another language, one more closely linked to Sirenath.”

“What language would that be?” Black asked.

“Uncharted,” Sivan replied, hands gesturing as he spoke. “Regardless of whether or not Uncharted are descended from humans, the fact that they have siren blood in them is true. It

makes sense that their language would be more closely related to the 'old tongue.' If Sirenath is an earlier form of Uncharted, the structure between the two might be similar. If we can find someone to translate this passage into Uncharted, I can study how the structure changes and apply that to Sirenath. If we are lucky, it would take no time at all."

Sivan was so engrossed in his theorizing that he failed to notice the beguiled smile that was playing upon Black's lips. He stared as Sivan prattled on, like he could listen to him lecture about the syntaxes of dead languages for hours.

"It just so happens that I know Uncharted," Black offered, extending a hand to show that he would translate it right here, right now.

"You do?" Sivan handed the quill over to Black.

"My fleet would not have half the crew it has now if I did not speak their mother tongue," Black explained. He took the quill and dipped it deep into the inkwell.

Sivan watched him scribble the passage down, completely fascinated. Of course it made sense that Black would pick up the language. Uncharted were notorious for being extremely biased towards their own kind. It would take someone who had a sharp mind and a sharper tongue to make them trust a human. But still, it was impressive that Black had successfully learned to speak and write Uncharted. It used a great number of syllables barely pronounceable by the limited nature of human tongues. Not only that, but Uncharted was a confusing language, having many different clauses and exceptions that most professional linguists found difficult to memorize. And judging from the speed at which he was translating, Sivan could tell he had quite a solid grasp on the language.

Sivan was impressed with Black, even if he would not willingly admit it to his face.

Black passed the translated passage over to Sivan when he was finished. He read it over, but the characters made little sense to Sivan. “Hm...” he murmured.

“What is it?” Black’s voice was low, close to his ear, and it made Sivan start.

“W-well...the Uncharted alphabet has quite a few variations in pronunciation from the standard alphabet. It would help me greatly if you could transcribe this phonetically in the common tongue. Then I would be able to make better sense of it.” Sivan found surety in his voice even if his heart was hammering at the proximity of the beautiful pirate’s face.

“I see,” Black hummed and took back the paper from Sivan’s hands. Their fingers brushed together, and Sivan drew his hand back sharply at the spark he felt at the touch. The pirate certainly noticed his reaction, but merely flashed his unnaturally sharp teeth at him in a glimmer of a smirk. “Of course, I will read it aloud if you write down the pronunciation as you see fit.”

Sivan nodded stiffly and re-inked the quill. New parchment was laid before him, and he prepared to relay Black’s words onto the paper.

“In ael zaeny ksien vrieloisi...” The pirate began speaking Uncharted like it was his native tongue. Not that Sivan really knew what that sounded like in the foreign language, but Black’s voice just seemed suited for it. His tones were deep and long, necessary for the Uncharted language’s complicated pronunciations.

“Please slow down,” Sivan said. He was frantically scribbling what Black was saying, but this was not like any language he had studied, and it was taking him a moment to transcribe it into something usable.

Black leaned closer, too close for it to be appropriate, and spoke low in Sivan’s ear. “My apologies, my lord.”

Sivan's heart sped up at the puff of breath against his ear. He somehow stopped himself from shivering, but only barely. Black continued his translation, low and hot, far closer than he was before. This proximity was completely unnecessary, and it was proving extraordinary difficult for Sivan to focus. The syllables he was writing down were most likely inaccurate; his neat, tight handwriting slanted into a sloppy script.

"Hi zaelyil err na' ririmseni yael..." Black continued his dictation, his voice turned melodic in its slowed down form. Sivan had always had an aversion towards the Uncharted language. Before, it was because he was not able to add it to his collection of languages, no matter how hard he tried. After Jhaeros, after his battle with the siren king that still haunted him to this day, Sivan's childish grudge against the tongue had turned into downright revulsion.

But when Black spoke Uncharted...it sounded different. It wasn't as harsh, wasn't as unnatural to him.

"...oitaeta't zaeny yael mieoinaephoir msaevi..."

Sivan froze.

'Msaevi.'

His world began to spin, even before Sivan could parse why the word struck deep fear into his veins.

"*Degi ha'oi db msaevi...*" These were the words Jhaeros had said to Sivan a year ago, when he had been about to kill him.

Sivan couldn't stop himself from translating that last word, the one that was also in the translation of the Siren Seal's wedding announcement.

'Bride.'

His stomach churned at the realization, nausea washing over him, forcing him to bend over onto the table.

"My lord? What's wrong?!" Black's voice was concerned, his deep voice growing high and worried.

Sivan was unable to respond as the scar Jhaeros gave him started burning, searing his nerves. He groaned, clutching at the mark, panic only rising when he saw the black handprint overlaid on top of it. His breathing reached a fever pitch, chest heaving, golden eyes wide and confused, not remembering how he got either mark.

He didn't know where he was, he wasn't even sure who he was. The dim room was cast into high contrast, the little light in the room making his head pulse.

"My lord! It's okay!" A voice called out to him, trying to hold him still. He didn't know who this was. It could be an enemy. It could be the one who put these marks on his arm. Pushing back against the man, he tried to break free from the iron hands on his shoulders.

Sivanv tried to speak, but he couldn't even do that. The light was too bright, the shadows too dark, the way the man was trying to calm him did nothing to still the hurricane rattling around inside his mind.

A hand moved from his shoulder to his arm, to wrap around the black handprint. It was a perfect match.

It was only then that he realized the pain on his arm was not from this darker mark, but from the red scar underneath. Warmth pulsed into his skin from where the man's hand connected with his arm. Slowly, the pain from the scar began to subside. It seeped out through the black mark, as if the man's touch was sucking venom out from a snake bite.

The world grew dark as the pain and panic let him go. He was so tired, and gratefully fell into the man's warm embrace as he sunk into blissful unconsciousness.

His last cognizant moment of awareness was that of someone brushing his hair back before gently cupping his face.

Chapter 7

Lissandry

The blissful darkness of unconsciousness allowed Sivan's mind to back away from the precipice of losing himself. His identity came back to him, his thoughts, his emotions, his memories.

This memory was once again from his time on the Northern Spear. He was fifteen, a year after his father had relocated their family to the island. Sivan enjoyed his life as a noble back then even if it required him to have certain responsibilities he didn't have much interest in. But the commoners on the island were still hesitant to speak with him in fear of displeasing the son of the man who was bringing them new luxuries to their tiny island.

Sivan was lonely. He had no-one near his own age who would interact with him as a person and not as the *'son of the Earl.'*

Today he was avoiding his etiquette tutor by roaming the docks along the shore. It was a bright and sunny day, hot but tempered by a pleasantly strong breeze. Sivan was still getting used to the hotter temperatures of the Spear. He had thought he

would be prepared for the climate since his home of Varis was known for its rather warm summers. Logically, the island should have been cooler than the capital since it was further north, but it lay in the Devil's Whip, an odd stretch of ocean where the current cut through the cloud cover and made it perpetually sunny. It was said this was why the Uncharted never ventured out beyond this line of sea. They couldn't handle the unending sunshine.

The docks were busy with merchants selling their wares to the new recruits the earl had requested from Varis. They looked bright-eyed now, enchanted by the foreign island, but they would be bone-tired after a few days at the training facility high on the hilly plateau of the island.

Sivan wandered past the stalls of fine silks, jewelry, and food, politely turning down the enthusiastic merchants' attempts to sell something to the rich noble.

"I'm keeping my eye on ye, boy! If one of those fruits go missin' I'll skin ya!" a shrill voice called from the end of the line of stalls. Sivan's attention was drawn towards the voice, and he laid eyes on the dirtiest boy he had ever seen scowling bitterly at the old woman who was shouting at him from behind mounds of succulent looking fruit.

The boy was filthy and skinny. His hair was a tangled barb of frizz and dust. One could not even be sure of his real hair color with all that dirt in it. He couldn't have been more than twelve, and Sivan assumed he was one of a handful of orphaned vagrants who lived on the streets of the small city. Looking around, he wondered where the other children were, as they usually roamed in packs.

But this child was alone, and he simply turned away after the old woman snapped at him. He clutched at his starving stomach, and it made Sivan pity him greatly.

Sivan approached the fruit stand and the old woman instantly perked up at the sight of the young and beautiful noble who surely had much money to flitter away. Indeed, Sivan picked out several of the biggest fruits and paid for them with a silver coin.

He walked away from the stand with a paper bag of fruit in hand. Ahead, the vagrant boy had been watching him, the baleful glare intensifying as Sivan approached with his purchase.

The boy was a head shorter than the noble, and his tiny body immediately tensed up as Sivan got closer. Sivan held out the bag for him to take, smiling at him even though the boy looked like he was considering biting his hand.

“Please take it,” Sivan said, urging the boy to grab the offered fruit. “I, um...I bought too much, I’ll never be able to finish it myself.”

This blatant farce was so transparent, but it seemed to settle the overt suspicion the boy had for Sivan. He took the offering hesitantly, looking into the bag of fruit to inspect them for any hidden weapons or poisons. Before the boy could say or do anything else, Sivan turned and began walking further down the docks.

After dealing with the pushy merchants, Sivan wished to find a quiet spot in the shade. At the end of the docks a few palm trees grew out from the land and curved up and over the pier. They created a nice shaded area not currently occupied by ships or sailors or merchants.

Sivan was aware the boy had followed him over here, but he remained on the periphery of his vision. The noble was just able to observe that he was indeed stuffing his face with the fruit he had been gifted, which satisfied Sivan and let him continue pretending he had not noticed him. He did not expect to be thanked for the fruit, more likely the boy was just following him to figure out if he could pickpocket him later.

Finding the most shaded area of the dock, Sivan sat himself on the edge, hanging his feet over the water. A pleasant breeze picked up and cooled him even further, and he let out a satisfied sigh. This end of the dock looked out over deeper water and would catch the current of air created by the curve of the shore and the rise of the plateau. It was a wholly wonderful resting location, and Sivan made a note to remember it again for later.

He was so lost in his relaxation that he'd almost forgotten the boy who had been stalking him. He also did not hear the telltale crack of a coconut breaking from a tree above him.

A coconut dropped down square upon Sivan's head, instantly making him lose consciousness.

He came to a few seconds later, but had already fallen into the ocean and was now sinking to the bottom. Sivan was still so disoriented that his limbs would not listen to him. He knew how to swim, he'd known how to swim since he was very small, but it was all useless now as the water pulled him down while his arms and legs swayed uselessly.

The darkness of unconsciousness began to take hold on him once more. Sivan was dimly aware of something clawing at his clothes, attempting to grab hold of him.

Sivan felt water rise at the back of his throat, and he woke up violently, coughing up water into the sand.

"My lord! My lord!" a boy's voice called out to him. Sivan's blouse was being pulled on, and the boy he had given fruit to before was now shaking him, panic clear in his bright green eyes.

Sivan was startled to find that the boy's hair was actually a shocking mess of damp, inky black. The dive into the water had cleaned off the vagrant's dust and grime and had revealed a fine-looking youth.

"My lord!" The boy repeated, clinging to him, tears suddenly

springing to his eyes. "Are-are you okay, my lord?"

"Did you save me?" was Sivan's response.

"I-! Yes! You fell in after the coconut hit you! You cannot sit under the palm trees, my lord! They are dangerous!"

The stark difference in the the dirty vagrant who tried to kill people with a glare and the sobbing, bright-eyed youth who had just saved his life was astounding. Sivan only knew it was the same boy because a ways off in the sand laid the bag he had given him, the fruit ruined and strewn in the sand.

"What are you doing to the young lord?!" a woman's voice cried out.

Suddenly the boy was ripped away from Sivan by a pair of frantic-looking sailors of the Royal Navy. The male sailor had the boy by the scruff of his shirt, and his thin legs were kicking out wildly, spraying water all over him. The female sailor went to Sivan's aid, but Sivan gathered himself up first.

"Unhand him! That boy saved my life!" Sivan ordered.

The sailors exchanged apprehensive looks, but they let Sivan's savior down. The vagrant children of the city were known to cause trouble to the sailors, being especially fond of pickpocketing the unaware. These two had jumped to conclusions because of it.

Sivan dismissed them after explaining that he was quite alright and required no further service of them. The sailors were quite the opposite from the commoners who were too afraid of offending him to speak to him, but they always tried to butter Sivan up in the chance that it would increase their military standing with the Earl. They were not very good at hiding this, and Sivan always felt like he was nothing more than a pawn after speaking to them.

After the sailors were on their way, Sivan turned back around to find the boy picking up the sand-coated fruit. The skin

of the fruit had split open, the sand instantly making it inedible. Still, the boy tried brushing it off, determined to eat the rest of it.

“Oh dear, please don’t eat that!” Sivan gently took the sandy fruit from him, stopping him from taking a bite out of it.

“But...” The loss of the fruit seemed to crush the boy, his bright green eyes hollow.

Once again, pity washed over Sivan. He had witnessed beggars and vagrants before, but he had never seen such desperation like this up close.

“What is your name?” Sivan asked.

“Nereus,” the boy answered.

“It is nice to meet you, Nereus. My name is Sivan Montgomery. Thank you very much for saving my life.” He bowed to the boy, whose eyes grew wide, not knowing what he should do in return.

He ended up bowing in return, which forced Sivan to hold back a chuckle.

“Where is your family?” Sivan continued asking him politely, trying to not make this sound like an interrogation.

Nereus frowned, looking down at the sand. “My parents died a long time ago. I don’t know where my brother is.”

Sivan suspected as much. Most of the pack of young vagrants were orphans. “Are your friends anywhere nearby?”

Nereus’s frowned deepened. “I don’t...the other kids don’t like me.”

“Why ever not?” Sivan said, surprised to find that this earnest child wasn’t even welcome in the vagrant gangs.

There was a long pause before Nereus responded. “They think I’m cursed.”

“Ah,” Sivan breathed. There was no convincing him otherwise. The people of this island were very superstitious. They even broke their eggshells into tiny pieces because they thought

whole eggshells would attract sea witches.

“Well, since the fruit I gave you has been ruined, what do you say to a meal at the manor as a reward for saving me?”

“I-I couldn’t possibly accept!” But the boy’s eyes sparkled, hunger overpowering the odd sense of propriety he seemed to possess despite being a vagrant.

“Nonsense,” Sivan said and pat Nereus’s head. He gently pushed the boy in the direction of the manor. “My father just hired a new chef. She’s an incredible cook. She’ll make you whatever you want.”

After a few insistent pushes and pulls on Sivan’s part, Nereus eventually gave in and followed behind him obediently, the joy in his eyes betraying his initial hesitation.



Sivan woke up again to an unfamiliar ceiling. But instead of knives embedded in a map, he was greeted by fine brocade drapery that formed a canopy over the impossibly comfortable bed.

He closed his eyes again, trying to let go of the memory that had haunted his dream. Why was he now having all these dreams about his attendant from almost a decade ago? It figured that if he wasn’t having nightmares about Jhaeros, he would be having pleasant dreams about the Northern Spear, only to wake up to the bitter taste of guilt in his mouth.

Sivan pushed down the guilt. He had lived with it for so long that he had gotten rather good at relocating it to a dam that he hoped would never break. Instead he tried to remember where he was. He recalled being led to Black’s manor and handed off to the pirate. They had been translating the seal, he vaguely recalled

Black speaking Uncharted, then Sivan blacked out after that.

A heavy shame settled in his belly. He had shown such weakness to the pirate lord by passing out like that. Who knew what kind of desperate nonsense he'd said during his panic attack. He had been determined to show Black that he was not to be taken lightly, but instead he had crumbled right in front of him.

Sivan rolled his head to the side and opened his eyes, only to be greeted by the pirate lord himself, sitting at his bedside. His head was pillowed in his massive arms, black hair spilling over his shoulders like a storm, only interrupted by the golden beads.

Sivan held his breath until he realized Black was asleep. Looking at him now, Sivan could now fully appreciate the pirate lord's beauty. His good looks were rather jarring to confront head-on. It was like looking at a statue created by a great master artist, only it moved and had a sword and a bad temper. Now, his edges softened by sleep, Sivan wondered how something so beautiful could be so ruthless.



Maybe because of his dream, Sivan had the strange urge to pat the man's head. He even reached out a hand, fingers inches from the mess of dark hair.

Black stirred suddenly, and Sivan pulled back his hand quickly.

The pirate opened his eyes, and the shadows seemed to return to his face when he became conscious. He did not look angry by any means, but there was a certain darkness that lingered over his expression when he was awake. It was a face troubled by years of tired struggle. His almost black eyes saw that Sivan was awake, and he sat up abruptly.

"You're awake," he breathed, relief and a faint blush washing over his face. "I did not mean to fall asleep here."

Surely the pirate lord couldn't be embarrassed by this. So far he had been relatively shameless in every aspect. Sivan decided to not broach the issue. "How long was I out for?" he asked.

"A day," Black answered. Sivan had to take his word on that. Looking out the big, ornate windows only revealed a dark sky swirling with the tail end of a storm, light raindrops expiring on the glass.

"Ah, that long? I suppose my body had been tired. I have not been sleeping well on the ship."

The pirate frowned, as if his prisoner not sleeping well was of deep concern to him. "Why not? Is your bed not comfortable?"

"Uh..." Sivan blinked. "That's not it...I have a difficult time being out at sea now."

Black's frown persisted. Evidently he wanted Sivan to explain further. He really shouldn't give the pirate any more fuel to manipulate him with, but for some reason Sivan felt like he owed it to the man. Black had cared enough to put him in this comfortable bed after his episode, after all.

"I...I used to be a general. My battalion was well-known for

taking victories against the Uncharted.”

Black nodded at him to continue. No doubt he knew all of this before if he had really gone to Varis to capture him specifically.

Sivan pressed on. “About a year ago my battalion was ambushed by a legion of Uncharted, led by the siren King Jhaeros.” Sivan noticed Black’s face darken at the mention of the king’s name. “It did not end well. My sailors were wiped out, and I faced Jhaeros head on. I can still hear his Uncharted taunts in my head.”

“I see,” Black spoke low, anger in the back of his throat. “So, me speaking Uncharted to you yesterday set off those memories?”

Sivan shook his head. “It’s just certain phrases, I think.”

“I will inform the crew to not speak Uncharted around you,” Black said simply.

Sivan was surprised. Why would the pirate accommodate him like this? “You—you don’t need to do that. I can’t expect others to bend to my sensitivities. If I did, I’d never leave this island.”

“Really? You can’t even be on a ship?”

“Being on a ship is fine,” Sivan said quietly. “It’s storms and the open water that bothers me. I can’t even swim anymore.”

Black’s face turned down, looking at the bed as he processed this information. It was like he couldn’t fathom someone not being able to swim.

“I did not realize that battle had done such damage to you,” Black muttered. Sivan almost didn’t hear it, for the pirate said it under his breath. But he had caught it, and he did not miss the slip of information that had just been given to him.

“So you did know who I was when you captured me,” Sivan stated. It was an assumption on Sivan’s part, the pirate could

have easily done his homework on the Grenaldian lord after he had captured him. But Renalt had made him doubt his assumption that he had merely been a convenient capture for Black. Besides, sometimes Black looked at him too meaningfully. There was significance in his dark eyes whenever he happened to meet gazes with Sivan. He got the feeling Black was expecting something from him. Something more than a mere translation.

Black was looking at him again with those dark eyes, beautiful but terrifyingly deep. Sivan thought he might drown if he kept up the gaze for too long.

“I did,” Black said quietly. “I waited until the seal was in Varis before stealing it. Because I knew you would be there.”

Sivan’s breath hitched a fraction. He couldn’t fathom why this pirate had sought him out. Sure, he knew Oltinish, but it was by no means a dead language. Anyone else would have been enough.

“Why me?” Sivan breathed, his scarred arm involuntarily twitching once where it was laying atop his stomach.

Black took Sivan’s marked arm gently into his large hands. His fingers were warm, and Sivan couldn’t deny that it made his heart stutter when he traced along the edges of the scar Jhaeros had given him.

“I will tell you the truth after you’ve recovered,” the pirate promised.

Sivan nodded, but he couldn’t understand why the man couldn’t just tell him now. He didn’t think any truth Black could give him would impede his apparently badly needed recovery.

“Just rest for now, my lord.” Black carefully set Sivan’s arm back in place on his stomach, his touch lingering just a moment too long before he left the room.

As he left, the spot on his arm where Black had touched him grew cold. Like he couldn’t retain heat without the pirate’s touch.

Sivan's tongue was stuck on the roof of his mouth; he could feel his heartbeat battering in his head. Waking up to the pirate at his side had been far too intimate. It was not at all appropriate for a man who was supposed to be his captor, yet it did not stop Black from looking at Sivan with such genuine concern. A concern that was born from a source Sivan was not privy to yet.

He truly wished to find out the real meaning behind Black selecting him to translate the seal. Yet it frightened him. The pirate alighted something warm in Sivan, but it was currently twisted inside him, leaving him with a heavy knot of unknown guilt for feeling anything other than disdain for the criminal.

Whether or not Black told him the truth, the Royal Navy would be upon their location in another week.

Chapter 8

Lissandry

Sivan felt much better the next day. He hadn't realized how sleep deprived he'd been until he was given the chance to sleep off the ship. He woke up refreshed, ready to get started on the translation he was here to do.

The bandage on his hand had gone loose. Sivan unraveled it, touching the red gash on his palm. It stung, the cut had reopened when he had started translating the seal. He remembered Black's gentle hands, but quickly shook the memory out of his head before it could go further.

Sivan got out of bed and found an unethically large bathroom attached to the back of the room. Inside was another change of clothes laid out for him, so he reluctantly climbed into the gilded clawfoot tub and bathed himself. There was no reason for a bathtub to be made of gold, yet here he was, soaking in one.

Ornate brocade and gilded everything decorated every filament of the lavish room he was sequestered to. The Grenaldian

nobility was not without its frivolous luxuries, but they tended to be a tad more understated than the gaudy detailing that the pirates were so fond of. Sivan's family home in Varis featured polished marble and sheer curtains. A little filagree here and there carved into the marble wasn't unheard of, but it was a far cry from the visual cacophony Sivan was now living in.

He changed into his new clothes, which were presumably another set stolen from a Grenaldian noble's wardrobe. White slacks, a low cut, light grey tunic embroidered with birds, and a black and gold brocade vest. Sivan stubbornly left the vest in the bathroom in an attempt to distance himself from the decadence of the room.

The sun was shining in through the large window, birds singing cheerily on a tree outside. It was a gorgeous day, so Sivan unlatched the window, letting the pleasant ocean breeze into the room as he took a seat at the mahogany table.

There was a precise knock at the door, and Sivan instinctively called out, "come in."

He felt an odd sense of *deja vu*, which was broken by the entrance of the massive pirate captain holding a silver tray.

"Good morning, my lord," Black greeted. It was far too cheerful and polite of an entrance, and the oddity of this was evidently reflected on Sivan's face as the pirate composed his face back into his usual neutral smirk.

"Good morning," Sivan said, crossing his arms to observe the odd scene that had walked into his room. "Are you serving me breakfast?"

"Indeed," Black replied, and he swooped over to set the tray on the ridiculous table. "How are you feeling?"

Sivan leaned back, watching as the pirate took plates from the tray and set them out before Sivan. "I am fine. I was merely sleep deprived."

“That’s good,” Black hummed.

He set the breakfast out in perfect order, arranging the cutlery as it would be presented in any noble’s home. Sivan couldn’t help finding it all strange. Black was a hardened pirate lord, notorious for being a ruthless monster and a greedy miscreant. Yet here he was, setting the table for his prisoner.

“Eat,” Black said. Sivan looked at the spread. Braised sausages over rice, a spicy smelling pot of chili with a soft boiled egg nestled inside, delicate pastries folded into neat and perfect flowers dripping with butter, fruit cut into intricate designs.

It was ridiculously lavish, even for a noble.

“You must pay your cook well,” Sivan mused, but went for the chili anyways.

“Very,” Black said with a chuckle. To Sivan’s surprise, he sat down at the table with him, but he made no move to share the meal with him. There was more than enough food for two, but there was only one set of cutlery.

Still, Sivan was hungry, so he put the first spoonful of chili in his mouth.

It was delicious. So delicious it almost brought tears to his eyes. Sivan hadn’t had breakfast chili in years. It had been a staple in the Northern Spear, but he hadn’t been able to find a proper reproduction until now.

“How does it taste?” Black asked, his dark green eyes genuinely curious despite the neutral smirk that his mouth was fixed with.

“It’s incredible. Please pass my compliments to the cook,” Sivan said politely. After the first night on the Blackwater, Sivan had learned not to criticize the food that the pirate gave him, but he did not have to lie in order to praise the merits of what he was eating.

“I will,” Black said, amusement glittering in his eyes.

Sivan didn't even care what kind of game the pirate was playing right now. The food was good, he was so hungry, and he was using all his willpower to not shovel the bowl of chili into his mouth like a starved animal.

He barely noticed when a glob of yolk from the egg dripped down, landing on his exposed collarbone and sliding down the deep opening of his tunic.

Sivan looked up to search for a napkin when he found one being offered to him by Black. The pirate refused to look at him, seemingly more interested in the open window. Although he had a faint blush along his ears, which Sivan found a bit odd.

He took the napkin and cleaned up the yolk on his chest. Now he remembered why the Grenaldian nobility's fashion from a decade ago always insisted on vests. The tunics underneath were mildly inappropriate.

"May I ask, why is the Captain of the Blackwater serving me breakfast and not one of his certainly capable crew?" Sivan asked, spearing a slice of fruit on his fork.

Black propped his chin up on a hand, the gold rings on his fingers glinting in the sunlight. "Because I don't trust you."

Sivan couldn't stop a light laugh from escaping. "You don't trust *me*? I'm not the one stealing priceless artifacts and kidnapping people."

"No, you aren't," Black said, a conflicted shadow crossing over his face. "But men who steal and kidnap are easy to understand. I know what they're going to do next. But you...you have a fortress built around you. If anyone is going to catch me off guard it's going to be the man I can't see coming."

Sivan was not convinced Black was reading him correctly at all. "Maybe I was that man once. Do you know what the Grenaldian sailors used to call me? *The Two-Headed Viper*."

"An accurate title," Black teased, amusement glittering in his

eyes once more.

“It is not,” Sivan insisted. “Vipers are deadly fast and lethally poisonous. All I ever did was be a faster target than the low level Uncharted dregs. And I’ve never poisoned anyone.”

Black grinned, sharp teeth glinting. “It’s never too late to start.”

“Preposterous,” Sivan scoffed. “Anyways, I’m not that anymore. I’m about as dangerous as a marmot.”

“A marmot?” Black laughed. His laugh was a low and pleasant sound. “Now you’re making me feel inferior. You were certainly fast enough in Varis. Your swords nearly got my throat, even sliced off a lock of hair.” He held up the strand of hair which remained notably shorter than the rest. “That’s no easy feat for a marmot.”

Sivan couldn’t decide if he was being made fun of or not, so he merely readjusted his posture and speared another slice of fruit with his fork. “So then, tell me, why is it they call you Black? Surely it can’t be the name you were born with, and it seems too coincidental for your surname to be the color of your ship.”

“Ah, it is not my real name, no,” Black admitted. “I had been taken prisoner early on in the war.”

“Prisoner? By Grenaldia?” Sivan was surprised, for the fact that there had never been a record of Black being captured even once had always irked his father.

“No, by Uncharted,” Black explained.

Sivan frowned. “But Uncharted don’t take prisoners.”

Black grinned, a dangerous light dancing in his eyes. “Not anymore. There was an island just outside of the Devil’s Whip that the Uncharted forces tried turning into a prison.”

“I’d heard rumors of that, but I thought they were just tall tales,” Sivan said quietly.

“That place was anything but a rumor to me,” Black said, his tone growing dark for a brief moment. “Anyway, the island had huge tar pits, and they would use the prisoners to sift the pits.”

“For what?” Sivan was interested now.

“Who knows,” Black muttered. “Jhaeros was searching for something in the pits, but we never found it. After five months of sifting through tar I tried raising a rebellion. It did not go to plan, and the overseers threw me into a pit.”

“What? And you didn’t die?” Sivan was astonished. Tar pits were very toxic. Humans and animals would stumble into the edge of one, get stuck in the thick muck and perish slowly. Being thrown right into one was assumedly deadly.

“Miraculously, no,” Black chuckled. “I crawled out of it, dripping in tar. I don’t remember much after that. I know the overseers met the pits as I did, but unlike me they are still in there.”

“I see,” Sivan breathed. “And that’s why they call you Black?”

“My early crew were fellow inmates who escaped with me that day. They started calling me it since I *‘walked out of those pits dripping in black.’*”

“Are they still with you?”

“Some of them.” A shadow crossed over the pirate’s face. “Hayes and Brand. Mostly everyone else has fallen in battle.”

“I see,” Sivan said quietly. He too knew what it was like to have a crewmate fall in front of your eyes. “Anyways, I’m here to translate, yes? After I eat I’ll get to work on it.”

The shadow over Black’s face faded, and he extended a hand towards Sivan’s right hand, the one with the cut on his palm. “Give me your hand.”

Sivan blinked, confused by the request. Yet he complied, obediently raising his hand so the pirate could take it. He gently examined the scar, frowning as he did so. It had hurt when Sivan

poked at it earlier, but he didn't feel any stinging when Black did the same.

"You can't write with this hand."

Sivan blinked again, further thrown off by the pirate's words, his brow furrowing by a fraction. "That didn't stop me the other day."

"Yes, and it reopened because of it. You can wait to translate it until after it's healed," Black said. His hand was warm, and he traced a thumb along the curve of Sivan's palm. It was a deeply distracting sensation, and it almost made Sivan skip over the strangeness of the pirate's concern.

"Why does it matter?" Sivan asked, trying to catch any change of expression on the man's face.

Black looked up at him, his near-pitch eyes gazing back at Sivan in an inscrutable flash of worry. "It matters," he said quietly. His hand squeezed around Sivan's wrist for a moment, making the captured lord's heart race.


Sivan was so caught off guard by the intimate gesture he pulled his hand back, desperate to escape the touch of the man who was making his face heat up. "F-fine, but I can just write with my other hand."

"You can do that?" Black looked genuinely surprised, as if he had a right to know everything about Sivan even though they had only known each other for a few days.

"Yes," Sivan said, flexing his left hand as if to show that it worked just as well as the other. "I wielded two blades during the war. My left works just as well as my right now."

Black propped his chin back up on his hand, the neutral smirk returning to his face with a hint of mischief. "Ah. I imagine that's quite handy, isn't it?"

Sivan refused to examine the innuendo the pirate had delivered that sentence with.



Days later, Sivan was still hard at work translating. He was seated once again at the ridiculous glass landscape table. It was extraordinarily beautiful, but it was the only table in the room, and Sivan found it extraordinarily distracting while he was trying to work. Currently, he had covered the surface of the table in various parchments scribbled with different translations of the Siren Seal. The seal was clean now, Sivan had made Black fetch him proper cleaning supplies and brushes so he could try to preserve the used artifact as best he could.

Looking over his work, Sivan was pleased to see that he had made great progress with the translation. It wasn't complete, and it would most likely never be truly perfect, but Black's Uncharted translation had significantly helped him jumpstart the process of unlocking the dead language.

He was almost sad that he would not be able to finish translating it before the Royal Navy arrived.

It had been nearly a week since they'd arrived in Lissandry. If Renalt's information had been correct, the earliest the Royal Navy could get here would be tonight. He had hoped he would have had another opportunity to speak to Renalt, to find out if he had any updates on the rescue operation, but Black had kept Sivan's room persistently guarded. If Black himself did not sit outside the room, either Brand or one of his other trusted cronies would be standing watch.

There was a careful knock on the door, and it opened without Sivan saying anything. He looked up to find Brand entering the room, carrying a tray with a plate of food and a pitcher of water.

Sivan hated himself for being disappointed that it was not Black. He had grown used to the pirate's presence during his

meals. Every time he would watch Sivan eat, asking him how he liked it. Sivan thought the first couple of meals had been a fluke, a twisted peace offering in order to convince him to translate the seal. Evidently the captain ate this well every day, and he insisted on sharing it with Sivan. Brand merely stepped in from time to time in order to keep an eye on him while Black did the things a pirate lord was actually supposed to do.

“Evenin’!” Brand chimed cheerily, sweeping across the room and placing the tray on the table, away from Sivan’s work. “How’s th’ translatin’ be?”

Brand poured him a glass of water, and Sivan took it when it was offered to him. “Fine, fine. I do wish I had the map I’m supposed to translate. It would help a great deal if I could compare it to what I have now.”

The pirate shook his head. “Th’ captain don’t keep tha’ map on Lissandry. If me had to make a guess, it most likely be on the hoard island.”

Sivan raised his eyebrows. “You don’t know where it is? How do you know even Black has it?”

Brand grinned. “Th’ captain ain’t let us down yet.” He then took the cover off the tray and placed it in front of Sivan. The corner of a note stuck underneath a plate on the tray caught the Grenaldian noble’s attention, but he ignored it for now in the presence of the pirate.

The food was decadent, as usual. Sivan wasn’t even particularly hungry, but his mouth salivated at the smell. Whoever was cooking these meals had a gift.

“Oh, th’ captain asked me ta invite ye tonight.”

“Invite?” Sivan said, stopping himself from taking a bite from the spoonful of orzo halfway to his mouth. “Invite to what?”

Brand smiled. “We be havin’ a party.”

“A party? Is that not what I’ve been hearing every night?”

“Nah, that’s nothin!” Brand laughed. “This is a real party. At the Grand Tavern.”

“I think I’ll stay here, thank you. It doesn’t seem appropriate for a prisoner to join in,” Sivan muttered as he set the spoon back down.

“Fair enough,” Brand nodded, his tone sympathetic. He picked up the tray and turned toward the door. “Th’ captain will be real disappointed, though.” Sivan stiffened, but didn’t say anything. Brand sighed and left Sivan to his dinner.

He had almost asked Brand why Black would be disappointed. He wondered if the pirate crew had more insight to Black’s motivations, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask any of them. Sivan felt that by saying it out loud, his shameful interest in the pirate would worsen.

After the door had closed behind Brand, Sivan set his fork down and tugged out the note from under the plate. Unfolding it, he read what it said:

‘They will arrive tonight. Be ready. -R.’

Despite the vague wording, Sivan knew exactly what the note meant. The Royal Navy would arrive at Lissandry that night. Sivan’s time with the pirates would soon be at an end. Then he would be put on a ship and returned to Varis, where he would be married, if his arranged fiancé was even still waiting for him.

It was then that Sivan had realized that he hadn’t once thought of his arranged marriage since he had been captured. He had been so focused on trying to not get killed or be seduced that his problems from a few days ago had seemed like they were from another lifetime. He had been imprisoned, he had been threatened, he had been nearly killed during his time on the Blackwater, but not once had he felt the staggering morose haze that plagued him in Varis.

It almost made him want to stay with the pirates.

Almost.

It did make him realize that he couldn't live like a half dead man for the rest of his life. The second he returned home he would tell his father that he could not marry the Vheltn prince. He needed to find some way to do good again, even if he couldn't use his swords.

Sivan ate his dinner, resolve bolstering with every bite. The food was delicious, as always. The orzo practically melted in his mouth, and the grilled fish was sumptuous and full of flavor, just how he liked it. He wondered how the Blackwater's cook always got his tastes right. Sivan's affinity for highly flavorful food was born from his time on the Northern Spear. The stretch of islands nestled inside the Devil's Whip was known for its robust cuisine and a taste that was usually too intense for the common Grenaldian noble's palate. But Sivan had grown to love it, and he had always missed the food from his youth once the war started.

Sivan was about to ask Black if the cook was from an island in the Devil's Whip when he realized the pirate was not with him as usual.

This bothered him so much he put his utensils down, glasses slipping down his nose as he frowned at his hands. The wound on his hand had finally started to heal once he'd listened to Black and switched to writing with his uninjured hand. He'd only been writing with his other out of habit. The warmth of the pirate's fingers against his wrist had left Sivan's skin feeling tingly, even now, days later. He closed his hand, hiding the scar on his palm from himself.

Why was Black so affectionate towards him? Was it merely how the pirate captain was, to be this flirty and warm with anyone he captured? It certainly seemed possible given the man's fabled reputation, but for some reason Sivan doubted it nonethe-

less.

Black had known who Sivan was when he had invaded Varis. He had a reason to do this other than the fact that Sivan knew Oltinish. Black had promised Sivan that he would tell him the truth behind this, but so far he hadn't done so.

Sivan stood up and straightened his vest. Today it was a dark silver one with platinum filigree, yet another set of outdated Grenaldian finery Black gave him to play dress-up in. There must be a reason even for that.

He walked over to the window, looking out over the still night covering Lissandry. On the other side of the island the glow from a great fire was just visible. Sivan figured that was where the party was taking place. If he were smart, and Sivan liked to think that he was, he would stay put until the Royal Navy arrived. If Renalt tried to fetch him from his room and he was not there it could make the impending rescue mission more complicated.

Besides, Sivan didn't have any particular drive to join the pirates in their merriment. Other than the few who had been tasked with keeping an eye on him, Sivan had not met the majority of the crew. He didn't know if they were as dangerous as Black or as unnerving as Hayes.

Another light caught his eye from down below. Along the coast of the island, below the outcropping the manor stood on, a small white glow cast a silhouette of a man standing along the shore. Sivan was too far away to see the man in great detail, but from the odd light he was holding Sivan thought he looked like the pirate lord. The man appeared to put the light inside of something, a bottle Sivan guessed. Then he bent over and gently tossed the bottle into the ocean. The light travelled unnaturally fast against the tide, and was soon well on its way to whatever destination it held.

Without the small light, the man along the shore was even less visible. He seemed to recede into the darkness, and Sivan was reminded of how Black had emerged from the same shadows during their first meeting. His gut told him that this man was Black, and his heart burned to ask the pirate to stop playing games and just tell him the truth.

He strode towards the door and opened it swiftly, announcing to Brand, "I've changed my mind. I'd like to attend—"

However, instead of the grizzled old Grenaldian, the blue tentacled quartermaster sat guarding his door.

"Ah, the fancy lord wants to go to the party," Vivianne teased, grinning at him with razor sharp teeth.

Sivan had to use every ounce of willpower to not retreat back into the room. He knew this woman was here to guard him, but seeing an Uncharted person up close still activated the part of his brain that had been trained to respond with either fear or violence.

Somehow he managed to push it down and stood even straighter, his head high. "Brand said the captain had invited me."

"Indeed he has." Vivianne's eyes brimmed with amusement even though Sivan had a hard time reading the emotions on Uncharted faces due to their unnaturally large black irises, which made their entire eyes appear like slits of pitch. She stood up suddenly, and Sivan reflexively flinched back against the door that had closed behind him. "Oh, calm down, I'm not gonna hurt ya. The captain would have my head."

Sivan nodded, but could not unclench his jaw around the Uncharted woman. He began mentally preparing himself to see even more of her kind soon, as he was certain the so-called celebration the pirates were having would include all of the Blackwater crew plus her sister ships.

Vivianne took a step towards the stairs and motioned at Sivan to follow. “Come on, I’ll take you to Black.”

That made Sivan follow her without hesitation. Before the Royal Navy arrived to rescue him, he needed to find out what secrets the captain of the Blackwater was hiding.

Chapter 9

Lissandry

The night was warm and clear, the water calm and the wind still. Vivianne had led Sivan out of the manor and towards the southern tip of the island, where the raucous roar of pirates grew steadily louder as they approached. The glow of a large fire could be seen at their destination, breaking up the deep blue of the night and ocean surrounding them.

As they passed the docks, Sivan noted that there were indeed far fewer ships than there had been when they arrived. Those that were left were much smaller than the Blackwater. The largest ships must have been sent for the supply run, true to Renalt's information. If and when the Royal Navy turned up, they would surely crush the remaining pirate fleet.

The Uncharted woman was a few paces ahead of him. She led him forward with confidence, unafraid that Sivan would try to use this opportunity to run. Sivan suspected that had something to do with the fact that the swath of tentacles on her head

were continuously undulating at him. They had no eyes, but Sivan felt they could sense his presence nonetheless.

“Can I ask you a question?” Sivan broke the silence, and Vivianne turned back to observe him more closely.

“Ah? You aren’t scared into silence by my presence, are you? I’m disappointed.” She grinned at him, and Sivan hated that when her black eyes filled with amusement it still made him shiver with dread.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he mumbled.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Although I can still smell the fear on you. You better get over that if you’re going to be sailing with us for awhile.”

“Why do you think I’ll be sailing with you for awhile?” Sivan asked.

She snorted, disbelief clear in her laugh. “Oh I doubt the captain will let you go easily. He doesn’t like to give up pretty things he’s grown fond of.”

Sivan ignored the comment and redirected the conversation to his original question. “So, what’s in all of this for you? Why are so many Uncharted eager to abandon their homeland?”

Vivianne narrowed her black eyes at him. “How can you ask something about a land you’ve never been to?”

He was unable to respond; she had a point.

“You humans have it so easy. There are so few dangers on land. In the deep sea you don’t know if you’ll be alive or dead one moment to the next. A trench beast might swallow you whole, and if you’re stupid enough to surface you might go mad inside the quiet fog.” She turned to the sea, momentarily letting her guard down. “We’re drawn to land because it’s so plentiful, so vibrant. Under the water everything looks the same.”

Sivan wanted to let it go, the subject was clearly a touchy one. But he reminded himself why he’d been captured by Black.

“Still, why would an Uncharted woman betray her kingdom and kill her king?”

She snorted again, louder. “Jhaeros is no king of mine! I don’t give a rat’s ass what happens to the tart.”

“You’re not after the Corseque of Estes? Why follow Black then?”

“Why does any pirate follow their captain? For the treasure, mate.” Vivianne grinned at him, her eyes glittering at the prospect of riches. “Estes made the fancy weapon, right, but he also hid away an enormous stash of riches in his tomb. That’s what most of the crew is after.”

Sivan hummed, making sense of it all. “So the Uncharted half only cares about the gold?”

She shrugged. “Some of ‘em have issues with how Jhaeros has been drafting Uncharted for this war. Few come back, and if they do they aren’t the same after the alterations.”

“Alterations?” Sivan was truly curious now. Grenaldian forces had not been able to actually interrogate any Uncharted they had captured. They had all been too violent, unable to even reason with them.

“Gods, did you think we’re all like the beasts Jhaeros cranks out?” She snorted again, lower, shaking her head at the same time. “Of course you did. Jhaeros does something to the Uncharted who go to war. Brings out their baser instincts. Changes them.”

“I didn’t know,” Sivan admitted.

“Right. Well, gold is far better motivator for most of us. Even the humans on our crew could care less about who wins this war as long as they get paid at the end of it.” She peered at Sivan, her expression growing shrewd again. “And not all gold is weighed on a scale, *my lord*.”

Sivan wanted to crawl back under his brocade blankets un-

der her gaze. "What does that mean?"

"I suggest you ask our dear captain," Vivianne chuckled and continued on towards the pirate celebration.

The tavern on the southern tip of the island was by far the largest building there besides the manor Sivan had been staying in. It was quite an open establishment, most of the walls being comprised of many carved stone pillars. Torches mounted on pillars had been lit, guiding them to a pit where the bonfire had been made. Sivan wasn't entirely sure the pit was originally intended for a great roaring fire, but the pirates had certainly decided that was its purpose now.

"Ah, the captain is dueling someone," Vivianne said to Sivan loudly, so he could hear over the roar of the crew.

Indeed, Sivan now saw what the very intoxicated pirates were focused on. They surrounded a raised platform, which Sivan guessed was once used as a bar for patrons. Now the long u-shaped table was being used as a battle arena. An Uncharted man stood at one end, and Sivan was struck by how odd-looking this one was. He appeared to be made out a semi translucent green substance, his vaguely human shape wobbling with every movement, like he were made of jelly. His eyes were that classic Uncharted black, his teeth sharp rows of fangs, but everything else undulated unlike any Uncharted Sivan had ever seen. Somehow, the jelly man was holding an axe, which he hefted above his shoulder with surprising ease.

On the other end of the bar stood Black, beautiful as ever in the glow of the fire, holding his black cutlass out as a warning. His neutral smirk was fixed into something like excitement, clearly ready for battle.

Vivianne nodded towards the pair on the bar. "You're going to want to watch this."

Someone in the crowd lit a firecracker and threw it between

the two men, which was evidently a signal for them to start.

The Uncharted man rushed towards Black, heaving the axe at him with surprising speed. But Sivan knew how fast the pirate lord could be, and was not surprised when Black dodged the blow easily. However, Black did not return the blow quite yet. The translucent green man shouted and went for Black again and again, every hit avoided by a graceful lean or step from Black. The crowd seemed to be on the captain's side, and cheered every time he avoided the axe.

As Sivan watched, he got the impression that Black was toying with the Uncharted man. It was like watching a cat play with a mouse, not killing it, but merely playing with it for fun.

The Uncharted man backed Black into a corner of the bar. The axe came down, Black had nowhere to step other than backwards into the jeering crowd. Instead he finally raised his cutlass, knocking the axe out from his hands with such force it flew across the room and buried itself into the carved face of a stone pillar in the shape of a siren woman.

The green man staggered back, his skin wobbling violently. Yet he did not back down even though he was now unarmed against the Demon of the Blackwater. His form continued to wobble until it began to spike outwards, transforming and solidifying into many sharp, translucent green axes.

Light reflected off the walking translucent armory onto Black's face, which gleamed with delight at the new change in his opponent. The newly formed axes shot out at Black, who parried them away with ease. The pirate lord's movements were so elegant, but the violence of his strikes made him a truly terrifying force to watch. The crowd of crew members was going wild, loving this strange new development and the way their captain adapted to it so easily.

Soon Black found the trick to the jelly axes's attacks, and he

turned his parries into blows that sliced the translucent green axes off from the man's body. Black gained footing, hacking away at the Uncharted man's form with each step. Soon the man was nothing but a stump of green jelly, every single one of the axes Black had chopped off turning into a sad puddle of goo. There was no way for this stump to yield, but there was no mercy Black could or would give him. The crowd roared for him to finish him off, so the pirate lord did, slicing the stump of a man up into cubes with a flurry of slashes from his sword.

Black raised his cutlass in victory, the crowd cheering for him. He was panting, sweat rolling down his neck and arms, soaking his tunic. He sheathed his sword and pulled the shirt off, wiping his face.

Sivan had been morbidly mesmerized by the whole thing, but heat rushed to his face at the man suddenly partially disrobing in front of him. He did not need to be reminded of the effect the pirate's chest had on him, and he especially didn't need to be made aware of what it looked like when the man was breathing heavily, a sheen of sweat on his skin.

An amused laugh sounded next to him, and it was Vivianne, her black eyes fixed on Sivan's red cheeks. "Did you like the show?"

Sivan refused to answer her, tearing his eyes away from Black's body to look at the sea. He was so mortified at being caught in his stare that he didn't even jump when the Uncharted woman smacked his back lightly.

"I can't say I blame you," she laughed. "He has no right to look like that and not sleep with any of the crew. It's just not fair."

Sivan again refused to say anything, mostly because he didn't know what to say. He had figured as a pirate lord, Black would use his position to get whoever into his bed whenever he felt like

it. Certainly the man didn't even need to use his position to do that. All he had to do was take off his shirt and his own prisoner was already reconsidering his stance on sleeping with the enemy.

Meanwhile, on the bar, the massacre of green jelly started coming back to life. In seconds the wobbling cubes and puddles of green goo molded back together, once again forming the green translucent Uncharted man, perfectly unharmed.

"I almost thought I got you that time, Captain!" the man shouted cheerily, grinning at Black.

"Those axes were a crafty trick, Jules!" Black shouted back, slapping the man on the back, sending him wobbling merrily into the crowd.

Vivianne prodded Sivan again and handed him a small glass of a clear liquid. "You're going to need this," she said, grinning at him with a knowing glint.

Sivan knew this was a bad idea. This went against so many Royal Navy codes. Drinking an unknown substance from the enemy. Trusting a hostile Uncharted. Yet Sivan thought of how he was about to meet Black while he was half naked again, and it made him take the glass from the blue woman. He downed it in one great gulp, the liquid burning all the way down his throat and into his stomach.

Sivan coughed, unprepared for how strong the alcohol was. Vivianne laughed and slapped him on the back again, trying to be comforting, but only making him cough more. "You're more fun than you let on, Montgomery!" she howled.

Sivan grimaced and pushed the glass back into her hand. "Just take me to Black," he coughed out.

"You came!" Black's deep voice cut through the loud chatter of the crowd. Sivan wasn't sure if the sudden lightheaded feeling was from the alcohol he had just downed or if it was from seeing the pirate lord's naked chest up close.

“He quite enjoyed your performance, Captain,” Vivianne crooned, teasing words jabbing at Sivan’s pride.

“Excellent!” Black shouted, and wrapped an arm around Sivan’s shoulders, pulling him closer. Sivan’s heart tried to escape through his nose at this, his face heating up miserably. “Thank you for bringing him, Vivianne. Tell Brand to take the night off too.”

With that, Black dragged Sivan away from her. Yet Sivan did not miss the amused cackle from the woman as he was carted off. His mortification only grew with the effect the strong alcohol was beginning to have on his mind, and he was beginning to deeply resent Vivianne for reasons other than her being Uncharted.

“I’m so glad you came, my lord,” Black said, barely audible through the cacophonous din of the party. Up close, Sivan could smell the drink on him mixed with the heady scent of his body after a fight. The pirate took him to a curtained off room farther into the tavern. The curtains were heavy, and did much to block out the sounds from the other pirates. Inside was a huge floor cushion surrounded by a mess of brocade pillows and throws. The room was lit by hanging chandeliers of red candles, instantly giving Sivan the impression that this was used by the tavern as a pleasure room.

Black let go of Sivan and collapsed onto the large cushion, his black hair spilling out over the many pillows. He grinned up at Sivan and patted the small space he had evidently left for him right next to his side.

Sivan was in a bit of a shock, being suddenly transported to this red room by a half naked pirate, but he was just light headed enough from the drink Vivianne had given him to think it was not an unreasonable request. Besides, if he wanted to find out the real reason Black had captured him, he could have asked for

no better opportunity than to try and coax it out of him while he was quite drunk.

So he sat down next to the man, trying to find a way to tactfully stay as far away from his still glistening chest and failing as there was little room to do anything other than sit in the spot Black offered to him beneath his arm.

"I really am so glad you decided to come, my lord," Black said, leaning into Sivan's space.

Sivan tried to not let the grinning pirate's unfairly beautiful face distract him too much, but it really was difficult. "You've already said that," Sivan muttered.

"But it is the truth," Black murmured.

"The truth..." Sivan swallowed, trying to will himself to concentrate on his purpose despite the pirate's intimate proximity. "When have you ever told me the truth?"

"I have only ever told my lord the truth!" Black had the audacity to look hurt, although he used it as an excuse to snake his arm tighter around Sivan's shoulders. "Why is the truth so important to you?"

"You say you knew me before you kidnapped me, but I feel like I'm nothing but a pawn in your game, Black," Sivan said, obstinately glaring at him despite the rushing of his pulse. "Except I don't even know what game we are playing."

Black grinned wickedly, sharp teeth glinting in the dim candlelight. "Only the best of all games, my lord." His free hand came up to tilt Sivan's chin to the side, so he was forced to look into Black's deep green eyes. "And you are no pawn, trust me. If anything you're the queen."

Sivan glared at him harder. "Don't mock me," he spat before turning his head away.

Black laughed, the sound cutting through Sivan's ire. "I am doing no such thing!" He pulled Sivan closer, settling him fully

against his side. “The king is the piece that ends the game, but the queen is without a doubt the most powerful player on the board. It can go in any direction without limit. It is arguably the most valuable piece in the game.”

Sivan refused to let himself be molded into the pirate’s warm side despite his body’s desire to do so. The pirate’s cutlass was digging into his hip at this angle, the cold metal making Sivan shiver. “This is not a game. It is reality. You can’t use others as pieces to be played with.”

Black’s wicked grin did not falter. In fact it only grew more daring and mischievous as Sivan continued to chastise him. Without Sivan realizing it, Black had been slowly inching his free hand towards the lord’s thighs. “No, but don’t you think it’s a little more exciting to be played with now and then?” His hand slid between Sivan’s legs, gently squeezing the middle of his thigh.

Fighting against the urge to moan the pirate’s name and open his legs wider, Sivan took action. He grasped the man’s sword, pulling it out from behind him. At the same time Sivan pushed him back and straddled his lap. He pressed the sword against Black’s throat, glaring down at him with molten gold eyes.

“I could kill you now,” Sivan hissed, though his words held no real threat to them. “Is that an exciting enough game for you, *Captain?*”

Black’s grin had not faltered in the slightest when Sivan drew the cutlass against his neck. In fact, his eyes only burned darker, his cheeks flushing, biting his lip. *Gods, the man liked this.*

“If I had to die, I would choose no other way than by your blade, my lord.” The pirate’s hands landed on Sivan’s hips, making him jump by a fraction. The edge of the cutlass grazed the man’s skin, drawing a thin line of red at his throat.

Sivan pulled the sword back, fearful that he might acciden-

tally slit his neck. He couldn't do that. This man was the dreaded Demon of the Blackwater, but Sivan absolutely could not be the one to end his life. He was too beautiful, his laugh too pleasant a sound, his touch too gentle for Sivan to do him any harm.

Black squeezed his hips, and Sivan threw the cutlass to the side. He surged forward, unable to resist any longer, and kissed the pirate. The man beneath him was evidently shocked for a moment, his hands freezing on his waist. Sivan panicked, maybe he had read this situation entirely wrong, and the pirate really was just messing with him. Then Black returned the kiss tenfold, pulling Sivan closer with a hand on his back and the other behind his neck.

The pirate's lips were surprisingly cool against his, but it didn't take long before Black's tongue was opening up Sivan's mouth, heat blossoming between them.

Black sat up straighter, giving him a better angle at which to deepen the kiss. Just this kiss alone was enough to leave Sivan shaking, but the pirate's hands were now on his back, his hips, his thighs. It was positively making Sivan tremble with want. He could feel himself growing hard in his pants, which had to be obvious since they were, after all, a size too small.

Sharp teeth nipped at Sivan's lips, teasing them swollen before Black soothed them with his tongue. Sivan got the impression that the pirate had a plan for making him come apart. It made him wonder if Black had been thinking about kissing him for longer than he knew.

Finally he let Sivan's lips rest, allowing the man to catch his breath. Sivan braced himself on Black's shoulders, steadying the weakness his body was giving into. "Black...wh-what's the real reason you captured me?"

Apparently the pirate couldn't resist licking up the mess he had left Sivan's lips in, and continued to kiss at the corners of his

mouth even as he spoke. "Ah, I can't tell you that, my lord. You may stop kissing me if you knew."

Considering the immense arousal Sivan was currently feeling, he doubted anything could sway him in this state. "Impossible," he gasped as the pirate slid a hand between his thighs, gripping the meat of his groin to spread his legs apart and expose the clear bulge in Sivan's pants.

Black grazed a light touch against the curve of his cock and Sivan bit his lips, biting back a moan. "You're quite hard," the pirate teased, pressing slightly harder against the bulge. "Come now, let me hear you, my lord."

Sivan shook his head, but couldn't stop his hips from bucking, desperate for more of the pirate's touch. "N-no," he whined behind a hand over his mouth. "Everyone will hear."

"Let them hear," Black encouraged, finally cupping Sivan's cock fully with his large hand, the friction washing pleasure over him. "I want everyone to know you're mine."

It was possessive, shameless, and it fanned the fire in Sivan's gut. There was something so deliciously exciting about being on display like that. He knew he should resent the man who had stolen him away from his home, but the dark part of Sivan that had been obsessing over the pirate the last few days also deeply desired to be taken by him.

"Will you please take off your pants, my lord?" Black asked into his ear, hot breath tickling his neck. The pirate asked it so politely, which only made the request sound all the more profane. Still, Sivan complied, shakily undoing the several buttons that kept the pants tight around his waist and pushing them down past his knees, all while still in the pirate's lap.

Black's dark eyes gleamed with excitement, and he placed his hands against the skin of Sivan's hips the moment he was exposed to him. He repositioned the man in his lap, and Sivan

could now feel the pirate's insistent arousal pressing against his ass. Sivan gasped at the realization. Even through his pants, he could tell the pirate's cock was huge.

A hand from his hips wandered to Sivan's erect arousal and gently took it in hand with a squeeze. Pleasure rocked through his body, the callous fingers jerking him off perfectly. Sivan shuddered, needing to grip at Black's shoulders to keep himself upright.

"You're so beautiful," the pirate praised against his neck. Sivan flushed harder, tried to find some words to protest the flattery, but the rhythm of the man's hand on his cock ruined his voice, turning it into another stifled moan.

Black's cock was somehow growing larger, the man beneath him unable to resist thrusting upwards slightly to get the barest fraction of relief against Sivan.

"Take...take yours off as well," Sivan panted, fingernails digging into the pirate's skin.

Dark green eyes glittered with possibility, the man flashing a familiar smirk at him. "Are you making demands of me, my lord?"

Sivan glared at him. This pirate captain loved to tease. "Yes," he said, firmer.

"Then by all means, go ahead," Black chuckled, taking his hands off Sivan to motion for him to do the honors.

Sivan swallowed, his mouth dry at the prospect of doing it himself. But still, he wanted to see the man's cock at least once. This could be his only opportunity. So he slid himself back between Black's legs and set to work on unlacing the pirate's pants. As he touched the fabric closer to the man's bulge, Sivan was surprised to find that it was quite wet. Maybe it was the sweat from his fight earlier.

His work paid off, and the pirate's large cock was free,

standing proud and tall and dripping quite badly. Sivan had some experience with sucking off other men; it was the easiest way to sate desires in the close quarters of military ships. But he had never seen a man's cock quite so large or quite so generously lubricated. He opened his mouth and leaned down, wanting to taste it, but was stopped when Black pulled him back up into his lap with a yank of his vest.

"Not so fast, my lord," Black said stiffly. "If you do that I won't be able to stop myself."

Sivan frowned. He thought that was the point, but the pirate rolled him over onto his side, propping himself over Sivan.

"I have other plans for you tonight." His voice was husky, sending all Sivan's challenges out of his mind. Black then gripped his own arousal with a hand, milking the ample precum into his palm. He then pushed Sivan's thighs up and to the side, sliding his wet hand between them, coating the insides of his legs. "Is this acceptable?"

So hazed over with desire as he was, Sivan took a moment before he realized the man wanted to fuck his thighs. He nodded hastily, face flushing, unable to say anything in return. Black pressed the tip of his cock between his thighs as he closed his legs around it. Sivan shivered. Even now he could feel how hot and heavy the pirate's cock was.

"Keep your legs tight together, my lord," Black directed.

"Please stop calling me that," Sivan muttered, his ears flushing hotter every time the man called out his title like that. "It sounds profane when you say it."

"But isn't what we're doing quite profane, my lord?" Black chuckled, and he pushed into the heat of the man's thighs. Sivan gasped. Black's cock was large enough that the motion had brought both of their arousals together. The pirate groaned loudly, shaking above Sivan. This clearly gave Black just as much



pleasure as it did to Sivan, which emboldened him greatly.

“Does that feel good, Captain?” Sivan asked, voice a low whisper.

“Yes,” Black replied, his own voice now needy. He pushed Sivan’s legs up further and thrust in between them again, now gliding firmer against Sivan’s own hard arousal. The pirate began fucking his thighs in earnest, each thrust sliding against Sivan’s cock, his balls, giving him the simulation of being fucked while fondling him at the same time.

Sivan had forgotten they were only shielded by a few thick curtains. He didn’t care about his moans escaping, Black saw to that. The pirate was quite possibly louder than he was, his cries growing more desperate the faster he went. It felt so damn good, the slick of Black’s cock providing a delicious slide of flesh against flesh. Sivan hazily wondered how it’d feel if the man were inside him, coating his insides with the slick that seemed to pour out from his arousal unendingly.

This thought was so tempting to Sivan that he genuinely hoped in that moment that no one would come to rescue him. He could spend the rest of his days being fucked stupid by this pirate who had captured his heart and body.

“My lord,” Black groaned, the title a sin on the man’s lips pressed flush against Sivan’s neck.

Sivan came, pressure from the man’s cock hitting his balls just right and sending him over the edge. He clawed at satin pillows and Black’s ridiculously large arms holding him in place. His orgasm made his vision go spotty, white flashes of hot light wrecking his senses. Black held him through it, not stopping his wild thrusting.

As soon as Sivan stopped trembling, Black came. He desperately held onto Sivan, like he was adrift at sea and the noble was the only thing keeping him afloat. Sivan held him back in return,

letting the pirate empty himself into his thighs.

The tremors from the man above him abated, and the weight of him crashed down on top of Sivan. He let out a weak noise of protest as Black was exceedingly heavy. Even though he was heavy, Sivan still felt so sated and relaxed beneath him. He wasn't sure if he had ever come that hard in his life, and he was even less sure if it was because of the pirate's sheer beauty or if it was because of the fact that he was a pirate.

"Black," Sivan hummed, trying to form words again with his mind still hazy. "Is this the reason you captured me?"

The pirate did not respond. His breathing was slowing, his body growing even heavier on top of Sivan. "Black?" He lightly smacked the man's muscled bicep, but there was still no response from him.

Black had fallen asleep.

Sivan traced the line of the man's jaw. Stubble had been strictly frowned upon in the Royal Navy. If a sailor wanted to keep a beard they had to have it perfectly groomed daily. Most found it easier to just shave it all off. Sivan found he rather liked Black with a touch of facial hair. He rather liked the pirate's whole appearance, if his quickness to get into bed with him hadn't already made that obvious. Black was a dangerous man. He was quick to temper and hard to read, but there was something about him that made Sivan think that he wasn't wholly evil.

The pirate wanted to kill Jhaeros, to end the war. Even if he had been misguided about how he went about it, he did good through the Blackwater's odd acts of vigilantism. He had shown Sivan kindness and concern, both of which Sivan felt came from that secret reason for his capture.

As much as Sivan wanted to find out the truth behind that, he could not let such a beautiful man be crushed under the tide of what was coming.

Sivan managed to push the man off him enough to crawl out. The mess on his thighs was now apparent, thick white globs of the pirate's seed painting the lord's copper skin obscenely. Sivan's own spill had made it up onto his vest, staining the fine cloth.

The reality of what they had done now seeped into Sivan's senses. He had come here to find out the truth of why Black had kidnapped him. Instead he had caved into his desires and slept with a dangerous criminal. Shame slowly burned into Sivan's skin, making the wet mess between his legs feel uncomfortably cold. He took off his soiled vest and sopped up his thighs as best he could. Locating his pants beneath the pirate's foot, Sivan freed them from the pirate's weight by yanking on them.

Black grunted when Sivan had taken his pants. He watched the pirate, praying to whatever gods that had not yet abandoned him that he would not wake up. The man pawed at his side, where Sivan had been just a moment before, as if he were searching for him in his sleep. His hand landed on a brocade bolster pillow and drew that underneath him, hugging it as he settled back down.

It was such a pathetic sight that it almost made Sivan want to stay.

Almost.

Instead he pulled his pants back on, snatched the pirate's cutlass, and hastily left the curtained off room. Either their moans had scared off any of the surrounding pirates or the Blackwater crew was not stupid enough to try and eavesdrop on their captain, for there was no-one nearby to witness Sivan escape.

He made for the docks. The Royal Navy would be here any minute, and Sivan had to find a way to meet them en route, so he could somehow convince them to let the pirates live.

He prayed he was not too late.

Chapter 10

Lissandry

The Blackwater lay unperturbed in Lissandry's port along with her reduced number of sister ships. There was naught a sign of the Royal Navy on the horizon.

A dangerous thought crossed Sivan's mind. What if Renalt's message had not made it to his father? Or worse, what if it had made it there, but his father did not care enough to send anyone to rescue him?

Maybe Sivan was on his own. Maybe he was stuck with the pirates.

The thought did not trouble him as much as it should have.

Sivan decided to stick to his plan for now. He slunk down to the docks, making sure to stay out of sight of any patrolling pirates. There were very few keeping watch, and those who Sivan had seen were likely too drunk to actually monitor the area effectively.

He found a small sailing ship docked closer to Black's man-

or. Sivan thanked the gods it was small enough that it could be navigated by one person.

He untied the ship from the dock and pushed off into the ocean. The familiar wave of nausea washed over him as the rocking of the boat stirred up his previous bad memories. But the night was still, and the ocean was calm, and Sivan was determined enough that he managed to swallow down the fear that threatened to take him.

He knew how to sail a ship. That had not left him, even after his battle with the Uncharted king. Sivan navigated the ship onto open water with ease. The Blackwater became less of an imposing presence the further he sailed away from it. After he got far enough out to not be noticed easily from shore, Sivan cast the small anchor attached to the boat and settled down to watch the horizon.

He did not want to be too far away from Lissandry when he noticed the Royal Navy. If the ships were coming from Varis they should be coming from the south, the direction he was facing, but if they had decided to approach from another direction for tactical reasons, Sivan couldn't risk being on the opposite side of the island.

His plan was to intervene before the so-called rescue fleet landed on the island. He'd sail towards them and board the ship, reveal who he was, and depending on who was captaining the ship, either lie or beg in order to get them to not attack the pirates.

There was only one sentence for those convicted of piracy: death.

Sivan would not let Black meet that fate. The strange attachment he'd developed for the pirate since he had been captured was one reason. The other was that deep down he believed Black was their only hope of killing Jhaeros at this stage in the war.

He wasn't certain the *Corseque* of Estes was real, but if it were, Black now supposedly possessed all the elements to obtaining it. Sivan had witnessed the pirate's tenacity first hand. If the weapon were real, he would find it. And he would use it to kill Jhaeros.

It might be a long shot, but Sivan was taking a gamble he felt good about.

A tiny clink of glass against wood alerted him to the port side of the boat. Sivan leaned over carefully, and was astonished to find the source of the noise was a small glass vial filled with a glowing pale green light. He immediately remembered the man who he'd witnessed sending a similar glowing light out from the shore. This had to be that same light.

Sivan hesitated. He wanted to scoop up the strange vial, but that required him to lean quite a ways out of the boat to reach it, and he was not sure if he could do it without passing out. Still, determination had brought him this far onto the sea, and determination allowed him to grip the side of the small ship, knuckles turning white as he leaned over the edge. He plucked the vial out of the water and fell back safely into the boat.

Laying on his back, the ocean hidden from view, Sivan could appreciate the beauty of the light up close. It thrummed in his hand, warm and fluttering. It was not very large nor very bright, but it seemed to grow brighter the closer Sivan held it to his face. He thought to open it, but was afraid that it would dissipate or somehow be destroyed upon touching the air. For some reason, Sivan just knew that Black had been the one who had sent this light out to sea.

Whatever it was, this could be important to the pirate lord, so Sivan leaned back over the side of the boat and reluctantly dropped it back into the ocean.

Reason told him to not give Black a reason to come after him

once he'd escaped, even if his heart told him otherwise.

Turning back to face the ocean, he set his sight on the horizon. He thought a small blip in the distance could be something like a ship, but it wasn't close enough for him to be certain. His golden eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and he focused them onto the blip, trying to discern if his mind was playing tricks on him or not. Sivan was torn out of his focus when another sound of glass against wood broke his attention. He leaned back over the side and once again saw the glass vial of light next to his boat. Sivan frowned at the light, as if he could make it go the other direction just from an expression. He paddled water in the opposite direction of the vial, trying to get it to find another current.

Plink.

Plink.

Plink.

Without fail, the vial always steered back to his boat. Even replacing it to the other side of his boat still resulted in the light returning to him. With a sigh, Sivan scooped up the light once more. It lay in his palm like a small bird, warm but so, so fragile.

Another light on the horizon drew his attention away from the vial. Finally, the blip had come close enough to be recognizable. The silver light of the Royal Navy dotted the horizon, making a beeline for Lissandry.

Without another thought he tucked the vial into his shirt pocket, buttoning it up to make sure it did not escape. He pulled on the line to bring the anchor up and found the best angle for the sail to propel him towards the oncoming ships.

He sped towards the approaching lights, but his ship was not as fast as he would have hoped. Soon the Royal Navy's ships came into focus, clear silhouettes growing steadily closer.

With every passing moment Sivan prayed the pirates would

not notice the approaching fleet.

He stopped praying when a shrill alarm sounded from the Lissandry port.

The pirates had seen the Royal Navy.

Still, Sivan pushed towards the boats. His plan had not gone like he had hoped. He had sorely underestimated the speed at which his little boat would sail or how fast the drunk pirates would catch on to the oncoming attack.

His boat was pointed in the direction of his rescuers while his attention was drawn towards the pirate capital. Sivan was horrified as he realized the Blackwater was already unfurling its sails.

The pirate ship was darker than the night and faster than any ship Grenaldia owned. Cold dread seeped into Sivan's bones as he watched the Blackwater cut through the bay of Lissandry with unnatural haste, leaving the other pirate ships behind. The Grenaldian fleet was still approaching, the silver light of the oil lanterns glittering in the night. Sivan felt like he was caught in the middle of his father's war table. A single great obsidian pirate ship driving into a fleet of silver Royal Navy vessels. Sivan's tiny ship would not have even earned a model on the table.

He finally got close enough to the Royal Navy ships to try and flag one down, but the sailors on board were too frantic in their preparations for battle to notice his shouts from below. All their attention was directed towards the legendary pirate ship charging towards him. Even if they had seen Sivan, the Grenaldian ships weren't really here for him. He had become an excuse for the earl to extract his revenge on the pirate menace named Captain Black.

The Blackwater saddled up to the head ship of the naval formation, the fellow pirate vessels not far behind. The pirates' cannons were drawn to match the Grenaldian ship. Somehow Sivan's tiny boat had ended up between the two opposing forces.

“Grenaldian scum!” a familiar deep voice shouted. “Give me back my lord and maybe I won’t send you to the briny hell!”

He looked up and saw Black, still shirtless, standing on the railing of the Blackwater and shouting at the Royal Navy. Sivan was suddenly mortified. Now everyone on the ship knew the dreaded demon of the Blackwater called Sivan by his title quite properly. Not only that, but Black was referring to Sivan as his own. Said lord floating between the two ships could have shouted out, could have used this opportunity to get their attention, but right then he wanted nothing more than to recede into the wood of his tiny ship.

“Do not play games with us, Black!” came the reply. Sivan gasped when he recognized the voice.

“Renalt...you traitorous cad!” Black’s previously calm voice had turned livid. A crowd of jeers supported him from the Blackwater crew. “Where is my lord? What did you do with him?!” The pirate lord’s voice was growing frantic, anger turning into fear.

“Don’t take me for a fool! You still have him, I know you do!” Renalt shouted back. The Grenaldian spy somehow found a way to meet up with the Royal Navy, but did not manage to take Sivan along with him. Perhaps Black’s near constant vigil around his chambers had not allowed Renalt an opportunity to sneak him away.

“Enough! I’ll take apart every one of these damn ships if I have to!” Black spit, and turned on his heel back onto the deck, his hair, darker than the night, fanning out around him.

Renalt disappeared from Sivan’s vantage as well, and he then lost his opportunity to make his presence known. “Wait-!” he shouted, but was cut off by sudden explosions of cannon fire from both ships.

The cannonballs found their marks, splintering the sides of

both ships brutally. Sivan covered his head to keep wood chips from slicing his face open and waited for the first round to end. He was now painfully aware of how stupid this plan had been. How could one man stand between two insurmountable forces?

Once the cannon fire abated long enough for Sivan to sit up straight, he steered his little boat as fast as he could away from the two massive ships.

As he passed the Grenaldian ship, Sivan observed the damage the Blackwater had done. Great holes had been bored into the wood, some of them already filling rapidly with seawater. This ship would sink soon, it was already beyond saving. He was only grateful the rest of the Navy was nearby so any survivors could swim to another ship.

By contrast, the Blackwater had barely taken any damage at all. Sivan knew the cannons the Royal Navy used, and they were not instruments to be taken lightly. Even if the pirates used dangerous amounts of gunpowder to get more explosive shots, the Grenaldian ones still should have done more damage than this. The places the Navy's fire had struck were mere dents in the hull. Sivan swore he saw a hole where one cannonball had pierced the ship suddenly stitch itself back together.

Sivan made it safely to the other side of the Grenaldian ship before another round of cannon fire erupted between the two ships. He could just barely see Grenaldian sailors swinging on ropes to board the Blackwater. The clatter of sword meeting sword signaling that the battle had begun.

Meanwhile, the sky above had started to darken unnaturally. The clear full moon had been quickly obscured by storm clouds made of pitch. Flashes of lightning danced in the sky, thunder providing a suitable background warning while the battle between the two ships raged on. Sivan couldn't fathom how the weather could have turned so quickly. It was a calm and cloud-

less night moments before, yet now it seemed like the sky was about to crack open and swallow them up.

The water beneath the Grenaldian ship started to swirl, forcing the vessel to turn as a new wave of cannon fire railed into the side. Strangely enough, the Blackwater did not give way to the torrent like the other ship. The pirate ship maintained its position in the water, the crew cheering and jeering as they watched the Royal Navy's ship spin wildly. The rudder passed Sivan, trying its best to steer the ship back on course, but it was useless against the force of the whirlpool forming directly beneath them.

Sivan's boat started to drag into the current of the widening whirlpool. He frantically grabbed hold of the oars and attempted to counter the force of the water, but it did little to get him to safety.

He heard a horrid snap of wood and watched as the Grenaldian ship was eaten up by the whirlpool. The sailor's screams as they were swallowed by the water struck a mighty fear in Sivan's gut. The force of the swirling water ground up the ship into pieces of wood and cloth. Sivan's blood ran cold as he realized his own ship was taking on water as it tilted to the side.

Sivan tried to hang on to anything that would float, but nothing could save him from the hurricane-like might of the whirlpool.

His boat buckled under the crushing water.

He sank fast, the flailing of his limbs useless against the overwhelming currents still rocking beneath the water's surface. Even if Sivan could swim again, he couldn't fight the torrent. It sucked him deep down into the dark ocean.

He tried to open his eyes, to find which way was up, but the saltwater stung his eyes, and the water was so devoid of light Sivan could not make out anything. Still, he didn't need to see in order to know what was happening. The Grenaldian ship was

sinking with him, the bodies of sailors limp, floating around the wreckage like flies.

It was cold down here. The depth of the ocean was all-consuming in its vastness. Down here Sivan remained frozen, unable to even move when faced with the entirety of his fear.

A flicker of warmth thrummed briefly against his chest. It was so faint, and the only reason Sivan noticed it was due to the cold around him. He remembered the vial he'd scooped out of the ocean. It hummed through his shirt, giving him the smallest beacon for his fraying sanity to grasp onto.

He could feel his his body going limp, the burning of his lungs caving in to taking a breath even though all they would suck in was water.

Yet before Sivan passed out, he felt strong arms wrap around him.

The arms were warm, a welcome reprieve from the cold abyss.



“-lord! My lord!”

The burning in Sivan’s lungs seared his mind into consciousness, and he unceremoniously heaved up water onto the floor, heedless of his surroundings.

Slowly, those surroundings came into focus as the dark edges around his vision began to recede. The floor was wood, likely a deck of a ship based off how wet it was. His chest burned, and his head ached, and for a moment he thought he was losing his vision again because his sight refused to clear fully. However, after feeling his face, he realized he’d lost his glasses in the ocean.

A tail flicked anxiously in the periphery of his blurry sight. Sivan squinted, trying to make sense of it. The tail was large, too large for any fish he'd ever seen. It was a deep black, scales iridescent with purples and greens, like oil slick spilled into the sea. It wound around the deck, longer than any eel or sea snake. He dimly recognized the dark silhouettes of pirates who crewed the Blackwater standing just out of the ring of the giant tail.

Strong arms pulled him closer to a wet body, cradling Sivan like he were a precious treasure.

"My lord!" the man holding him called tearfully, tears streaming down his face to mix with the seawater that dripped from his inky black hair. His dark eyes had seemed to clear for the first time, his tears turning them into a bright, fair green.

"Are you okay, my lord?" he sobbed, clinging to Sivan desperately. "I did not know you were in the water or I would have never sunk that ship."

This man was Black, the dreaded pirate lord, but he was also someone else entirely.

Someone Sivan had thought was now only a memory.

"...Nereus?" Sivan rasped, the water he had coughed up had made his throat raw.

The man holding him froze, uncertainty clear on his face. How had Sivan not seen it? The boy he'd left on the Spear had been a wholly different person, but the resemblance was still there. He'd spent years with Nereus, yet he'd forgotten his face so easily

Sivan struggled to sit up, and saw that winding tail grow closer and wider until it reached the man's hips. Black scales dissipated from the tail and gave way to a man.

No, not a man.

A siren.

Fear gripped Sivan instinctively, making him push back

against the thing that was holding him. “Y-you’re a-!” He couldn’t say it. The last time he’d seen a siren was when Jhaeros had almost killed him. Yet here was another one, and Sivan couldn’t make sense of it. Black had been human hours before.

The memory of the bright-eyed boy that had desperately called out his title vanished, and the familiar dark shadow crossed back over Black’s face. His eyes darkened, his expression grew hard. His grip tightened on Sivan, refusing to let him escape.

“Ahh, you finally see the truth of it all. Yes, I am that boy you once knew. That boy you abandoned on that burning spit of land to be sacrificed to demons.” Black’s words were full of malice, spite stabbing into Sivan. He leaned in close, whispering into Sivan’s ear, “this is what I became after you left me. All that I am now, all I’ve ever done...it’s all your fault.”



Chapter 11

The Northern
Spear

Sivan woke up to the noise of a precise knock at the door. It opened without him saying anything, and he groaned, pulling the covers over his head stubbornly.

“It is past seven, my lord,” a familiar voice informed him. “We have much to do before the Spearhead arrives.”

The blanket atop him was cruelly yanked off his body, the cool air hitting his skin with a snap. Sivan reluctantly sat up, and looked at the boy who had woken him. His attendant stood before him, shoulder length black hair tied up into his usual half ponytail. “Nereus. Why do you always wake me up in such a cruel manner?” he grumbled.

“Because my lord would not wake up otherwise,” the boy said politely, but his small grin indicated to Sivan that he clearly enjoyed it. Nereus had grown several inches since he had saved Sivan’s life, and he was now nearly as tall as the lord he attended to. The boy’s eyes were still a crystal clear green, bright and

sharp whenever Sivan spoke to him. He was beginning to grow out of his youth, his jaw starting to become more defined. By any account he was growing into a very handsome young man, but his past as a starved vagrant still clung to his figure.

Nereus stepped forward as Sivan kicked his legs over the side of the bed and offered a cup of tea to him. The lord took it gratefully, blowing on it despite knowing his attendant always brought him the morning tea at the perfect temperature. He took a sip, trying to will himself into full consciousness through the action. A clinking of metal signaled that his breakfast was ready, and Sivan sat down at the table in front of one of the tall windows to eat it.

“Looks delicious,” Sivan hummed and dug in. The main dish was a bowl of spicy chili, a soft boiled egg nestled in the center. “Did Eliza make this one or you?”

“I did,” Nereus replied. His clear green eyes looked for approval, hoping the meal was to his lord’s tastes.

Sivan laughed lightly. “It tastes lovely. It’s getting harder and harder to tell which one of you is making my meals.”

Nereus still looked somewhat disappointed. “I had hoped I would have surpassed her by now,” he admitted.

“You still have plenty of time to do that,” Sivan said, trying to be reassuring. But they both knew that would soon no longer be a reality. Nereus was fifteen now, and Sivan’s father had already made it clear that the boy would be joining the navy once he reached the recruitment age in a year. The earl had allowed his son to take in the vagrant child who had saved his life, but as the years passed the less Sivan’s father tolerated his son having a nameless attendant by his side.

Besides, Sivan would be of age to marry in a month’s time, and his future husband would not likely allow him to keep his childhood retainers.



Sivan redirected his attention to the window, noting how cold it was for such a clear spring morning. “What’s your take on the weather today?” he asked his attendant.

Nereus stepped forward and opened a window, and Sivan shivered as the cooler air entered his room. The boy inhaled, clear eyes peering out over the sea and sky. He frowned at the seemingly eternal blue and said, “It is going to storm today.”

“Really?” Sivan asked. “There isn’t a cloud in the sky.”

“No, but there is a cold breeze coming down from the north. It carries something dark with it,” Nereus continued, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

Sivan looked out over the ocean as well. Uncharted territory lay to the north, so anytime a southbound cloud wandered over to the little island the native folk would immediately herald it as a new sign of the end days. Sivan knew Nereus usually did not share his fellow islanders’ superstitions, but the boy had a knack for predicting the weather.

“Then I’ll have to bring an umbrella today,” Sivan decided, and returned to eating his breakfast.

Nereus continued to stare out towards the northern sea, his face unreadable. It took Sivan complaining about being cold for his attendant to snap back to his senses and close the window.



The next stage in their morning routine took place in the training arena atop the manor. A portion of the roof had been leveled off to provide Sivan a place to practice his fencing. Canvas had been stretched on poles over the area, allowing Sivan to practice in rain or shine.

Despite being the son of an earl who governed over the entire military of Grenaldia, Sivan was not allowed to actually become a sailor. Not that he had any particular desire to risk life and death in a real battle, but it frustrated him that his fencing had only ever been a means for his father to show off his youngest child’s talents. So that when the time came, Sivan would have plenty of offers from nobles who had been enamored by his skill with a blade in competitions.

Sometimes he felt like a pet his father had groomed for show. A deadly pet, but a pet all the same.

It was not like that when he trained with his attendant. Sivan had gifted the boy the sword nearly two years ago and had been training him in the art of the blade ever since.

“Your back toe is overextended,” Sivan critiqued as he parried away an attack from Nereus.

The boy fixed his foot immediately and followed through with a lunge. Sivan easily caught the oncoming blade with his own, but was surprised at the force of it. Nereus had a long way to go with his footwork, but his strength had been growing by leagues lately. The lord was still able to disarm the boy with a lightning fast twist of his sword, and it sent the other blade clattering across the arena.

Sivan lowered his sword, allowing Nereus to hastily pick up his fallen blade. “Your lunges are sloppy. You focus too much on might, and you step forward before your blade even moves. Your opponent will always be able to see it coming.”

“Understood, my lord!” Nereus shouted as he reclaimed his sword. He was breathing fast, sweat collecting on his forehead. He looked nothing other than determined, and faced Sivan once more with burning green eyes.

“Now, try to disarm me,” Sivan said. He raised his sword, gesturing with his free hand for his opponent to make the first move.

Nereus advanced upon him well, his footwork controlled and precise, just as Sivan had taught him. But he was focusing too hard on the movements and lost all of his force. This was fine if he were fencing for play, but if he wanted to win in a competition, or more importantly if he wanted to win in a battle, he had to perfect both footwork and force.

Sivan parried away Nereus’s blade to the side, but the boy

had been mid lunge and fell forward when his attack had been foiled. He crashed into Sivan, who was able to catch him by the arm. “Now, now, Nereus. You aren’t giving a training example. Give it your all.”

Nereus looked up at him, face burning red. This happened far too often for Sivan to pay it much thought. For some reason his attendant always flushed with embarrassment whenever they collided in training. Sivan figured it had something to do with either being ashamed he hadn’t done the drill well or the fact that the boy likely did not have much physical interaction on the streets.

Nereus squeezed Sivan’s arm for a fraction of a second before he stepped back. Sivan wasn’t even sure if he had imagined it or not.

His attendant faced him once more, eyes determined, sword raised. This time he waited, staring Sivan down until his lord was forced to make the first move.

Then he returned the attack with such force it rattled Sivan’s arm. His footwork was nowhere to be seen, but the ferocity in which he struck made Sivan retreat back a few steps. The boy continued to swing, completely unaffected by Sivan’s attempts to finesse his more skilled hand into disarming the attack. Sivan’s back hit a pole, and at the same time Nereus hit his saber with such strength Sivan lost his grip on the handle. Then the boy’s hand brushed against his own before yanking the sword out of his hand.

Sivan held his breath as his attendant held the sword he had gifted him up to the lord’s neck. It was inches away from being an actual threat, but it was the first time Nereus had actually succeeded in disarming him.

“You cheated,” Sivan exhaled. “Grabbing a sword hilt like that is against the rules and very dangerous.”

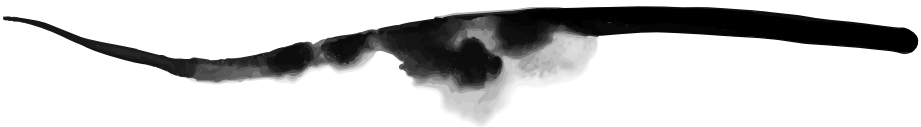
The corner of Nereus's lips curled up into a small smirk. "You are too skilled for me to disarm without cheating a little, my lord."

"In that case I can cheat a little too," Sivan returned, and touched the tip of the other sword he had drawn to the boy's side. "Always keep count of how many swords your opponent has."

Nereus did not disengage immediately. He fixed Sivan with a look the lord did not understand. His breath quickened, and he leaned into the tip of Sivan's sword by a fraction, snagging it on a button.

Sivan's heart quickened, and he wasn't sure if it was from the fear of accidentally harming his attendant or if it was from something else entirely.

He pulled back his sword before it could do any real damage and gently pushed Nereus back a step, the boy sucking in a breath and blinking rapidly, as if broken out of a spell. "That strength of yours is getting more impressive by the day," Sivan said lightly. "But your footwork still needs attention." He patted the boy's head, trying not to notice how his pale skin had once again turned an embarrassed crimson hue.



The rest of Sivan's morning was filled with making preparations for the return of the Spearhead. His father had sent out a ship into Uncharted territory in an attempt to finally make a claim on the unknown waters. The vessel was manned by the best and the brightest new graduates from the training academy, and apparently their mission had been successful. The earl had

told his son that the Spearhead had successfully staked out an island. Few of the Uncharted creatures that ruled the territory had been living there, and they vacated voluntarily when the Spearhead had arrived.

Sivan doubted that last part. He had heard rumors of how deeply possessive the Uncharted were of what they considered theirs. It seemed unlikely that they just gave up their home to Grenaldia.

Regardless, the Spearhead was returning to port late this afternoon, and Sivan had somehow been put in charge of organizing the regalia to welcome their return.

He had to check everything from the florist who was decorating the pier with Grenaldian white roses, to the numerous nobles who lived on the island who all wanted to have the very best view. It had been an exhausting few days of preparations, and Sivan was grateful that Nereus was by his side to assist him.

Being in charge was new to Sivan, and he felt almost as out of his depth as his attendant had when he had first taken the position. Nereus likely saw that and did everything he could to help him share this burden.

“What’s next on the agenda?” Sivan asked, rubbing his temples. The two of them stood in a hallway of the Montgomery manor lined with great open windows. Sunlight streamed in peacefully, the storm Nereus had warned him about before was nowhere in sight. They had just left the welcoming orchestra conductor, who had been having a nervous breakdown after two of his cellists ran away together late the previous night. Sivan had somehow managed to find replacement musicians, but it was just one of many small catastrophes he had narrowly averted that morning.

“All that’s left is to check in on the catering, my lord,” Nereus informed him, scratching off notes in a leather bound schedule.

“Very well, to the kitchen then,” Sivan sighed and began walking down the hall.

Nereus froze for a few moments before he followed after him. Usually the boy would follow him far too eagerly, and Sivan still found himself reminding him to walk next to him or at least one pace behind so he would not bump into him endlessly. The hesitation was quite obvious, and Sivan slowed to allow his attendant to catch up to him.

“What are you and Eliza fighting about now?” Sivan asked outright.

Nereus’s expression soured, his usual pleasant neutral smile replaced by an uncomfortable mask of dread. “We aren’t fighting...yet.”

“Ah, is that what I’m about to walk into?” Sivan couldn’t help but chuckle. The chef of the house had taken Nereus in under her wing, treated him like a son, but the two were constantly at each other’s throats even now.

“I forgot to clean up after I made breakfast for you this morning. She said she was going to skin me after lunch.”

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Sivan said.

“I am sorry, my lord,” Nereus apologized, bowing his head. “I should not be making more trouble for you at such a time.”

“Nonsense, it was for my breakfast after all, wasn’t it?” He patted the boy’s head, although it was a little awkward to touch the top of someone who was nearly his own height. “I’m sure Eliza will understand if I am there as well.”

Nereus nodded, his face turning pink from what Sivan assumed was embarrassment at needing him to calm the temper of the woman who terrified him.

They walked to the kitchen, where there was a flurry of floating pots and pans and trays and foods of all kinds. In the middle of it all was a buxom middle-aged woman directing it

with a scowl. Her red hair was tied up severely but elegantly, and her sharp steel blue eyes could see right through your heart and mind. She was wearing a spotless white blouse and a black pinstriped skirt that didn't show a trace of flour or grime. All the stains from her cooking were firmly allocated to the apron tied around her waist, as if she had made an agreement with all the ingredients to not touch her clothes.

"Mrs. Day, how are your preparations for the Spearhead coming?" Sivan called out, causing the woman to turn her attention towards them. She saw Nereus and her glare deepened, causing the boy to hide behind Sivan even more than he already was.

"I'd be done by now, my lord, if it weren't for a certain ungrateful brat who can't clean up after himself!" she barked, and walked towards them through the floating cookware. The pots and pans moved to allow a path for her silently, as if they were as afraid of her as Nereus was.

"Now, now, he was merely preparing my breakfast," Sivan tried to explain, waving his hands as if that would put out the flames of the woman's ire. "We have been preparing for the Spearhead's arrival all morning, so I have not allowed him a moment to go clean up. The fault is all mine."

"Please do not say it was your fault, my lord!" Nereus piped up, stepping out from behind him. "I could not bear it if you felt guilt over such a small thing."

Eliza sighed loudly and stepped forward to grab the boy by his ear, dragging him into the kitchen, where he collided with a few floating pots. "There is no need to apologize, my lord. Just lend me your devoted attendant for an hour or so to finish this up."

"Very well." Sivan didn't have much of a choice, so he just gave Nereus an apologetic look before turning away.

He decided to cut through the courtyard to return to his room. He needed to start changing into his clothes for the welcoming ceremony. As he stepped out onto the lush grass a single heavy raindrop hit his head. Sivan looked up, not at all surprised to find that Nereus's prediction of the weather souring was turning out to be true.

He frowned at the sky, remembering what the boy had said to him about the northern breeze carrying something "dark."

Chapter 12

*The Northern
Spear*

The arrival of the Spearhead was met with much fanfare and cheer, regardless of the now cloudy sky. The orchestra performed admirably despite the change in cellists, and Sivan was quite pleased to overhear comments of praise from the nobles gathered around below him. The hard work he'd poured into organizing this event had paid off.

Sivan's father had built a raised platform a few years ago to make announcements to the commoners. The earl was at the top, now sitting after giving a rather lengthy speech to the returning sailors about the glory of Grenaldian expedition, the dawn of a new age, opportunities for the ready, and on and so forth. Sivan was positioned on a lower wing of the platform, just high enough to remind the crowd of his status, but low enough to be shown off.

"I have returned, my lord," the breathless voice of Nereus announced quietly from behind him. Sivan turned around to see

the boy on the stairs leading up to his wing. He had changed into new clothes, likely due to the aftermath of his time in the torrent of Eliza's kitchen.

"Ah, you made it." Sivan smiled at him. "So you wanted to get a good look at the Spearhead, hm?"

Nereus blinked quickly, the faintest hint of confusion on his face. "I returned to serve you, my lord."

Sivan sighed and shook his head. "You don't have to serve me every second of the day, Nereus," he said gently.

His attendant huffed quietly, and Sivan did not need to look at him to know he was pouting.

The sailors began to disembark from the ship, streaming out onto the docks in perfect formation. This was Sivan's cue to begin waving, and he did as such, greeting each and every sailor politely as they walked by.

Sivan Montgomery was not an experienced youth. Every moment of his life had been set and scheduled by his father and tutors. This left little time for the frivolous matters of the heart and body, which left the young lord completely unaware of the beauty he had grown into. His copper skin glowed even in the overcast sky. A dark silver vest with a flowing trail and a high collar perfectly complemented his light silver hair, cropped short except for a fringe which cascaded down the side of his face in elegant waves. His eyes were golden kindness and held within them a well of warmth and grace.

Sivan was a beautiful young lord from a wealthy family, nearly of age to marry, and this did not go unnoticed by the sailors who streamed past the Montgomery's platform. A few of them even broke their strict march and stumbled to return the wave and smile stupidly at the beautiful lord. Sivan was not aware of the effect he held on these people, and so he simply continued to wave politely as he had been instructed.

A very quiet noise of disapproval was coming from his attendant with every returned wave from a sailor. Sivan looked back at Nereus and found the boy was scowling at the sailors as they rounded the side of the platform.

“Nereus, behave,” Sivan warned.

“I’m not doing anything, my lord,” the boy grumbled.

“Is that right?” Sivan laughed quietly. He turned partially to face his attendant. “You cannot reserve your smiles for me alone.”

“Yes, I can,” Nereus said obstinately. “You are the only one who deserves them.”

Sivan wasn’t sure if he should laugh or cry. Honestly, this boy was far too attached to him for his own good. “That is not true, and even if it were, that is not how the world works. Sometimes you must put on a pleasant face even if you do not feel happy.”

Nereus simply made another noise of disapproval, and Sivan could not hold back the laugh that escaped him.

“Come here, you have flour in your hair,” he said, beckoning the boy to come closer. Nereus did as he was told and stepped forward to allow Sivan to dust away the remnant flour. “So, if you must, reserve your real smiles just for me, and come up with another smile to show the rest of the world.”

Nereus looked up at him, face pink, green eyes sparkling with something Sivan did not have the understanding to recognize.

“My lord-“

A mighty crack of lightning shook the sky above, forcing all in attendance to look up in fear. Thunder followed almost instantly after.

The dark storm Nereus had predicted rolled in supernaturally fast. Grey overcast clouds turned a sickly, dark hue, and

opened a sudden deluge upon the crowd below.

“Where is your umbrella?” Nereus shouted over the rumbling thunder. He was frantically looking for it, desperate to get his lord out of the rain.

But it was too late. Sivan was already drenched, along with the rest of those in attendance. The nobles and sailors rushed to find cover from the sudden storm, but Sivan stood dazed, mesmerized by the strange fog that was now rolling in over the port.

“Wh-what is that?” Nereus breathed, a mixture of fear and awe in his voice.

The boy’s eyes were keen, as Sivan was just barely able to make out the shape of a massive ship emerging from the fog. It was three times the size of the Spearhead, a hulking beast of a vessel. Sivan had never seen a ship that large, and it was even stranger that it had not been sighted on the horizon earlier. It had not been foggy mere minutes ago, and the ship would’ve had to approach at unnatural speed to have traveled so quickly. It was like the ship had arrived with the fog, seemingly out of nowhere and just as ominous.

“It’s an Uncharted battleship! Everyone to your stations! Now!” Earl Tristan Montgomery shouted, his voice carrying clear over the panic that was brewing below.

His father’s order snapped Sivan out of the cloying fear that was crawling under his skin. He reached at his side, but his swords were not there. He had no reason to carry them today, or at least he thought he didn’t this morning.

The ship came into full view, the fog seeping out into the docks and streets. It was covered in huge barnacles and writhing tentacles that seemed to be searching for anything nearby to take hold of. It bore no sails, no means of propulsion. It was just a hulking mass of rotting steel and aquatic tumors. Yet somehow it had sailed here.

The front of the ship suddenly split open, right down the seam of the bow, the metal peeling back on its own. Inside was pitch black, and Sivan just knew there was something dark waiting inside. A thousand shattering screeches pierced the ears of the onlookers, making them all shrink back in pain and horror. Uncharted creatures spilled out from the open maw of the ship and descended on the waiting sailors and onlookers.

Battle broke out all around them, Grenaldian sailors clashing with ferocious Uncharted demons. Sivan turned to Nereus, whose face was shocked and pale. "I don't have my swords," he said, golden eyes meeting green in a shared moment of dread.

With those words, Nereus jumped into action. "Find safety! I'll get them for you!" he shouted before dashing down the stairs of the platform.

Sivan attempted to follow after him, but was stopped by his father grabbing his arm. "Where are you going? You are not fighting in this battle!" the earl bellowed, his face a stern mask of fear. He led Sivan down the platform, his grip firm.

"But father! Nereus went to the manor to—"

"I don't care where that brat went! You!" His father pointed to a tall young recruit with deep copper skin and dark gray hair.

The man stood straight, saluting the earl properly. "Yessir!"

"Make sure my son finds safety," he said. His father drew a longsword and faced the enemy ship.

"But father! I can fight!" Sivan protested, but he was ignored as the earl began shouting commands at other sailors.

"Follow me, my lord," the tall sailor said, offering his hand for Sivan to take.

Sivan ignored the hand and marched off towards the Montgomery estate. He knew this would be where the sailor took him, so he refused to give the man the satisfaction of leading him anywhere.

Sivan made it back to his room safely, but he had been locked inside, much to his consternation. He could hear the battle against the Uncharted raging at the docks even from his closed window. The storm only grew wilder and more ferocious the longer time went on. The dark clouds completely obscured the sun, turning the afternoon into a dim twilight broken up by flashes of brutal lightning.

His swords were still in his room. Nereus had not made it back to the manor after all.

Worry churned in Sivan's gut. His mind cycled through a million deadly outcomes for his attendant. The boy had some skill with a blade, Sivan had made sure of that, but he was nowhere near strong enough to fend for himself against this tide of danger. Sivan had no real experience himself with the Uncharted, but he had been trained to use a sword since he was young. Despite what his father thought about him, Sivan knew he was ready to fight.

His anger and frustration grew with every passing minute. During all this chaos, no sailor would stop to help a scrawny attendant. The only chance the boy had was Sivan, and he was locked away in a tower.

Leaning down near his door, Sivan checked to see if the tall sailor who had escorted him was still guarding his door. The shadow of two boots confirmed that the man was still there, so Sivan turned towards the tumultuous storm outside his window.

He flung open the doors to the short veranda outside, wind and rain blowing into his room.

"My lord, is everything alright?" the sailor outside his door called.

Sivan didn't waste any time and ran out onto the veranda. He was on the third floor of the manor, the courtyard vast below

him. There was a trellis against the wall on either side, and Sivan decided to take his chances and use it as a ladder. He kicked his legs over the railing and attached himself to the trellis covered in slippery vines.

The wet leaves made his grip precarious, and the criss-crossed wood groaned under his weight. He carefully made his descent, praying to whichever gods were listening that he'd get out of this without any broken bones.

"My lord! That is dangerous! What are you doing?!" the panicked voice of the tall sailor shouted out from above.

"Someone has to help him!" Sivan shouted back.

"Help who?!"

Of course. No one cared about Nereus other than him. Now more than ever, Sivan had to come to the boy's aid. He tried to hurry his climb down, but his foot slipped on a vine and he began to fall backwards. Sivan grasped at the trellis, attempting to regain his footing, but part of the wooden trellis ended up coming with him, and they both fell backwards with a mighty thud.

The wind was knocked out of Sivan, but he was not seriously injured. He coughed a few times, blinking rapidly against the downpour slipping past his spectacles.

"My lord!! Are you hurt?!" the sailor still on the veranda called out from above.

Sivan ignored him and sat up as quickly as he could. He tossed the trellis off his body and scrambled to his feet, heaving as his breath started to return to him.

He heard footsteps from above fade back into his room, and Sivan knew he would not have long before the man caught up with him. Taking another steadying breath, he began running towards the kitchen.

If anyone else knew were Nereus ended up, it would surely be Eliza.

Sivan made his way towards the kitchen, and was horrified to find an Uncharted beast dead at the entrance. The sword Sivan had given Nereus for his thirteenth birthday was embedded into the thing's chest. Sivan tried to pull out the sword, but it was too firmly stuck into the blood-stained torso. Pitch-colored Uncharted blood had been spilled everywhere, but it was mixed with a red shock of presumed human blood. Cold fear drained into Sivan's chest. The kitchen was a disaster, broken dishes everywhere, dark scorch marks marred the walls. It was a far cry from the orderly chaos of Eliza's cooking. A battle had been fought here, but the cook was nowhere to be found.

The red blood left a trail in a direction outside the kitchen. It was just barely visible now after the rain had washed away most of it. But it gave Sivan a direction, and he began running.

"My lord!" The tall sailor had found him and was now chasing him. But even after falling Sivan was still plenty fast. He let his feet carry him until he reached a fork under an awning. One path went back to the battleground that the docks had become. The other led up a flight of stairs, towards the watchtower of the estate.

"Lord Montgomery!" a breathless voice called from behind him. "Please wait! It is not safe for you to be out here!"

The sailor had caught up to him, and Sivan's frustration had reached a breaking point. He turned on him, drawing one of his swords. In a flash he had the tip pointed at the man's throat. There was no real threat in his expression, but Sivan needed the weapon to show he was serious.

"Give me your name!" Sivan snapped.

The tall sailor opened and closed his mouth a few times, his mind stuttering over the sudden threat from the young lord who's public persona was marketed as polite and unassertive.

"R-Renalt Dubois."

“Renalt, you will not take me back there. You can either help me look for my attendant or get out of my way.” Sivan’s words were firm, and his golden eyes burned with the gravity of the situation.

Renalt held up his hands and backed up a step, surprise clear on his face. Apparently he had not expected Sivan to actually put up a fight. The threat had stunned him into silence, and he merely watched as Sivan turned his back to him and entered the tower.

Then there was a shrill screech from above, and Sivan immediately began running towards it. The stairs circled the watchtower, bringing Sivan upwards until he ran into the Uncharted monster that had made the ungodly sound.

Pale yellow scales armored the beast. It looked like a massively overgrown serpent, huge scales forming ridges of gold before dissolving into frills of spikes. The thing could have looked elegant swimming through the blue ocean, but in the gray deluge it appeared unnatural and sickly.

The beast hissed at a pair backed into a corner of the watchtower. Sivan’s chest clenched as he recognized the two as Nereus and Eliza. Nereus was crouched on the ground, his eyes wide with fear. He was doing his best to protect the woman behind him, but he had been forced to leave his sword in the previous Uncharted he had killed, and he was now brandishing a iron pan as a poor weapon.

Eliza was collapsed on the ground, keeping a tourniquet bound around her right knee. Her leg was gone from her upper calf down. Sivan now knew where the red blood had come from.

The yellow serpent attacked, and Nereus was just able to deflect the gaping maw of sharp black teeth with a hit from the iron pan. The creature hissed again, now angry, and snapped the pan out of the boy’s hands.

Sivan acted quickly. He drew his other sword and ran forward, slashing with both blades at the back of the beast. His strike was true, but the armored scales stopped his swords from piercing it directly. He managed to chop off some of the frilly spikes, which only served in angering the Uncharted creature further.

“My lord!” Nereus called, voice a mix of relief and dismay.

The serpent attacked Sivan, and he deflected it by crossing both blades in front of him. The yellow beast snapped at him, the foul breath of its mouth invading Sivan’s senses. He braced one arm and released the other, freeing a blade and driving it upwards through the creature’s jaw and into its brain. Holding the speared beast up by his sword, Sivan released his other sword and slashed down through the serpent’s soft underbelly, spilling open its stinking guts and black blood.

Sivan dropped the sword still embedded in the Uncharted’s head and stood over it, panting as he caught his breath. Everything was silent except for his breathing, the downpour outside, and the distant horror happening down at the docks.

Unbeknownst to Sivan, Nereus and Renalt, who had followed him up there, were both transfixed by the young lord. He was covered in black blood, chest heaving, golden eyes burning fiercely with the heat of battle. He was the most beautiful and most dangerous person either young man had seen before, and both had truly fallen in love with him then and there.

Nereus was the first to move, scrambling up from the floor to hug Sivan tightly despite the blood he was drenched in. “My lord! You came!” He sobbed pitifully, clinging to his lord with trembling hands.

Sivan sighed, finally coming down from fighting the serpent. He used his free hand to pat the boy’s head reassuringly. “Of course, I couldn’t just leave you, now could I?”

Nereus leaned into his touch, his eyes shimmering brightly with tears. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he did not have the words to voice what it was he felt.

“What the hell did that piss tart of an earl do to provoke the Uncharted like this?” Eliza grumbled from the floor.

“My gods, Mrs. Day! What happened to your leg?” Sivan cried, kneeling down next to her to inspect the wound. Her foot and calf had been torn away, her flesh in tatters around broken bone. She had been smart enough to affix a tourniquet before she bled out, but she required immediate medical attention.

“The one in the kitchen got my leg before the brat finally managed to kill it. Gods-!” She grimaced, clutching her thigh.

“Excuse me, my lord!” The tall sailor behind them piped up. “I have medical training, if you’d allow me to fetch supplies I could treat her leg.”

“Hurry up then!” Eliza snapped at him. Sivan nodded at Renalt, and he disappeared down the stairs.

“My lord, what is going on down there?” Nereus asked as Renalt attended to Eliza’s leg.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I was carted back here not long after you ran off,” he replied, joining the boy in looking out over the battle ensuing on the docks below.

Nereus turned his head down, frowning. “I am sorry for leaving you, my lord. I just wanted to be helpful.”

Sivan looked at the boy for a long moment. He wasn’t sure what drove his attendant’s devotion towards him. Sure, he had picked him up off the streets after he had saved Sivan’s life, but the fervor in which Nereus conducted his duties was almost fanatical. It could not be expected of an attendant with proper status and training, yet this vagrant boy conducted every task given to him with an unparalleled passion. Considering the situation, it

was not always a good thing.

“It is alright, but you acted too rashly,” Sivan chided. “I thought you wanted to serve me. How are you going to do that when you’re not there?”

Nereus looked up at him, eyes sparkling once again, his mouth open with a confession he didn’t know how to phrase.

Both of their attentions were drawn towards the window. A red flare shot up into the sky, reaching past the deluge to explode into a bright white star.

“That’s the signal to retreat,” Renalt gasped from behind them. He had finished dressing Eliza’s leg, and was gazing at the flare signal in the sky, his deep copper face a little ashen at the sight. “The— There’s another port on the southern side of the island. That’s where the evacuation vessels are.”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here then,” Eliza huffed, struggling to stand up with Nereus’s help.

“Indeed, let’s go,” Sivan agreed. He walked over to the Uncharted beast he had killed and took hold of his sword still embedded in it. Bracing a foot on its head, Sivan pulled out the blade, black blood trailing from the end.



The four of them made their way to the other side of the island. The wind and rain continued to batter at them, making their progress slow and difficult. Because they were closer in height to Eliza than Renalt, Sivan and Nereus braced the cook on either side to assist her walking.

The southern port was in sight. Most of the evacuation vessels had left already, but a great hulking battleship was still

docked in the bay. Its sails were being hoisted, the sailors on board readying the ship for departure.

“The last ship! It’s leaving. Everyone, hurry!” Sivan shouted at the others, and they all attempted to hasten their pace.

A great wooden bridge was built into the side of the island, giving them an easy entry point for the ship. They had just made it to the foot of the bridge when a huge explosion was heard from the north. It was such a large blast that it shook the island, forcing them all to hold on to the railing or each other to keep their balance.

“What was that?” Sivan breathed, dreading the answer.

“I think...I think they found the gunpowder stores in the academy. If that blew up...not much of it will be left,” the tall sailor said, his voice grave.

“Let’s get out of here then,” Eliza grunted, pain evident in her voice. She was in no condition to walk, but she had little choice now.

Something like an arrow shot through the water below and hit the base of the bridge. The structure shook violently, causing the four of them to stagger. Sivan looked over the railing and saw an emerald snake shooting through the water unnaturally fast. His first thought was that it was another Uncharted beast like the one he had killed earlier. But then it stopped and raised itself above the water. A dark-skinned woman with shockingly white hair emerged from the water. She was wearing armor, streamlined to let her swim with ease. And from the waist down her body turned into the winding tail of a siren.

Magic crackled around her, and she drew an arrow from the quiver strapped around her chest. Her bow was large and powerful, and as she docked the arrow it crackled with white electric magic.

None of them had time to react properly. Sivan was about to

shout at them to move when he was yanked forward by Renalt. The arrow's magic pierced the spot Sivan had been standing in, cleaving the bridge clear in two. The two halves of the bridge wobbled precariously, the wood creaking in its death throes.

Sivan and Renalt had been separated from Nereus and Eliza. "Nereus!" Sivan shouted, reaching out a hand to perhaps drag the boy across with him. But the gap between them was too wide. Sivan could not take hold of his attendant, and neither could he could jump across.

"The boat is leaving, my lord!" Renalt shouted frantically, pulling at his arm to make Sivan look at the ship.

Sivan saw it was true. The last escape vessel was now in a hurry to escape the siren that had found the southern port. The anchor was being hoisted, their chance of leaving the island narrowing.

Another arrow crackling with magic hit the bridge, further making it less stable. Eliza threw up a magic barrier, but it only managed to cover her side of the bridge. The side Sivan was on had been left exposed.

"My lord!" Nereus shouted from the other side. He looked like he wanted to jump, but Eliza stopped him by yanking his collar firmly.

Sivan wanted to do something. He felt like he had to do something. Nereus had been his one and only friend during his time on this island, and he could not just leave him here like this.

But Renalt's grip on his arm hardened. "It's too late for them! Quickly, we have to board the ship before this bridge collapses!"

"No!" Sivan shouted, resisting the sailor. Renalt had no choice but to restrain Sivan, overpowering him and dragging him away from Nereus and Eliza. "Nereus! I will return for you!" he sobbed. "Find somewhere safe to hide and wait for me! I promise I will not abandon you here!"

The tears that had been welling up in Nereus's eyes were now spilling out, but the boy nodded. "Yes, my lord!" he cried.

Sivan was dragged onto the last Grenaldian ship to leave the Northern Spear intact. He watched miserably as his beloved attendant grew smaller and smaller in the distance until he could no longer be seen.

He left that island with every intention of fulfilling that promise and returning for Nereus. But that attack on the Spear had been the beginning of the war between Grenaldia and the Uncharted, and promises were not as easy to keep when a war was raging around him.

Chapter 13

The Blackwater

Sivan woke during a storm on the Blackwater. It wasn't the rain or the crashing waves which had roused him from sleep, but the rattling windows above the daybed he had passed out in. The storm outside was not the worst Sivan had ever sailed through, but it did not help with the nausea that was washing over him as he came fully into consciousness.

The events of the night before came back to him, as did the horrible realization that the dreaded pirate lord Black was one and the same as Nereus, his once faithful attendant. The one he had no choice but to abandon on the hostile Northern Spear all those years ago.

A black siren's tail, dripping wet and snaking around the deck of the Blackwater flashed in Sivan's mind. Not only had he realized what his connection with Black really was, but the pirate had also revealed his true form to him.

Sivan's mind throbbed trying to make sense of this situation.

He had spent years with Nereus, and there had been no indication that the boy was anything other than human. Sirens were not supposed to be able to hide their true form, especially not to the point of being able to blend in with humans around the clock. Nereus had not been a siren, that much Sivan was certain of. Black had been human mere hours before as well, so how had he turned into Sivan's most feared enemy?

And how had the devoted boy Sivan once knew turn into this fell pirate who kidnapped, thieved, and murdered at will?

Part of Sivan tried to convince himself that the pirate was orchestrating it all, that he had somehow learned of Sivan's attendant from long ago and was pretending to be him. But then why had he waited for so long to tell Sivan of this? Surely he could have gotten Sivan to come with him willingly if he had just told him Nereus's name.

Sivan sat up slowly, head groggy with turmoil and sleep. He had not slept well or long, and judging by the sun obscured through the storm it was just past dawn. The room was dim, but he remembered Black tossing him in the captain's cabin and locking him in. There had been no time for questions, and Sivan doubted he would have gotten answers from the pirate judging by how angry he had been.

Out of instinct, Sivan reached for his glasses at the side of the daybed. His fingers found them, but at the same time he remembered that they had been lost when he'd gone into the dark water. They should have settled at the bottom of the ocean, but somehow they had manifested next to him during his sleep. He picked them up, and realized there was a dried piece of kelp stuck to the frames. Sivan plucked it off, frowning at the sea plant. Had one of the pirates found them floating in the sea, or had Black really gone back into the water to find them for him?

Shaking his head at the thought, Sivan put his glasses on.

There was no sign of Lissandry or the Royal Fleet outside the window. After Black had rescued him from drowning, the Blackwater had made a hasty retreat. Some of the pirates had wanted to stay and fight for their capital, but the Blackwater crew was a practical lot and they knew when they were outnumbered, even with a siren.

Sivan didn't know what happened in Lissandry after that.

The door opened and rain blew in along with the dripping silhouette of a siren. Anxiety rose at Sivan's throat. He had to remind himself that this was Black, not Jhaeros, but the sinking feeling did not abate entirely.

Black did not give Sivan a single glance as he slithered over to a stove which was glowing faintly with the traces of embers. His tail followed him, snapping the door shut with a fin once it was all inside. The pirate picked up iron tongs and placed a few logs into the stove. Then he turned to the worn armchair placed in front of the fire and collapsed in it before raising his tail and hanging it over an ottoman.

The manner in which the man obstinately ignored Sivan's presence reminded him of a child throwing a silent tantrum, and it made Sivan slightly less afraid of him.

Slowly, Sivan left the daybed to get a better look at the man. His obsidian scales glittered near the glowing fire, slick with water. "I don't understand," he began quietly, "how did you become like this?"

Black was silent for a long moment before he responded. "Do you mean how did I become like this since yesterday or since you abandoned me on the Spear?"

Sivan flinched at the stabbing question. The guilt he had been pushing down for years threatened to come up as bile in his mouth. He did not answer; he did not know how to.

Eventually Black answered for him. "You told me you were

coming back for me. I waited. I waited for a year and you never returned.”

The ship was rocking with the turbulent waves, but it was nothing compared to the terrible lurching Sivan’s heart was doing. This was too cruel. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly, but there was no response from the pirate. “There was a war—“

“Yes there was a war!” Black snapped. “And I was in the middle of it. I was on that island for a year. It was crawling with hostile Uncharted who were left there to cull the rest of the surviving humans.” His hands were digging into the armrest of the chair, straining the upholstery. But the black scales dotting his forearms and hands were beginning to fade, returning to their original human form. “I had to become one of them to survive there,” he rasped, voice calming down but still ragged with emotion.

“But, how-?” Sivan asked. He had to know what his attendant had been through. Maybe if he heard his full story the guilt would not be as great.

Black took another heavy pause before he answered.

“I had Eliza put a curse on me. When I touch water I turn into...this.” He motioned dismissively towards the winding tail drying out in front of the stove before him. “Once I dry off I’ll be human again.”

Sivan didn’t know much about magic, especially not this kind of dark magic that was forbidden in Grenaldia. He didn’t think the cook had this kind of power, but he remembered the shield she had summoned during the siren attack on the Spear. Even so, a curse that could turn someone into a siren seemed unlikely.

“Nereus-“

“Don’t call me that,” Black hissed. “Nereus died on that island. All that is left is the dreaded pirate lord Black, and he’s no different than the many Uncharted monsters you’ve slain be-

fore.”

Sivan’s heart sank; he had no words to make this better.

“Get out,” Black said, tired, but no less menacing.

Sivan blinked back tears and left the captain’s cabin quickly.

The storm had abated somewhat, the rain a mere sprinkle that slowly soaked into Sivan’s clothes as he walked out onto the deck. Crew members were adjusting the sails to accommodate for the change in wind, and Sivan suddenly felt very out of place.

“Oi! What are you doing out here?!” Vivianne snapped at him, grabbing him by the elbow.

Sivan didn’t even try to resist. He was grateful that the rain masked the tears that had stained his face, for he feared showing weakness to this woman. “Black told me to get out.”

She fixed him with an assessing glare, which made Sivan’s skin crawl due to her pitch black eyes. “That doesn’t sound right. Why would the captain let his prized plaything go?”

The comment cut right through Sivan’s distress and went for his pride. He didn’t need to be reminded that he had been seen as an object for Black to possess; he had been seen as an object by his fiancé, even by his father in some regard. All of Grenaldia saw Sivan as a hero they used to bolster their spirits, but the second he returned home a failure they all tossed him aside. Like a worn-out plaything.

Mustering speed he had not used in over a year, Sivan darted for the Uncharted woman’s sword. He unsheathed it before she even had the chance to realize what was happening.

“Do not underestimate me,” he warned, pointing the sword at her.

Vivianne tensed, stepping back and instinctively drawing a dagger. “You better watch it, high and mighty lord. You might be able to kill me if you’re lucky, but all of us?”

The metallic sounds of swords releasing from their scabbards

rang around the two of them. Sivan glanced around him, but for some reason did not feel any real fear. He was not stupid, and neither was the crew of the Blackwater. Kill Sivan, their key to translating the sirenath map, and their siren-transforming captain would surely condemn them. And Sivan knew that it was not in his best interest to start a fight he'd certainly lose.

A tense moment passed, each of them refusing to back down. It was broken when another sword intervened, tipping away Sivan's blade with a quiet clink.

"This deck was just cleaned. If either of you get blood on it I'll kill both of you," Hayes said, her tone level and unfeeling.

Vivianne gave her a baleful glare, but the Uncharted woman slipped her dagger down and turned away. Sivan dropped the sword, and the rest of the crew returned to their work on the ship.

"Do not antagonize the crew, Mr. Montgomery," Hayes said to him. "Most of them are wary of you after they witnessed what you did to the captain."

She walked away as Sivan's mind reeled at her words. "Me?! What did I do?" He followed after her, dodging working pirates and shielding his face from the rain.

"Up until yesterday the crew had only ever seen Black as a fearsome pirate who led them into victory after victory." Hayes stopped at the stairs to the bow of the ship, looking back at him with no more emotion on her face than when she had stepped between him and Vivianne. "Yet because of you they witnessed him as a weeping, broken man."

She went to the starboard side of the upper deck, fixing her cold stare on the sky. Sivan joined her, but kept his distance.

"Few on this ship know of his past. Even fewer know that you had anything to do with it. Black is more than a name. It's a character he's built to make human and Uncharted alike fear

him. And you shattered it by swimming poorly.”

So she did know that Black had been Nereus long ago. “If their faith in him is so easily rattled maybe he should find a better crew,” he said.

“What crew?” Hayes spat. “We’ve lost Lissandry. That father of yours and his royal vermin snatched it up. Any pirates who stayed were executed.”

Sivan bit his tongue. He hadn’t known that. “What about the ships who managed to escape? Or those who were sent on a supply run?”

“How did you know about that?” Hayes glared at him, boring through his bravery. “I suppose that rat Renalt told you.” She scoffed, looking out at the sea. “It doesn’t matter. Black wasn’t a pirate lord because he invoked deep loyalty. The other captains followed him because they were afraid of him. Now he’s only the lord of the Blackwater. There’s no reason for them to return.”

At a loss for words, Sivan followed Hayes’s gaze as it returned towards the dark sky. Unease was faintly visible on her profile. “Besides, it’s not the crew that’s the problem. It’s him.”

“Sorry? I thought you said this was my fault.”

Hayes glared at him, her dark eyes reading all the turmoil in Sivan’s mind. “You saw what he truly is. Sirens control the weather. At their best they can use it to clear the way for ships and call hurricanes at will to crush enemies. At their worst... they’re subject to the whims of their emotions.”

Sivan was starting to get it. The turbulent waves when Black was angry. The days of endless summer on Lissandry when he was happy.

“He has no control over it?”

“Not right now. Getting us past the fleet surrounding Lissandry helped distract him, but now that he’s alone with his thoughts I fear the worst is yet to come.”

As if on queue, a mighty crack of lightning pierced the sky above them. Everyone on the ship held their breath. One could practically feel the anxiety coming from the crew right then.

“The crew grows uneasy when they see their captain thrown into a mood. Especially when his mood is the thing that governs the seas we sail through,” Hayes said. She looked at Sivan, her gaze cutting deep. “This has happened before, but not to this degree. Someone needs to get Black out of this or we will lose many lives in this storm.”

Sivan was taken aback, and he leaned away from her, brows furrowing. “You want me to do it? Aren’t you better suited to it as his first mate?”

She rolled her eyes and leaned on the railing. “What makes you think I have any idea what’s going on in that man’s head? You’re the cause of this mood of his. You fix it. And you’ll sleep in the captain’s cabin until it’s done.”

He wanted to argue, but he couldn’t really see the point of it. Just like Black had said, this was all his fault. If he had only been able to take Nereus with him when he fled the Spear. If he had only been able to keep his promise and return for him. As the years went on, Sivan had buried his guilt with the hope of ever seeing his attendant again. But now, guilt and hope were returning, along with the horrible dread that, even though he was right in front of Sivan’s eyes, Nereus was still beyond saving.

Something small and hard fluttered in Sivan’s pocket, and he was reminded of the small vial of light he had hidden away there. His hand instinctively went to it, touching where it was concealed to feel it through the fabric of his shirt.

“What do you have there?” Hayes asked, eyes fixed on his pocket. Sivan’s hand hadn’t lingered there for more than a moment, but she had still noticed it.

“I, uh-“ he stammered. For some reason he felt like he did not

want to let anyone else see the vial. It needed to be protected, hidden close to him.

“Show me,” she demanded, her stance suddenly defensive.

Slowly, Sivan took the vial out. The light inside still glowed, small and precious in his hand. Hayes made to take it from him, but once she saw what it was a strange look crossed over her face. Concern, but for who?

“What is it?” Sivan asked, holding the vial up for them both to see better. “I saw someone cast it out to sea from Lissandry. I thought it was Black—”

“Put it away,” she hissed, looking around to make sure no one had seen it.

Sivan was startled by her reaction to it, but closed his hand around the light all the same.

“Why do you have that?” Hayes asked, her face returning to the assessing glare she liked to use on him.

“I-I found it while I was trying to escape the port. It kept hitting my boat. Is it Black’s?”

She set her jaw, angry at someone, but it wasn’t Sivan. “Not anymore. It’s yours.”

“Sorry? I don’t understand.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Her words sounded far more venomous than Sivan thought he deserved. “Just, keep it safe and hidden. Black could suffer if it fell into the wrong hands.”

“But what is it? Should I give it back to Black?”

“No, no.” Hayes pointed a finger at him. “He’s already in a foul mood because of you. Don’t sour it further by returning this to him. He sent it out into the water for a reason.”

“You’re not going to tell me what that reason is, are you?”

Hayes sighed. She looked tired, like between Black and Sivan and the rest of the crew she was the only one who was not governed by their emotions. “I am not the one who should ex-

plain it to you.”

With that, she turned on her heel and left, leaving Sivan with even more questions than he had before. He faced the water, a sudden wave of nausea hitting him once more as he was left alone to face the open sea. Sivan opened his cupped hands and watched the light inside the vial. The warmth it held grew the longer he held it, like it was happier to be pressed against his palm rather than nestled between the fabric of his pocket. It calmed him somehow, the nausea passing more quickly than it usually did.



Just as Hayes had feared, the storm took a turn for the worse. Sivan was shooed back into Black’s cabin as he kept getting in the way of the deckhands frantically trying to rework the sails as the weather changed.

It was dark inside. It had to be well into midday by now, but the sky had grown so thick with storm clouds they blotted out the sun. Sivan saw Black was still in his armchair.

Except he was no longer a siren.

Just as the pirate had said, once he dried off the long tail that had filled most of the cabin had transformed back into human legs. Black was asleep, his handsome face slack, but the dark circles under his eyes had not left him.

Sivan decided to let him sleep. As much as he understood Hayes’s demand for him to work on the captain’s mood, Sivan didn’t think it would help if he interrupted his dreams. Besides, Black looked so exhausted when he’d dragged himself inside earlier. Sivan wanted him to recover.

He took a blanket from the daybed and draped it over Black. The man stirred, and a lock of dark hair fell across his face.

Sivan couldn't help it. He brushed back the strand with a hand, his fingers lingering on the man's stubble.

"My lord..." Black mumbled.

His words were slurred with sleep, but Sivan understood them. His chest tightened, and he withdrew from the sleeping man.

No matter how many years it had been, or what dreadful deeds the pirate had done in that time, Nereus was still Sivan's attendant.

Sivan would begin making amends with him when he woke.

Chapter 14

The Blackwater

The great plans Sivan had made to reconcile with Black were dashed when he woke up to find that the captain had vacated his cabin once again.

In fact, Sivan could not find the pirate at all. He questioned the crew, but they all refused to answer him. Whether it was out of resentment for Sivan or fear of Black's wrath, he did not know.

So Sivan waited in the captain's quarters for the man to return. The Siren Seal and the work he had done on the translations were on the long wooden table. His notes were neatly stacked, untouched by Sivan who only had the capacity to spread out papers into messes and never see them organized again. He should be working on the translation, but instead he was contemplating who had organized them for him.

It was likely one of the crew members. Surely Black wouldn't keep up with his attendant's duties now that he was a pirate lord.

Sivan instead daydreamed, tracing the patterns on the table with his finger. Without the decadent spread of food on the table, he could see that it was indeed a war table. It was similar to his father's, but the map was vastly outdated. It showed a coastline from two hundred years ago, before Grenaldia had secured its territory furthest north. His finger wandered to the deep knife wound Black had carved into the table the first night he was captured. Examining further, he could see other gauges and scars from likely similar gestures of intimidation.

This table was very old and very possibly quite rare, and here Black was using it as a cutting block. Sivan huffed, ire rising from the thought.

Black had successfully avoided him for two days at this point. Sivan's initial guilt over Nereus had slowly evolved into irritation. Surely Black had some strong feelings about the matter, but he had been doing fine conversing with Sivan before his identity had been revealed!

He resolutely did not think of how this roughly translated into Sivan actually missing the man's company.

He just didn't like to be ignored.

Standing up quickly, chair skidding on the wood floor, Sivan grabbed a gray leather cloak and headed back onto the deck.

The cloak had been something he had found in Black's room. It was clearly the captain's as it was far too big for Sivan, but he needed something to shield him from the constant deluge. The water had calmed somewhat, but the rain was unending. Occasional lightning would strike far too close to be comfortable, but so far the crew had managed to steer away from the charged clouds as they appeared.

Right now the wind was especially bad. Most of the sails had been lowered to keep the masts from splintering in such tremendous force. The ship was rocking quite badly, and Sivan gripped

the cloak around him tighter to steel himself. He had been sick quite a number of times since the storm had began. Just when he had thought he was regaining his sea legs, the boat would rattle in a way that had his stomach doing backflips.

The cloak smelled like Black. Seawater and musk and sandalwood. He wondered if the man was vain enough to actually use a cologne. He likely was. Still, the scent comforted him and let him continue making his way through the deck step by step.

The crew had learned to not try and hustle him back into the cabin. Sivan had not been locked anywhere since they left Lissandry, and he intended to keep it that way. He was always faster than the pirate who tried to stop him, and just like he had with Vivianne, would often steal their swords from their scabbards. Then Hayes would begrudgingly come over to tell them to break it up.

Sivan never tried the same thing with Hayes. For some reason the woman unnerved him even though she was human. Probably. He honestly wasn't sure who was human anymore after he'd seen Black turn into a siren.

There was a thump from below deck, and Sivan went to investigate. Immediately below was the gun deck. Cannons were bolted down to keep them from rolling. Cannonballs were lined up in rows behind them. Sivan walked past barrels filled with gunpowder, and he held his breath as he did so. That smell reminded him too much of war.

He went down another floor into the crew's quarters, walking through rows and rows of swaying hammocks. A few crew members were sleeping soundly, likely exhausted from a shift of trying to keep the ship sailing through the storm.

The rest of them had to be down another floor or two, judging by the noise coming from below. Sivan could hear jeers and laughter from the Blackwater crew, broken up intermittently

with low growls and ominous thuds. Every time a particularly loud thud happened the pirates seemed to cheer even louder.

He passed stores of food and water. A handful of sheep and chickens were kept in pens to one side. Sivan went down another set of stairs.

Excess supplies were kept in the hold, the very bottom of the ship. The spoils from the smuggler's ship lay down here as well. Luxury wares and buckets of gold were neatly tucked away amongst the supplies. It was evidence of someone who had skill in finding the perfect way to slot in odd, valuable items to get the most inside the ship.

There were a handful of cells made out of iron bars. They looked uncomfortable and damp, and the cold water they were sailing through turned the bottom hold into an inhospitable ice-box. Sivan was very glad he had not been jailed down here.

One of the cell doors was open. An open padlock swung on the latch, suggesting it had been recently opened.

Beyond the cells were the pirates. They formed a circle around some spectacle Sivan could not see. It was probably some kind of fight if he remembered the Blackwater's crew chosen form of entertainment on Lissandry. He thought this was an odd place to be having a fight, but then again it was one of the only dry places in the ship.

Was it Black? Was he fighting the jelly Uncharted man again?

There was a distinct rattling growl, and Sivan knew it had not come from a human or Uncharted.

He weaved through the crowd, pushing past pirates who were trying to get a better view. A few recognized Sivan and moved out of the way, giving him odd looks of dread upon realizing who it was.

Sivan broke through the throng of jeering pirates and saw a

bloodied man facing a Belatoran crocodile. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of the thing. Jhaeros had used a menagerie of exotic and ferocious beasts in the war. The yellow snake Sivan had faced on the Spear had been the start of it. The Siren king would find a new creature and destroy its mind with whatever dark magic he possessed. When he was done with it, the animal would thirst for violence and attack anything it was set upon.

This creature was likely one of those Jhaeros had finished playing with. After the battle was over the beasts were cast aside to fend on their own in a strange land, so they more often than not ended up on some Grenaldian island or coast where they would terrorize the local population.

This crocodile was long and fat, evidently well fed in the bowels of the Blackwater. It was pure white, its ridges flecked with rust. It was plated with thick scales, hard as steel. All six of its eyes were pure black, evidence of Jhaeros's corruption. Its long snout tapered into a great horn at the tip, and it was currently opening its mouth to hiss at its opponent with large white teeth. A few of them were already stained with blood.

The man who faced the creature darted back at the warning. He was holding a sword, but it had been bent badly from fighting the crocodile. He had deep copper skin, dark gray hair, and when he turned to evade the creature's lunge, Sivan recognized him as Renalt.

He gasped, making the connection that the man who had tried to rescue him must have been captured during the attack on Lissandry. Renalt looked battered, his eyes sunken from exhaustion, his skin sallow and marred with cuts in various stages of healing. This was obviously not the first time he had fought something down here, and he was nearing the end of his stamina.

Renalt aimed for one of the Belatoran beast's many eyes with his sword, but it glanced off the creature's impenetrable scales.

The beast turned its head and took hold of the sword with its jaws. It tossed the sword out of Renalt's reach, and the crowd of pirates cheered.

Sivan was horrified by their sheer joy watching the weakened man fight an animal that knew only rage. Sure, Renalt had been exposed as a spy and had lost them their capital, but submitting him to such torture for their entertainment was cruel.

It made them no better than Jhaeros.

The man who seemed to be enjoying this display the most was sitting in a brocade upholstered chair, legs propped up on a stool. It was Black, pirate lord and master, and his emerald eyes were stained a shade of pitch in their amusement. He was grinning, sharp teeth glinting in the dim light of the hold. Sivan did not feel fear or resentment when he saw Black like this now. Knowing who he really was, Sivan was crushed by disappointment. How had the innocent boy who had attended him all those years ago turn into a man so consumed by hatred?

"Black!" Sivan snapped as he pushed through the inner circle of pirates and stepped into the ring. "Stop this now!"

The pirate captain's face went blank upon seeing him. Sivan had hoped there would have been traces of remorse or at least surprise, but the man's face was unreadable.

The other pirates booed him loudly, upset their show had been interrupted. The crocodile continued to hiss and growl, approaching Renalt inch by inch. Black's face remained blank.

"Finish it," the pirate lord said, and his crew cheered, causing the crocodile to go in for the killing blow.

Fast as he could, Sivan picked up the battered sword from the ground. He rushed between Renalt and the beast and slashed precisely, cutting across two of the six black eyes. The crocodile roared in pain, thrashing and knocking down a few observing pirates in the process.

Sivan knew he had to put this thing down quickly. The mangled sword would do nothing against the crocodile's armored body. Even if he had a sturdier and newer weapon it likely would not do much. But Sivan had read about the Belatoran crocodile before. Although its scales were thick and impenetrable, it had a rather thin skull and a small brain.

He darted toward the crocodile. Black stood up to intervene. Sivan brought the hilt of the sword down on the beast's head hard. The blow rattled the creature, and it staggered one way then another before it collapsed, unconscious but not dead.

Sivan panted, regaining his composure despite the anger and disappointment that still boiled inside him. The pirates had gone silent. No doubt they were shocked, seeing the *high and mighty lord* knock out the seemingly unstoppable beast with two hits.

He was a war hero, after all. Now they would have to respect that even if they didn't want to.

"What is wrong with you?!" Sivan shouted at Black directly now that the crocodile was on the floor. "I understand pirates don't care about common ethics, but I expected more from *you!*"

This finally broke Black's blank expression. His eyes grew wide, brows knit upwards as if he were in sudden pain.

Still, Sivan't couldn't stop himself from spitting out a final blow. "You disappoint me."

He shook his head, turned around, grabbed Renalt by the arm and marched him out of the hold.

Once they were out of sight of the crowd of pirates, Sivan relaxed his hold on the man. He feared hurting him more than he already had been. They continued to make their way up the floors of the ship, ignoring pointed stares from the crew.

"You shouldn't have done that, my lord," Renalt rasped weakly. "They'll seek retribution on you. I'm not worth—"

"Quiet," Sivan said firmly. "Black would not harm me, and

the crew knows to keep their distance because of it.”

“How do you know that?” the taller man asked.

Sivan sighed. “I’m his prize. He won’t damage me no matter what I do.”

Renalt stopped, taking Sivan’s hands in his own. “Let’s take this opportunity to escape, my lord. I saw some dinghies up top before they locked me down there.”

“Escape to where?” Sivan retorted, although he kept his expression sympathetic since the man looked so hopeful. “We would not survive this storm, and we are leagues away from the Royal Navy at this point. It’s suicide.”

“But- Isn’t it also suicide to remain on this ship full of lunatics?”

“Perhaps,” Sivan said quietly. “But I believe Black can be reasoned with when he’s not in this mood. If I can find a way to break him out of it I might be able to make a plea for your release.”

Renalt’s hands tightened around his. “And what about yours, my lord?”

“That might not be in the cards for me just yet.” Sivan smiled at him sadly. Now that he knew Black was Nereus, he felt an obligation to at least try to steer him back on the right path.

He’d abandoned Nereus once. He wasn’t about to do it again anytime soon.

They were interrupted by the crowd of pirates from the hold rushing up the stairs and through the decks. The Blackwater crew had just been cheering for Renalt’s death, but they now ignored both unattended prisoners as they dashed past them.

“What’s going on?” Sivan asked aloud.

Jules, the green jelly Uncharted man who had fearlessly dueled Black on Lissandry happened to hear him and answered, “It’s — It’s Black. He’s...turning into...I don’t know! Just stay

away from the hold!”

Sivan’s stomach turned, although it wasn’t from fear. He should be afraid, considering how distressed the pirates running out of the hold looked. He tried to take a step back down the stairs, but Renalt stopped him.

“Forgive me, my lord, but are you mad? If all these pirates would run from their own captain why would you go back down there?” Renalt pleaded with him, confusion in his amber eyes at Sivan’s reluctance to leave the dangerous pirate captain alone.

“But-“ Sivan started, but was cut off by Brand walking up the stairs and clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“He be right. Th’ captain be beyond reason now. No sense in goin’ down to face him now.” The older pirate said, his expression serious but not as terrified as the others.

“But, Brand- we have to help him,” Sivan whispered, failing to hide his concern for Black from Renalt.

Brand’s face hardened at Sivan. The man heard what Sivan had said to Black down there. He knew Sivan had started whatever was going on down there. “There be nothin’ we can do for him now. Best to wait out th’ storm somewhere safe.”

The boat rocked harshly, tossing several pirates across the floor. The wind outside picked up, and Sivan could hear the Blackwater groan and splinter at the sudden increased intensity of the storm.

Where was safe in a storm like this?

Chapter 15

The Blackwater

Sivan made sure Renalt was put in Hayes's cabin despite the man's insistence that he could help. He was barely able to stand at that point, and Sivan knew he would do best out of the way of the frantic pirates.

The storm had escalated to a hurricane while Sivan was below deck. Gale force winds tossed the Blackwater into chaotic, foamy walls of water. Hayes was at the helm, concentrating on directing the crew as she continuously adjusted the wheel.

One of the sails had not been tied up properly and was now unfurled, catching the wind. The wood of the masts creaked painfully at the force, testing the strength of the ship's core. The crew was trying to haul the sail back up. Pirates dotted the yard of the mainmast's topsail like panicked crows on a branch. Dragging the sail back into place was slow and dangerous work in this storm.

As much as it creaked and groaned, the Blackwater seemed

quite resilient to the forces of the sea. But that didn't stop water from pouring in through the waves that crashed down on them. A line of pirates were hauling water out from below with buckets. Sivan was among them, passing along heavy buckets as they came to him.

A scream up top diverted Sivan's attention to the topsail. One of the pirates had been flung off the yard and was now hanging by his foot tangled in a rope. The other pirates were too busy trying to keep the sail from falling again to save him.

Sivan broke the line of water carriers and started climbing up the mast. He didn't allow himself to think that this was a pirate who had been party to his capture; he just knew that he'd seen far too much death in his life to simply turn away someone who could be saved. The mast and ropes were slippery with rain, and the wind constantly tested his strength. But Sivan persevered and reached the man flailing in the ropes.

"Stop thrashing! I'll get you down!" he tried to shout over the roar of the wind, but it was unlikely the man heard him. Sivan pulled at the ropes around the man's foot to no avail. They had been twisted into knots during the man's attempt to break free.

He needed a knife.

"Oi!"

Sivan could barely hear someone yelling at him from directly above. It was Vivianne, and she had one of her tentacles unfurled and pulling out the knife from her belt. She still had both arms pulling up the sail along with the rest of her tentacles, which had seemed to multiply in the storm. Sivan reached out and caught the knife as it was tossed to him. He cut at the pirate's ropes, sawing away each thick bond one by one. Finally, the man was freed, and he was safely turned upright while holding onto the mast.

The pirates above him finally got the sail tied up, and all of them cheered at their success. Sivan thought it was odd that he could hear them so clearly now when it had been almost impossible to hear even himself shout.

Then, in a matter of seconds, the rain stopped and the sun sliced through the clouds. The wind died down to a mere strong breeze. Most of the crew looked confused, but a few understood what had happened.

They were in the eye of the hurricane.

The *Blackwater* drifted to the center of the circle of clear sky and dropped anchor. It was surreal to be surrounded on all sides by the wall of storm that had nearly capsized them. The crew was taking survey of the ship to assess the damage. Yet she continued to maintain her reputation as neigh indestructible as all that needed to be repaired was a torn sail and a handful of broken lines.

Below deck held another story. The stores were a mess, barrels exploded and boxes overturned. A few of the livestock had died in the turbulence, but for the most part the majority of their supplies were salvageable.

The hold was still an unknown. None of the crew would even go near the stairs which led to *Black* down below. A dark energy seemed to spill out of the staircase, suggesting the man did not want to be disturbed.

Sivan was on the top deck, leaning over the railing. He was frowning at the wall of dark clouds that was now his new jail cell. Except this time he was trapped in it with the entirety of the *Blackwater* crew.

“What did you say to him down there?” Hayes demanded as a greeting. For the first time Sivan saw her looking haggard. That was to be expected after she had somehow maintained her position at the helm for the entirety of the hurricane, but for

some reason Sivan had assumed it impossible for her to look anything other than severe.

“Nothing that he didn’t deserve,” Sivan said obstinately, turning his gaze back on the storm.

“Fuck,” she swore, pinching the bridge of her nose. Sivan could feel her glaring at him, trying to decide on how to intimidate him into doing what she wanted. Instead she leaned on the rail and slowly slid down to sit on the deck. “You’re going to fix this,” Hayes said, but there wasn’t any of the usual growl to it. Black had been sulking for days now and was likely skipping his command shifts to avoid Sivan better. How long had Hayes gone without rest?

Sivan let her rest there. The crew anxiously worked around her. They likely had never seen the first mate in this state of exhaustion.

He made his way down the decks, and the pirates down there looked at him with a range of expressions. Some knew he had caused the captain’s mood to spiral out of control. Others had witnessed him help on the top deck and save a crew member’s life. None knew what to think of him.

Sivan grabbed a lantern hanging from the wall. He would need it where he was going.

Brand was waiting at the staircase down to the hold. Perhaps he was guarding it, although it was unlikely the old pirate would do much good against a siren throwing a tantrum. Sivan marched up to him and put out his hand. “Give me your sword. I’m going down there.”

The old Grenaldian man was surprised for a moment before shaking his head at him. “It won’ do any good, I be telling’ ye.”

“I’m not going to hurt him, but I don’t know what I’ll find down there,” Sivan tried to reason.

“Ye wouldn’t be able ta hurt him if ye tried,” Brand said seri-

ously, frowning at the dark staircase. "I've only seen him be like this once. When we escaped th' prison island."

"When he was thrown into a tar pit?" Sivan instantly remembered the story of how Nereus became known as 'Black.'

Brand raised his eyebrows, surprised at Sivan's knowledge. "So he told ye. I not be sure if it started thar, but tha' was th' first time I saw him as truly dangerous. He wasn't...all thar' in th' head." He tapped his temple with a finger to make the point.

"He blacks out?" Sivan asked, surprise in his voice. The story Black had told him had sounded heroic. This sounded like something else.

"Somethin' like tha', yes. He could recognize me and Hayes, but all those other prisoners..." Brand looked at him, pity in his face. Not for Sivan. For Black. "It wasn't his fault, but it tore him up fer ages after."

Sivan faced the dark shadow that cut into the staircase below. Whatever was going on down there seemed like it was dangerous not only to himself and the crew of the Blackwater, but to Black himself as well. Sivan had already witnessed his long lost attendant turn into a devil of a pirate and then into a monster of a siren. Nothing could surprise him at this point.

Since Brand was not in support of him going down there, Sivan used the trick that had become old hat for him on the Blackwater.

He stole the pirate's sword and marched down the stairs with it into the hold.

Brand shouted at him from above, but the man did not follow after Sivan. It was cold and pitch dark down here. He had no magical talent, but even he could sense the raw power coming from somewhere deep in the hold. Sivan could not fault the crew for not wanting to venture into the ominous void he was now embraced in.

The lantern was his only reprieve from the dark, but even it seemed to wither the further he went in. It barely cast enough light for Sivan to see where he was stepping. The waves had made their way down here during the hurricane, so he was currently wading through several inches of ice cold seawater.

“Black!” Sivan called.

There was no response other than the gentle sloshing of water in the hold.

He continued his trek into the bowels of the ship. Strangely, the water seemed to get warmer and thicker. Sivan held his lantern close to the waterline to see what was happening to it, but it didn’t appear any different. Slightly murky from the debris in the hold, but still clear enough for Sivan to see his own boots.

Before bringing the lamp back up, Sivan thought he saw a very faint glow further in. He squinted, trying to get a better look at it, but it flickered back into darkness once he raised the lamp. He tried holding the light behind his back, and the glow appeared once more. It was just a sliver of green in the dark, but it was still too dim for Sivan to really understand what it was.

He approached cautiously, his nerves tensing upon remembering the faces of the pirates who had fled the hold in horror. Several more of the green slivers of light appeared, each one uniformly placed in a row.

Sivan was upon the lights now, but he still could not make heads or tails of what it was. His lamp had nearly gone out, although it still contained a fair amount of oil. The darkness had overgrown here, and it clotted the light the lamp produced until it barely shone at all. He shook the lantern, trying to persuade it to give out more light, but it only made an unpleasant rattling noise.

A splash of water was the only indication Sivan had before he was smacked on the back of his knees by something wet and

hard. He buckled under the hit, dropping both sword and lantern, and falling face first into the shallow water.

The water was even thicker over here. Unprepared for the blow, Sivan accidentally swallowed some of the strange substance that saturated the water. It was warm, strangely sweet, and it sat on his tongue even after swallowing. He struggled to stand back up, feeling for the lantern in the water as he rubbed at the slime that was covering his eyes.

Instead of the lantern, Sivan's hand met warm scales. He panicked for a moment, thinking it was the crocodile who had revived and had dealt him the blow just now. Then he opened his eyes.

The faint green glow had exploded at Sivan's touch. Bioluminescence lit up the area, allowing Sivan's eyes to view Black, fully transformed into a siren.

Except there was something wrong with him.

The green light was coming from Black himself. Scales of his siren tail lit up in brilliant greens, forming delicate, winding patterns. The slimy substance which had thickened the water seemed to be coming from him, as it covered him in a wet gleam. From that substance, thick ropes of shadows unfurled, undulating around Black. The man was unconscious, but the tentacles that formed from his shadows supported him, keeping his torso raised above the water.

Sivan suddenly felt very weak, his strength leaving him as he started to go lightheaded.

"Black..." he rasped, hoping the man would respond to him before he passed out.

The pirate himself did not stir, but the shadowy tentacles did. They shot out to wrap themselves around Sivan. One went around his waist and brought him to his knees. Two snaked around his thighs, binding them apart. The adrenaline from the

attack must have shocked the lightheadedness out of Sivan's system, for he was wide awake now. He tried to get a hold on the tentacle around his waist, but it would not budge. The thing was a dark shadow, semi transparent. Sivan could just see himself through it.

"Black! Wake up!" Sivan yelled at the unconscious man. He struggled against the bonds, but they only wrapped tighter around him.

"Come on! I know I said some harsh words to you, but this is no way to deal with your emotions."

Again, no response.

The tentacles began sliding against his body in a way that made Sivan's face burn red. Indecent thoughts flitted around his consciousness. Black's hands on him on Lissandry. The way the pirate groaned his title like a sinful prayer. The tentacles squeezed, and Sivan had to stop himself from grinding back. He shouldn't have been thinking these things now of all times. He'd been able to keep the memory of what happened that night buried amongst the chaos of the invasion and following storm, but for some reason his lust was now catching up to him with a vengeance.

Still, Sivan had years of experience in compartmentalizing memories he didn't want to deal with. So he grit his teeth and shook off the sudden surge of want.

He inched closer to Black, ignoring the shadowy tentacles to get closer to the man himself. He reached up, taking the pirate's face in his hands.

"Black! Captain! Come on, Black!" Sivan's voice was beginning to sound more frantic as he realized the man was truly unresponsive. Panic began to set over him at the thought of Black never waking up again.

"Nereus!"



Finally, there was a reaction on his face. His brows twitched before bright green eyes opened, meeting Sivan's worried frown with surprise. The man blinked a few times, seeming to have a hard time figuring out if he was awake or if this was still a dream.

"My lord...?" Black rasped, his voice ragged from whatever sleep he had fallen into.

Sivan sighed in relief and let go of his face.

"Finally, you're awake. This has gotten out of control, Black." The tentacles started to retreat back into the normal darkness around Black, letting Sivan kneel back into the water. The green

lights on his body still lingered, allowing them to see one another in the pitch black hold.

“Out of control...?” Black was watching Sivan carefully, confusion creasing his brow.

“There’s a hurricane out there. We’re in the eye of it now, but we’re trapped here until you get rid of that storm.”

The surprise that had crossed over Black’s face when he saw Sivan dissipated, and it was replaced by a sullen frown.

“I can’t control it.”

Sivan resisted the urge to shake him and tried talking some sense into the pirate lord who was starting to resemble a pouting child. “Sure you can. You’re the one who brought this upon us, aren’t you? Hayes said your emotions make this storm worse. Just control your emotions, and the storm will settle.”

Black’s eyes darkened, the clear green turning back into murky pools. He turned away from Sivan, rolling onto his side. “I told you I can’t control it.” The dark tentacles began to emerge from his shadows once more. They wrapped around Black’s torso, folding him into darkness. “I’m a failure. Everything I touch goes wrong.”

“You’re not —!” Sivan reached out to touch him, but stopped, remembering how the tentacles had held him hostage moments before. Black was disappearing into the dark, the green lights on his tail that illuminated the hold going out one by one.

“You said it yourself. I’m a disappointment,” the pirate continued. “It’s why you left me on that island.”

The comment stung, more than Sivan would have thought. “That’s not true,” he whispered.

“Yes it is!” Black said indignantly. “You hate me. I saw it on your face when you saw me as a siren for the first time. I’ve turned into the monsters you’ve fought so many of.”

Sivan didn’t know what to say. None of this was true, but

convincing Black of it when he was like this was impossible.

“I had to become this monster,” a weak voice came from the dark. Sivan only knew it was still Black by the timbre and location. “I had to become a pirate, a criminal, this wicked man. I had to.”

“Why?” Sivan asked. It was all he could do.

“So I could get off that island. So I could come back to you.”

Sivan’s heart clenched. He could not imagine all the horror Nereus had experienced on the Spear after he had left him there. His attendant had turned to curses and piracy as a means of escape, as a means of returning to Sivan.

But this couldn’t be the whole story. At some point Nereus had become independent enough to not just become a pirate, but become a pirate lord. One who was feared all across the Grenaldian coast. At some point there was nothing stopping Nereus from finding Sivan. At some point ‘Nereus’ was lost and ‘Black’ took over.

Yet here he was, throwing a tantrum in the bowels of a ship because Sivan had yelled at him.

Nereus was still in there, and Sivan knew what to say to him.

“I see. I understand now why it took you so long to return to me.”

There was no response from the shadows, but Sivan knew Black was listening.

“The dreaded pirate lord Black, the demon captain of the Blackwater, has been a tale between sailors in the Royal Navy for quite some time. But all those stories were just that. Stories.”

The water in front of Sivan sloshed, like Black’s tail had twitched.

“In reality there is no pirate lord. There is no criminal. There is no wicked man.” Sivan’s words were firm, his tone turning harsh.

Tentacles unfurled and Black's baleful face glared back at him.

"There is only a child. Throwing a tantrum!" Sivan shouted, sitting up on his knees.

In a flash Black emerged from the dark, shadowy tentacles falling behind him. He rose to meet Sivan, his glare intensifying into a snarl.

Sivan held his ground. A small part of him wanted to flinch away from the display of intimidation, but he knew doing so would doom Nereus to forever live in the dark.

"Of course I am disappointed in you! And it's not because you're a pirate or even a siren!"

Black's eyes bore down on him, watching Sivan's every move.

"It's what you did with that power. You could have returned to me years ago, and I would have accepted you with open arms. But you chose to stay in the dark and instill fear from there."

Sivan rose a hand slowly and touched the man's face gently.

"But it doesn't mean you're incapable of redemption," Sivan said with a smile. "Making mistakes is easy. Learning from them is what makes a person stronger."

Black's face went slack, the anger melting into something confused and a little hopeful.

"I believe in you now just as much as when you first became my attendant."

The tentacles retracted, disappearing into the darkness. Black's eyes cleared once again, the dark shadows dispersing to reveal the clear viridescent shade from his youth.

Sivan wiped away a droplet of water that had dripped onto Black's cheek from his damp hair. "I tried to return to the Spear. More than once. It was in the heart of the Uncharted invasion, but I still found sailors who were insane enough to follow me into it. Every attempt was a failure, and for that I am sorry."

Those clear green eyes began to water, tears forming on thick, dark lashes. Black swayed, like he was going to crumple under Sivan's touch. Sivan brought his other hand up and held his face even more firmly.

"There is no excuse that will forgive me for breaking that promise, but I hope you will do so anyways."

Black surged forward, hugging Sivan tightly. He sobbed into his chest, his large arms shaking as they encircled his lord who had finally come to save him from the dark.

"My lord, my lord..." the pirate cried, his voice broken and tender.

Sivan hugged him back, kissing the top of his head. He stroked Black's hair soothingly, holding him steady through the sobs. His own tears came, but they were not as desperate as the pirate's. The relief he felt at having Black conscious and willing to speak to him again was enough to temper the guilt.

"I promise I will redeem myself to you, my lord," Black whispered into his shirt. "I'll become worthy of your approval once more."

"Okay, okay, there will be plenty of time for that. I'm not going anywhere," he patted the man's head. It still felt ridiculous with Black being a full grown man and not the child Sivan had once known, but the pirate smiled at him like he had never known joy, and Sivan felt that made it worth it.

Black hugged him once more, his large hands spreading across Sivan's back affectionately. Sivan shivered, the touch reminding him how he had been at the mercy of the man's shadowy tentacles not long ago.

"Are you cold, my lord?" Black asked earnestly, looking up at him with clear green eyes.

Sivan coughed, looking away from him although there was only darkness to see. "Yes, well, it's rather chilly for me down

here. Let's return to the deck, shall we?"

Sivan led the way, although he couldn't see much of where he was going. The bioluminescence from Black's tail was obscured by water as he followed behind him now, but Sivan could not let himself be led because he would be tempted to stare at the enormity of the man's wide back. The pirate's body lit a fire in Sivan he could not control, and it did not pair well with his unending shame at lusting over his once innocent attendant.

"Yer alive—oh!" Brand greeted them when they exited the hold.

Sivan held his head high and resolutely did not look at any of the other pirates on the ship. He did not want to know what they thought of their dreaded pirate captain now following behind Sivan like a happy puppy.

If he had looked, he would have seen them unable to decide if they should be more shocked at the cheerful state of their captain or at the man who went into the dark with nothing but a sword and a lantern and returned with an obedient pirate lord. No one dared to stop them, and no one dared to say a word.

When they made it to the upper deck, Sivan finally let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. The hurricane had begun to break up, dark clouds dispersing under the rays of radiant sunshine. Black snaked around him, his tail curling around Sivan as he took his place next to him.

He was smiling, and Sivan wasn't sure if the sun or the man's smile was more brilliant.

Chapter 16

The Blackwater

They had a string of exceedingly nice days. The fair weather even went so far as to break up a storm as it approached on the horizon.

The crew of the Blackwater were bewildered to say the least. They had consigned themselves to only seeing the sun when their captain was too drunk to be anything other than happy. Many of them had not seen the sun for more than a few hours in a very long time.

There were whispers among the crew that Sivan was really a very powerful witch who had cast a spell on Black while they were in the hold. It was of course unfounded and ridiculous, but nonetheless everyone except for Hayes and Black seemed to be a little suspicious of Sivan now. Whoever could walk into that darkness with nothing but an unimpressive sword and a lantern and tame their unmovable captain surely had to possess dark powers.

Sivan couldn't stand overhearing their whispers. As it turned out, pirates were horrible gossips and even worse at doing it quietly. He would have been content to stay within the captain's cabin if it were not for the captain himself.

"What would you like to wear tomorrow, my lord?" Black asked pleasantly, laying out some outfits onto the long wooden table.

Sivan hummed, keeping his nose to his translation notes to show that he wasn't interested. The sun was growing low on the horizon, lighting the cabin with a warm glow. Black's cabin had always been rather tidy, but after coming out of the hold it had reached a spartan level of cleanliness. Between the glow of the sunset, the opulence of Black's furniture, and the tidy presentation, Sivan honestly would have guessed that he was in some wealthy lord's manor and not aboard the most feared pirate ship along the Grenaldian coast.

His disinterest was not taken seriously by Black, and Sivan found his mess of notes being fastidiously organized into neat stacks by the pirate. "Please look at them, my lord," Black requested, plucking the page Sivan was reading out of his hand.

Given no choice, Sivan stood up and circled the table, looking at the outfits.

"These are too small," he determined.

"Forgive me for disagreeing my lord, but they are not," Black retorted politely.

Sivan looked at the garments again. They were all finely tailored, the pleats and seams done with an expert hand. They all held some shade of gold or silver with an occasional splash of embroidered blues or greens. Sivan reasoned he could maybe squeeze into the vest and blouses if he wanted to be uncomfortable, but there was no denying that the pants were too small.

"Hold on..." Sivan looked closer at the vests. They were all

of Grenaldian make, and the style of the collar indicated that these were made roughly a decade earlier. It had been such a long time it had taken Sivan a moment to recognize the clothes as his own. “These are mine! From—from the Spear!”

Black smiled at him, seemingly happy that Sivan finally noticed. “Yes, they are. I managed to save some of your wardrobe before we left the island.”

Sivan pinched the bridge of his nose, his head throbbing. He thought he would be able to understand Black better after their reconciliation in the hold. Yet for some reason the man was reverting back to his attendant days, serving Sivan dutifully despite his many protests. Then there were instances like this, where Black did something so deeply sentimental it bordered on obsession.

“Do you not like them anymore?” Black’s voice went soft, his clear green eyes marked with worry.

“It’s not that!” Sivan scrambled to save the situation. He found that he had to be exceedingly careful with his words or the man would twist them into new ways for Sivan to be disappointed in him. After escaping the hurricane Sivan wanted to keep Black happy long enough for them to at least make land somewhere. “It’s just. These are from ten years ago, Black. They won’t fit me.”

“Not to worry, my lord. I had a tailor-witch enchant them to accommodate whoever wears them.” Black brightened, worry vanishing instantly. He suspected that the man was manipulating Sivan’s newfound sympathy for him in order to get his way.

Sivan relented and picked out one with green floral embroidery on the collar of the vest. Black put the other outfits away neatly, leaving the chosen one out on the table. As the pirate prepared a hot iron for his clothes, Sivan found his way back to the chair he’d been sitting in and slumped down in it. He was

growing truly wearisome of this play they were enacting. Ever since they returned from the hold Black had insisted on preparing Sivan's clothes, his meals, his every possible daily need. Sivan had accepted such things from his attendant in the past because that was what was expected of a lord, but he hadn't taken another attendant since the war started. Grenaldia was a different country now, and Sivan was a different man.

And Black was supposed to be a dreaded pirate lord, feared by all who crossed his path. Yet here he was, ironing Sivan's clothes.

It felt more than a little foolish now.

"You know," Sivan started, watching the audacity of the twin barracuda tattooed arms delicately pressing creases out of a blouse, "this isn't what I meant by 'redemption.'"

Black did not look up at him, but Sivan didn't miss his grin. "I know."

Sivan sighed, losing the battle over this. Maybe Black needed to be his pretend attendant once again, to get it out of his system. He didn't miss how happy it had made the man over the last few days, so Sivan didn't have the heart to argue it with any force.

There was a firm knock on the door and Hayes walked in without waiting for a response. She took in the sight of a cursed pirate lord ironing clothes, and her already hard expression soured more. She shot a glare at Sivan, as if she thought he was forcing the captain into this domestic role.

"I'm taking over the watch for the night. Is there anything to report?" Hayes asked Black.

"Not that I'm aware of," Black hummed. "Vivianne has been giving me hourly reports."

In truth, the Uncharted woman had only disturbed them once that day. It was not uncommon for the captain or Hayes to let another crew member oversee things for awhile, but Black

had been making it a habit over the last few days. He preferred to spend his time obsessing over Sivan's needs now that he had been given permission to do so again.

As much as it was overwhelming to Sivan, it clearly irritated Hayes to no end. Sivan had unintentionally turned their legendary demon of a pirate captain into a housewife.

"Come with me, we need to talk," she said to Black, her voice low.

Black set the iron aside and looked up at her, eyes darkening. "Whatever you have to say to me you can say to me in here."

Sivan was about to offer to leave the room, but Hayes didn't give him the chance.

"Fine!" Hayes stomped a boot on the floor, grinding it into the wood. "Have you even set foot out there today?"

Black's face remained hard, no part of his expression giving her an answer. But Sivan knew he hadn't.

"The crew needs to see you, Black. After that hurricane of yours most of them are starting to question your competence. Now you've locked yourself away to what? Iron clothes? Do you want your crew to mutiny against you?" she spat at him.

"I'd like to see them try," Black glowered.

Hayes rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, you'd win in a fight against any one of them, but these are pirates. The second they think you are not serving their best interests they will cast you out."

A thick silence fell over the room. Sivan felt incredibly awkward being a silent participant in this conversation, but he really didn't know enough about pirate politics to say anything. Even if he did, he was indirectly the cause of this conflict.

"I'll take the night shift," Black said. The reality of the situation finally seemed to sink in for Black.

"Good," Hayes returned sharply, satisfied at the gesture but still irritated.

Black slipped on his overcoat, but turned to Sivan before he left. He bowed, sweeping up one of Sivan's hands in his own.

"Forgive me, my lord. I must attend to this tonight instead," the pirate said to him. His voice was low, apologetic, but the way he said it almost made it sound like he was breaking a far more scandalous promise than simply not cleaning up after Sivan. That paired with the man's large hand in his own and his exceedingly handsome face made Sivan's heart race.

"It's fine," Sivan said, his voice much smaller than he had intended it to be. "You don't have to do any of this for me anyways," he said a little more firmly.

Black grinned at him, one part wicked, one part affectionate. "I know, my lord."

The captain left the room, leaving Sivan trying to suppress a flush under Hayes's scrutiny.

After the door had shut behind Black, Sivan dropped his head to the table, letting out a large exhale. "I swear I'm not making him do any of this," he groaned into his hands.

Hayes growled quietly. "I am aware. But you're not stopping him either."

Sivan dragged his face up, looking at her miserably. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Beats me," she shrugged. "How's the translation coming?"

Sivan brightened a little at being able to share his progress. "Well, actually! It's a complicated language, but I should be able to fully translate that map soon."

"That's good." Hayes nodded, but seemed uninterested in hearing further. Her mind still seemed preoccupied with the captain's faltering position with his crew.

"What..." Sivan started, unsure of how to word his question. "What happens if the crew thinks Black isn't serving their best interests?"

Her dark gaze hardened. “The crew will call for a vote. If he loses they will give him the option of accepting it and remaining on the Blackwater as part of the crew. Or, more likely...they will restrain him and drop him off at the nearest deserted island.”

Sivan frowned. There wasn't really a concern of Black being stranded on an island now that he could turn into a siren. Although, the loss of the Blackwater would be a mighty blow to the man who was far more fragile than he projected to most people.

Sivan suspected Black would not accept the vote peacefully if it came down to it.

“If you want to help with his image, come with me to the mess deck,” Hayes said.

“Why would that help?” Sivan asked.

“Right now they're afraid of you. I hear whispers among them about you casting a mind control spell on the captain.”

Sivan scrunched up his face. “That's ridiculous. I've don't have any magical talent whatsoever.”

“I know, but they don't. Especially since you haven't left this room much at all.”

“Well, so far I haven't been given the opportunity,” Sivan returned.

Hayes motioned towards the unlocked door. “I'm giving it to you now.”

The two of them left the cabin trying to be inconspicuous, but Sivan's proper noble attire and Hayes's cloud of severity did not go unnoticed by the crew. They were also not unnoticed by Black, who was at the helm, his hand on the wheel twitching as if he wanted to stop them.

Hayes ignored him and shuffled Sivan off to the floor below.

Obsidian Uncharted eyes and varying colors of human eyes stared at them as they walked through the dining hall. The day

shift had just started eating dinner, and they were clustered in groups around wooden tables. They watched Sivan openly, a few hostile, a few nervous. Some of the pirates were curious, wondering why the captain's pet and/or master was stooping low enough to eat with them.

In truth, Sivan had already eaten. This was a fact Hayes seemed to know already, and she went over to a barrel of lager and poured both of them a pint.

Sivan drank it, trying not to grimace at the taste. He had never enjoyed lager. His noble upbringing taught him to have a palette for aged wines and fine liquors distilled many times over. Still, the stares from the crew made him uncomfortable, so he drank it down dutifully.

Hayes brought him over to an empty table and took a seat next to him. "Look at them all. Quivering like mice."

Sivan glanced over the grizzled pirates decorated in varying shades of grey clothes and scars. "I think your judgement of the crew is a little off."

Hayes grunted dismissively and took another drink of her lager. The woman was odd. This was the first time Sivan had seen her actually sit down, and she seemed like it was a relatively uncomfortable task for her to do. Her tense nature was only outmatched by the severity of her presence. Hayes could easily have captained her own ship and had the crew operating at peak efficiency on intimidation alone. Yet she chose to follow Black for whatever reason. No doubt Black had his own qualities when he wasn't distracted by his own emotions, but Sivan wondered where that loyalty came from.

"You've known Black for quite a long time, haven't you? He said you escaped the prison with him," Sivan tried to say casually, the buzz from the potent lager making him talkative.

"He told you about that?" Hayes looked a little surprised,

just as Brand had when he had mentioned the prison. “Yes, something like that. We’ve been sailing together ever since.”

“I see.” Sivan felt a tiny pang of regret. He’d missed watching Nereus mature into the man he was today. Hayes had seen it, Brand had seen it, and likely some of the other crew had seen it as well. Instead, Sivan had left him in enemy territory to fend for himself.

“He’s told me about you. Of course he has, he won’t shut up about you when he’s drunk,” Hayes grumbled. Sivan’s ears flushed, but she continued. “I thought you had been close. I have to say I’m surprised it took you so long to recognize him.”

“Ah...yes, well, I feel rather foolish now,” Sivan said quietly. “He’s quite different now. Very different.”

“Piracy will do that do a man,” Hayes said glibly.

Sivan ignored her tone and continued, “Right. And his eyes are darker. And it’s more than just the color. Is that part of the curse as well?”

“The curse?” she asked, frown deepening.

“Um, the curse that turns him into a siren? Does he have more than one curse on him?” Sivan asked, confused, since she didn’t immediately know what he was referencing.

“Ah...that curse,” Hayes said into her lager before taking a swig. “He’s certainly under one or two spells of his own designs.”

Sivan couldn’t quite parse what that meant, and the woman really didn’t look like she was in the mood to clarify herself.

“My lord,” a voice with a heavy Vheltan accent interrupted them. Sivan looked up and saw a rather pretty woman standing before him, holding an envelope. Her face was soft and open, her skin milky white, her hair fair as a spring day. The woman looked determined, gripping the piece of paper while staring at Sivan fiercely. “I am told you can read Oltinish.”

“I can,” Sivan confirmed. He turned to face her, and realized

she had captured the attention of most of the pirates there. The woman was a little too clean and slight to have been with the crew for long, and Sivan wondered where she came from.

“Can you please translate the letter for me?” She offered the letter out to Sivan, although her grip on it was so tight he wasn’t sure if she’d let go of it.

“What’s your name?” Sivan asked. He’d of course translate this letter for her if it were a personal matter, but he had been allegedly kidnapped for a translation. At this point Sivan felt like he deserved to at least know what he was getting into.

“Marquis,” she answered. “I worked on the smuggler’s ship until your captain liberated us.”

“Liberated?” From what? Sivan had thought the pirates had executed everyone on board. He was not aware that anyone from the ship had survived, yet alone done better for it.

“In a sense,” Marquis continued. “A group of us had been tricked into working for the master of the smuggler’s ship. Our contract was to end when they made port, but they made a point to never return to shore. We were in effect prisoners.”

“That’s quite awful,” Sivan sympathized.

“Captain Black gave us a choice when he boarded the ship: join the fight against the smugglers or be killed along with them. So we joined.”

Of course they had. Could that have really been called a choice?

“He’s promised to drop us off the next time we returned to land. And with enough fare to wherever home is,” she said quietly, a little disbelief on her own face at the idea of it.

“I see,” Sivan responded, just as quiet. So Black hadn’t just blindly killed everyone on the island. His methods were still far from being admirable, but at least he wasn’t as far gone as Sivan had initially feared.

“This letter is from my husband. He...he’s from Oltin, but he can’t write the common tongue. Nor can I read his native tongue.”

“I see,” he replied again. “Hand it over to me. I will translate it for you.”

Her face instantly illuminated with hope, and she carefully placed the letter in his hands. The envelope looked worn, as if she had opened and closed it many times. Indeed, when Sivan took out the paper inside he could tell that the creases had been worked often with worry. The woman had clearly poured over the letter despite not being able to understand what it said.

“My dearest Marquis,” Sivan started, reading the rather sloppy Oltinish handwriting. “I apologize for not writing you in the common tongue, but I did not have any time to find a translator before the smuggler left. He tells me of the master on the ship and how he is holding you there. I will do my very best to save you, but I know how stubborn and resourceful you are. If you can escape before I make my way to you, know that I will wait for you on the first of every month in the tavern in Varis where we met. With all my love, Yorick.”

Marquis had tears in her eyes, and she was clutching at her blouse as if it could contain her heart. “Thank you,” she said tearfully, taking the letter back from Sivan. She returned to a table of men and women who were also too clean to be part of the Blackwater crew. The pirates returned to their meals. Some of them still watched Sivan suspiciously, but there were far fewer eyes on him than before.

“Very nice,” Hayes murmured after the din of the mess deck returned.

“What exactly is so nice?” Sivan asked, frowning at her.

“I brought you down here so you could indoctrinate good will towards Black. What you just did was a small step towards that.”

Sivan's frown deepened. "I only helped her because she asked."

Hayes shrugged and knocked back the rest of her lager.

Chapter 17

The Blackwater

Black did not return to the cabin until morning. Sivan looked up from the table to find the man carrying yet another silver platter. It presumably contained his breakfast, given the eager grin the pirate was giving him.

“Please do not tell me you made me breakfast after spending the entire night out there,” Sivan chided.

Black’s smile only grew a fraction wider. “Then I will not tell you that, my lord.”

Sivan sighed and set his pen down. Nereus had been a good attendant long ago. Hardworking, took instruction well, eager to please. But Black took it to an extreme, sacrificing both his health and status among his own crew in order to care for Sivan.

“This has to stop.” Sivan tried to start the topic with a gentle tone, but Black ignored him as he continued to set up his breakfast. He swore the man had extremely selective hearing. “Black, please just —”

“Please tell me what you think of your breakfast, my lord,” Black interrupted him with.

Sivan, ever weak to the delicious smell of the man’s cooking, looked at the breakfast. The spread had at least been scaled back this morning. Sivan rarely finished what he was served, and Black was finally beginning to modify the quantities in response. The main dish today was a peppercorn halibut, decorated in lemon wedges and sage. Sivan couldn’t even imagine what kind of sorcery was happening in the kitchen to allow Black access to fresh herbs while out at sea.

He took one look at the pirate’s expectant face and sighed again. Sivan knew that there was no moving the man after he had served him his meal. He was going to have to eat it before Black would even consider discussing something serious.

Sivan took a fork and dug in. It was delicious, as always. It tasted like the most perfect memories he had. The long, golden days of the *Spear* where he had few worries and much to keep himself busy with. There was no war, no fiancé, no haunting nightmares. Just Nereus and him, spending every day together.

Sivan set his fork down, suddenly too emotional to eat another bite.

“Is there something wrong with it, my lord?” Black asked, sitting down next to him at the table.

“No, no.” Sivan looked at the fish. Few Grenaldian chefs cooked like this. “I should have known it was you from the first meal you made me.”

Black was silent for a moment before he responded. “Well, I do look quite different. It is understandable you would not recognize me right away.”

He smiled, to try to put Sivan at ease. It was a brilliant smile, and despite the sharp teeth and the tattoos, the man still bore a resemblance to the youth Sivan had once known. Had Nereus

always been this beautiful? Sivan had always remembered him as a good-looking boy, but he never really paid much attention to it. Now, being near Black was like being near the sun. Too brilliant to look at directly, but you could not help but be drawn to his heat.

Sivan's heart skipped a beat, and he realized he was staring. "A-anyways, for the last time, you really don't have to do any of this for me. You have a ship to captain. You're no longer my attendant."

"That's not entirely true," Black chuckled. "You never officially dismissed me."

Sivan's mouth pursed, trying to find an answer, but he realized he couldn't find one. "I guess that's true," he allowed. He fiddled with his sleeve, looking for something to distract him from the beautiful man seated next to him. "Although, I have to say you've been a rather poorly behaved attendant in recent weeks."

Black took his right arm, the one he was fiddling with. Sivan's heart jumped, but he made himself calm down when he realized the man was examining his scar. "I am sorry for this," he said, tracing the line of the black handprint on his copper skin.

"Oh," Sivan breathed. "It's quite alright. It hides the scar."

"It's not alright." Black looked up at him, his light green eyes intense. "You saw how I'm not in control of my powers when I let my emotions get the better of me. Seeing you after so long... rattled me. But it was not an excuse for me to mark you like this."

"Mark?" Sivan couldn't understand any of this. Rattled? Was his anger so bad at the time?

"It's something sirens can do," Black explained. "It leaves an imprint on the person. So the one who marked them will always know where they are."

“Oh,” he breathed again. Black was tracing the outline of the handprint, and it was sending Sivan’s senses into a frenzy. He was reminded of the tavern in Lissandry and of the tentacles in the hold any time the man touched him. Black did not let on that he remembered either of these, and he continued to touch Sivan like it did not hold any meaning.

It was driving him mad.

“Like I said, it’s quite alright,” Sivan muttered and pulled his arm back.

“Of course, my lord,” Black said, his voice low.

Sivan couldn’t take the title any longer. It sounded strange coming out of the Blackwater captain’s mouth, and for some reason made Sivan feel a burning sense of shame. “You really shouldn’t call me that anymore,” he mumbled.

“Call you what, my lord?” the pirate asked innocently.

“That.” Sivan swallowed. “‘My lord.’ Such formalities don’t befit a pirate lord.”

Black chuckled, and the sound danced across Sivan’s skin. “Oh, we are both lords now, aren’t we? Then, what do lords call each other?”

The pirate looked at him with a grin that was borderline salacious. The man had to be doing this on purpose. Sivan’s breath caught in his throat, and it made his next words come out small. “Just—Just names are fine.”

Black’s grin went wider, sharp teeth glinting in the morning sun. “Sivan,” he tested, his voice almost a whisper.

A shiver wrapped itself around Sivan’s spine at the sound of his name on the man’s lips. It somehow sounded more profane than his title. He instantly regretted his choice to berate the man for this. Hearing his name said through the filter of an utterly bewitching pirate captain was far worse.

“A-anyways, I’ve been meaning to ask-“ Sivan cleared his

throat, forcing himself to look away from the pirate. “Whatever happened to Eliza? Did she make it off the Spear as well?”

Black’s face soured at the mention of the woman. “She did. She’s out there somewhere. I try not to think about her.”

“Why not?” Sivan found that strange. As hard as the chef had been on Nereus as a boy, Sivan did not doubt that he viewed her as a mother figure.

“We didn’t part on good terms,” Black muttered, his face darkening.

And that was it. Black turned away from him, closing off the line of questioning.

Sivan suddenly realized that even though he thought he had known Nereus well in the past, he knew little about what happened to him after. Glimpses were being fed to him through a sieve. The man was trying to only show him the parts he wanted Sivan to see, but he was still getting hints of the hard life he’d led after leaving the Spear. It pained him that the man no longer trusted him enough to divulge everything to him. But if Black wouldn’t open up to Sivan, he would simply have to connect the dots from what he was given.



Sivan finished his breakfast, and Black cleared away the table so Sivan could clutter it once more with translation notes.

“I think I’ve done it,” Sivan breathed, looking over the papers spread out before him.

“Really?” Black rushed to his side, peering over him to see for himself. Sivan could instantly feel the heat from the man, even at this respectable distance.

“It’s not perfect—gods, this language is complicated—but I should be able to get the gist of whatever your map says.”

Sivan looked up and saw Black smiling at him, his eyes bright and filled with delight. Before Sivan’s heart could even respond he was pulled out from his chair and swung around, one of Black’s hands gripping his own, the other at his back.

“I knew you could do it!” The pirate praised.

Black’s hand was warm and pleasant on his back, so Sivan could barely remember what they were celebrating. He could only smile along, feeling a little like he was being swept up in the moment.

“Did you really?” Sivan asked, his voice a little high at being swung around the cabin.

“Of course!” Black turned the clumsy dance into a simple waltz, leading Sivan with his steps. “As skilled as you are with a sword, I’ve always admired your talent with language just as much.”

Sivan couldn’t stop the laugh that bubbled out of him. “So that’s why you kidnapped me, hm?”

The dancing stopped suddenly, but Black did not let go of him. In fact he brought Sivan closer, the hand on his back giving him a warm push towards the pirate’s chest.

“I stole you away from Varis because I wanted to see you, after so long,” Black said quietly.

Sivan’s heart stuttered. Surely the man had to be playing with him still. Renalt had suggested Black had an ulterior motive for kidnapping him specifically. Now that he knew who the pirate lord really was, he could not deny that fact. But was it really for such a superficial reason as Black no longer being able to stand how much he missed him?

“I-If you wanted to see me,” Sivan breathed, “you could have done it in a more proper way.”



Black's hand on his back grew warmer, and he leaned in a fraction more. "There's nothing proper about my desire to see you, my lord."

Sivan's heart was working at fevered pitch. He couldn't stop himself from parting his lips, was barely able to stop himself from swaying forward. Black's hand on his back twitched at the sight of Sivan's lips, open and panting. His breath was coming in shallow puffs. His knees grew weak.

Then the burning on his arm began.

The pain was far worse than anything he'd experienced in his nightmares. Sivan buckled under the might of it, crumpling to the floor. Black came down with him, concern clear on his face, but it did nothing to stop the screams coming from Sivan now.

Flashes of visions appeared behind Sivan's eyes. Never before had he been plagued with nightmares during the day. Yet these images were too real for them to be dreams. He saw a castle on the ocean floor. White spires of glass shooting up from a trench made of pitch. It was surrounded by Uncharted. Inside the castle was a room, an atrium for any commoner, but a mere study for royalty. The room housed a perfect sphere of obsidian. The orb hummed with magic, an ominous red glow radiating from it. A man held a hand to the obsidian ball, a wild grin on his face, illuminated by red sparks of magic. But it was not a man.


It was a siren.

It was Jhaeros.

In reality, Sivan's body convulsed. "My lord! Sivan!" Black tried to bring Sivan back to his senses, but at the moment the man was utterly lost to his voice. His bones felt like they were being splintered. The scar on his arm began to glow an inhuman red, so bright it appeared to be molten hot.

Seeing the scar burn so brightly, Black realized what was happening. He quickly placed his own hand over the scar, over the black handprint he had burned into Sivan's skin. Green sparks of magic poured into the mark, Black concentrating all his energy on bringing Sivan out of this alive.

Slowly, the fear and the pain faded away. Sivan stopped convulsing in Black's arms, his body going limp.



When Sivan came to, he was in Black's bed. Not in the daybed, but in the curtained off mattress that the pirate slept in. Black was once again at his side, and he instantly noticed when Sivan opened his eyes.

"My lord," he croaked. His voice was strained, as if he had been holding back tears.

"I am fine," Sivan lied. His whole body felt like it had been battered. Every muscle felt worn to shreds. He was not even sure if he could walk. But it hurt him more to see those green eyes marked with worry.

"He's awake? Now are you going to explain what that was, Captain?" Vivianne's sharp voice cut in from behind him. "It's not everyday red lightning almost hits the ship."

Black's face darkened, but he did not turn around to face her. Sivan realized that they were no longer alone in the cabin. Vivianne, Hayes, and several other pirates had filled into the room while Sivan had been unconscious.

"What did you see?" Black asked him quietly, continuing to ignore the crew behind him.

Sivan hesitated. He was wary of sharing his strange nightmares with anyone, let alone most of the Blackwater crew. But Black's eyes were so full of concern, pleading with him to share. So Sivan did.

"I saw a castle, white as snow, on the ocean floor."

A few of the Uncharted pirates gasped.

“Was Jhaeros there? Did he have an obsidian ball of some kind?” Black asked.

Sivan’s eyes widened. “Yes. How did you know that?”

Black stood up suddenly, turning to Hayes. “We need to leave immediately.”

Hayes’s face had grown serious, and she nodded at Black in agreement. Sivan had no clue why his visions had brought this on.

“Hold on, hold on,” Vivianne stepped forward, holding her tentacle-wrapped arms up to keep both Black and Hayes at bay. “What’s the rush? Why did he see the Siren Castle?”

“He’s marked,” an older Uncharted woman spoke up from the crowd. She had one eye, the other gauged out with a thick scar running diagonally across her face. Her remaining eye was black as the night sky and full of fear. One of her hands looked vaguely human, but the other was a rather sharp looking claw. She raised her claw at Sivan, pointing at his arm. “That scar. I saw it glowing when we came in. King Jhaeros gave it to you, didn’t he?”

Sivan’s wide eyes gave him away.

“His screams were from Jhaeros calling to him. The king knows where we are, and he’s coming for him!”

The pirates began arguing all at once. Sivan heard motions to throw him overboard right then. They’d gladly give up the Grenaldian noble to save themselves the fate of facing the tyrant Uncharted king. A few offered to kill Sivan, hoping that ending his life was a surefire way to break the connection he had with Jhaeros.

“No one is going to touch him,” Black roared. His imposing stature cut down the rising mob, but they did not disperse. “I sealed his mark with my own just now. Jhaeros will not be able to track him anymore.”

“But he already has our location! It’s too late!” Vivianne argued. She had stubbornly not stepped back when Black had shouted at them. The defiance on her face was plain to see.

“We cannot escape Uncharted legions, Black,” Hayes confirmed.

Black was quiet for a moment, considering his options. Then he landed on a solution. “We will go to Calloway Cay.”

There was more upset from the pirates. “Are you insane? The sea witch wants us all dead. We’re better off making a run for it now,” Vivianne snapped.

“She’s the only one who can protect us from Jhaeros,” Black said decisively.

The sound of a sword being unsheathed rang out. Vivianne had the tip of her blade pointed at Black’s throat. Sivan’s heart jumped, fearing for the man. He had no sword of his own, no means of protecting himself.

“Undo your seal. We’ll leave the lord on an island for Jhaeros to find,” Vivianne ordered.

Black glared at her firmly. He did not fear the sharp sword at his neck. “I will not,” he said simply.

“You will!” Vivianne shouted, her blade trembling slightly. “I will not die for some Grenaldian noble you took a fancy to!”

“I am Captain of this ship. You will do as I say.” Black’s words were cold, his tone a threat.

Vivianne seemed to lose her temper and suddenly thrust the sword into the floor between them.

“I call for a vote!” She declared. “Get everyone up deck.”

“Fuck,” Hayes muttered, quiet enough so only Sivan heard.

Chapter 18

The Blackwater

Sivan did not know what was going on, but he knew he had to see it for himself. All the pirates had left the cabin. Black had told him to stay in bed, that this would all be over soon and they would be on their way to safety shortly.

Somehow Sivan doubted that. He had gone with Hayes the day before to try and dispel the crew's suspicions of him, but all he'd done was translate a letter. Had he really done enough to prevent a mutiny?

He gathered his strength and got out of bed. Sivan's bones still felt rattled by the horrible pain Jhaeros's call had put him through, but somehow he managed to stumble to the door. He opened it and fell to his knees when the rain and wind hit his face.

The storm had returned, although it was not as deadly as before.

"You were told to stay inside!" Hayes hissed at him. Sivan

looked up to find her guarding the door. She helped him to his feet, supporting him when he stumbled again.

“What’s happening, Hayes?” Sivan asked weakly. He now saw the deck filled with pirates. They were all watching Vivianne give an address on the forecastle, standing tall next to Black above the crowd.

“They’re electing a new captain,” Hayes spat.

Sivan’s heart sunk. If this turned out poorly, he had indirectly caused Black to lose his crew.

“Are you not tired of suffering under the whims of a siren?” Vivianne addressed the crowd with utter certainty. The pirates roared in response, but it was hard for Sivan to tell if they were all in agreement. “How many days have you even seen sunlight since you’ve boarded the Blackwater? Now we are forced to make a decision between facing Jhaeros and the sea witch? Just for the pretty little lord he’s grown used to warming his bed?”

The crowd roared again, and Sivan blushed. Was that really what they thought he and Black were doing?

“That lord is going to lead us to the greatest treasure the world has ever known,” Black interrupted her with.

Vivianne laughed loudly. “Are you speaking of the Sirenath translation? He’s already done it. I saw his notes in the cabin. We can find the treasure of Estes without him!”

The crowd cheered. Sivan’s gut churned at realizing his quick translation work had cost him this bargaining chip.

Vivianne took a step back, offering the crowd to Black with a hand. “Your turn.”

Black gave her a steely gaze and stepped forward. The crowd fell silent quickly.

“What do you think Jhaeros saw when he called out to my lord? The ocean floor? The island you want to leave him on?”

He paused, waiting for an answer that would not come. “He saw

you. The siren king knows the Blackwater has who he wants, and he will come for you. It does not matter where you leave Lord Montgomery. Jhaeros will hunt down the Blackwater and kill every last one of you just for being part of it.”

The crowd was deathly silent. Sivan could feel the fear wash over them.

“Who do you want leading you when that time comes?” He finished with.

The pirates did not cheer. Vivianne had riled them up for change, and Black had tried to instill fear.

“That fucking idiot,” Hayes hissed. “They’re already afraid. Intensifying it will only make this vote more embarrassing.”

Dread gripped Sivan as the pirates cast their votes into a tri-corn hat Brand held. If he had known it would end up like this, he would have offered to jump off the ship himself. But it was too late for such gestures.

Brand counted the votes on a table in front of Vivianne and Black. Vivianne hovered over him as he counted, but Black had noticed Sivan standing on the other side of the boat and was gazing at him intensely.

Even from afar, Black’s gaze settled him. The pirate was losing his control over his ship, but his emerald green eyes still appeared steadfast and calm.

“Forty-eight to twenty-nine. Vivianne is our new captain,” Brand said solemnly. The majority of the pirates cheered, as well as most of the minority who had cast their vote for Black in fear of being ostracized for their vote. Only Brand and Hayes appeared unhappy with the choice of new captain.

Black’s face remained unchanged. He still gazed at Sivan, as if he were an anchor in the sea of mutiny he was in.

“Alright, enough fucking around!” Vivianne shouted loudly. “Grab the lord!”

Hayes was shoved aside, and Sivan was snatched by the pirates. He did not struggle—he did not have the strength to—but the pirates handled him roughly nonetheless. He was dragged to the side of the ship and held against the railing. As soon as Sivan realized that they intended to throw him overboard he began resisting. In his state he'd sink to the bottom and drown before Jhaeros ever found him.

"Do not touch him!" Black roared, tearing through the crowd and yanking Sivan out of their hands. The pirates stepped away from him quickly when they saw Black protecting him. Black was no longer their captain, but they were still acutely aware that this man was the most dangerous thing on this ship aside from the red mark on Sivan's arm.

"Don't do anything rash, Black," Vivianne called out as she descended from the forecastle.

Sivan was too weak to do anything but lean against Black, so he could feel the tremors of anger rattling his frame. A crack of lightning opened up the sky, drawing everyone's attention upwards. Rage was setting over Black's face, and the storm that came along with that anger was rolling in fast.

"Please calm down," Sivan whispered into his ear. "I won't survive the water if there's another hurricane."

"You're not going into the water alone," he growled, low enough so only Sivan could hear.

The crowd parted as Vivianne approached. "Remove the seal on his arm so we can get rid of him."

Black did not respond. He only glowered at her.

Sivan realized he had to do something to get out of this. Black would end up doing something stupid soon, and Sivan had to try and find an alternate route to being thrown in the sea. "Give me a boat," he said.

Vivianne laughed. "Sorry, why would I do that?"

“Give me a boat, and Black will remove the seal,” Sivan offered.

Black’s arm around him tightened, but he did not say anything. Vivianne sized them both up, her black eyes discerning if they were plotting to screw her over or not.

“If you throw me over now, Jhaeros will still think I am on the Blackwater. If the seal is removed, he will know I am no longer with you.” Sivan, weak as he was, still found the resolve to put every ounce of reason he could muster into his tone.

“Deal,” she agreed, and waved a hand to get the crew to get a dinghy ready. “Remove the seal, Black. I will know if you fake it.”

Black’s eyes shifted to Hayes, who looked like she was about to jump Vivianne. He shook his head imperceptibly, and it was all the signal she needed to back off, although she did it with a fair amount of scowling.

Sivan stuck out his arm, offering the scar to Black for him to release. “It’s okay,” he tried to reassure him.

He took Sivan’s arm, but did not make any attempt to release the seal. Black’s eyes had clouded back over to the stormy dark green, but they glinted with resolve when he stared into Sivan’s eyes. His hand was tight around Sivan’s wrist, a thumb smoothing over the back of his hand.

Then, without warning, Sivan suddenly found himself scooped up in Black’s arms. The pirate had jumped onto the railing of the ship, balancing on the edge with ease.

“I wish all of you the best of luck when you face the Uncharted legion without your true captain!” He shouted before jumping backwards into the ocean.

Sivan had no choice but to wrap his arms around the man’s neck tightly, holding on for dear life as they plummeted into the water. The second they touched the water Black began trans-

forming. His grip on Sivan tightened, his body shuddering as he changed. The transformation seemed to be painful, and it took several tense moments of sinking downwards before his tail fully took shape.

Once it did, Black shot towards the surface with a mighty flick of his tail. They breeched the water and Sivan gasped for air. He wiped the water off his spectacles and observed the Blackwater sailing away.

“Why did you do that?! They were going to give me a boat!” Sivan sputtered. He tugged at a wet lock of black hair, earning a wince from the siren holding him.

“I am sorry, my lord!” Black said, sounding not at all apologetic. “They wouldn’t have done that because I was not going to remove the seal on your arm.”

Sivan relented and let go of his hair. “And why not? Jhaeros already knows where I am, doesn’t he? Why does it matter now?”

Black looked at him seriously. “The mark causes you pain. I would not allow it to make you suffer again.”

Sivan lost the will to berate him further on the matter. The pirate treated his well being like life or death, even though he had held a knife to his throat no more than a fortnight ago. Black had just lost his position as captain, and Sivan doubted he was in the best of places mentally right then. There was no point in arguing with him now.

The Blackwater slowly shrank into the horizon, leaving them behind. “They aren’t going to come after us?” Sivan asked.

“No,” Black answered. “They wanted to get rid of both of us, and I did it for them. It’s easier to evade Jhaeros if it’s just the two of us.”

“Hold on.” Sivan paused, a disturbing thought coming to mind. “Did you plot to lose that vote so they would kick us both

off the ship?"

"You give me too much credit, my lord," Black laughed. "I merely saw it coming and did not make an attempt to stop it when I realized it could work in our favor."

Black let go of Sivan's legs and supported him as they floated in the water. Sivan could see the mighty black tail swishing lazily in the water below, keeping them steadily afloat. Had the lord been thrown into the water by himself, he no doubt would be having a panic attack and sinking to the bottom as his weakened limbs failed to bring him back to the surface. Being in the open ocean had become a terrifying experience for Sivan since he fought Jhaeros, but he felt no fear as he was supported by Black.

"Would you be able to hold onto my back, my lord?" Black asked him. "I believe there is an island not too far from here I can swim us to."

Sivan tested the strength in his arms and frowned when he saw them shaking still. Holding onto Black as he had jumped into the water had stolen the strength he had been able to summon earlier. "I'm not sure," he said hesitantly, not wanting to expose how weak he still was.

"Then," Black started and took Sivan by the shoulders as he leaned back into the water. "Is this preferable, my lord?" He laid Sivan down on his chest as he floated on the surface. Sivan remained mostly above water and was secured tightly against the man who had his arms around his waist.

The lord's ears burned. Black was still wearing a tunic, but it was very wet and didn't leave much up to the imagination. Plus, being so closely nestled against him was starting to become a surefire way for Sivan's heart to go into overdrive. But he couldn't really think of another way for Black to transport him across the ocean.

"It's fine," he said quietly.

Black grinned at him, and it made Sivan want to pull on his hair again. He seemed all too happy to have wound up in this position. Then his tail snapped loudly in the water, and they started steadily speeding off in a direction.

“How do you know where the island is?” Sivan asked. He resigned himself to folding his hands on the man’s chest politely and letting his head rest against them.

“I saw it when we jumped off the ship, my lord,” Black replied. “My vision is much better underwater when I’m in this form.”

Sivan let out a hum of acknowledgement. A thousand more questions popped into his head, but he was too tired to raise them. He had been terrified of Jhaeros, but Black was a different story. After getting over the initial shock, he found that he wasn’t afraid of the cursed siren he was currently riding on. If anything, he wanted to learn more about how it all worked. He wondered if Black could breathe underwater, how fast he could swim, what the shadowy tentacles were.

Upon remembering the tentacles, Sivan’s head spun and he gritted his teeth to keep the memory of the Blackwater’s hold out of his mind.

“Is there anything wrong, my lord?” Black asked.

“No, no! I’m fine,” Sivan said hurriedly. He reminded himself that he was good at compartmentalizing, and he would find a way to do it with what happened in the hold...and in the tavern on Lissandry. Black hadn’t brought up either incident so there was a good chance he did not remember them. Sivan was too embarrassed to ever confront that fact.

“I just realized. You’ve started calling me by my title again,” Sivan said. This had just dawned on him even though Black had only called him by his name once.

The pirate laughed, causing a deep rumble to vibrate under

Sivan's hands on his chest. "Forgive me, my lord. I'm too used to it. Old habits, and all."

Sivan let it go and put his head back down. It was probably for the best. Hearing his name in those low and dangerous tones did not ease his strained heart. He might as well indulge his long lost attendant, even if he was a pirate captain without a ship.

They made it to a tiny spit of land. Black delivered Sivan to the shore, finding a rock to let him lean against. His long obsidian tail created a snaking contrast against the pure white sand of the untouched island.

"Please give me your arm, my lord," Black requested, motioning to Sivan's marked arm.

"Why?" he asked, but offered his arm anyways.

The pirate took his arm gently and placed his hand over the black handprint covering Jhaeros's scar. "The seal I put on your mark will not last forever. I will need to infuse it with power every few hours," he explained.

Sivan watched as sparks of green magic glowed against his arm where his skin met Black's hand. He was once again made aware of how the larger man's hand wrapped entirely around his forearm. It made him shiver, thinking of that contrast.

"Are you cold, my lord?" Black asked, seemingly unaware of Sivan's fluster.

"I-I'm fine," he said dismissively.

Black merely smiled at him. "Do not worry, my lord. We will not stay here long."

Sivan was surprised. "And how are we getting off this island? I don't see a way to make it out of here without running into the Uncharted legions on their way."

As if on cue, there was a great splash off in the horizon. The two on the beach watched in horror as the white crests of

waves fell away to reveal a great ivory ship. It was not like any Grenaldian or pirate ship. Not even the gaudy ships of the smugglers could compare to the monstrosity that had just rose out of the water. Spires of white coral jutted out from the ship like a broken sea urchin. Strung from them were sails of iridescent frills like that of a jellyfish, billowing strangely in the breeze, as if they were still underwater.

It was beautiful, in a sense, but it immediately struck dread into Sivan's heart. He had seen that ship once before, over a year ago.

"That's Jhaeros's ship," he breathed, his voice ragged with fear.

Black gave Sivan's arm one final squeeze before releasing him and slithering off inland. He grabbed the first stick he saw and returned to a perfectly smooth area of beach.

"We are lucky, the tide's coming in. Jhaeros won't be able to reach us before it washes away the circle," he stated as he covered the end of the stick with his hand. Green light spilled from his fingers, and when he pulled away his hand the end of the stick was burning brightly green.

"Circle?" Sivan asked, completely lost. Black made a perfect circle in the sand with his tail before tracing it with the glowing stick.

"A circle to activate the portal to Calloway Cay," Black explained. He began working quickly, drawing intricate designs and symbols Sivan only faintly recognized as dark magic.

Sivan watched, letting his fascination distract him from the approaching white ship. "Calloway Cay? But no one has been able to find the sea witch's fortress. You know where it is?"

"Of course I know where it is!" Black laughed. He finished drawing the circle with a flourish. "I helped her build it."

The lines of the circle illuminated green the moment Black

finished. The outline burned brighter and brighter until a wall of shimmering green light burst up towards the sky. It formed a pillar of semi-transparent light in front of them.

Sivan's breath was stolen away at the display of magic. He knew Black's siren curse had given him powers Nereus never had, but he had not realized that the pirate had studied the craft associated with his power. The circle had been drawn so quickly and with so much skill. Sivan wondered who taught him such things.

"Quickly, my lord! Black returned to Sivan and scooped him up like he weighed nothing. "The tide will wash this away soon."

With that, he carried Sivan into the portal.

Chapter 19

calloway cay

When they exited the pillar of light, the tiny island was nowhere to be seen. Black's portal had transported them inside the great entrance room of a castle. The walls were crafted from huge panels of frosted sea-glass, arching up to the zenith of a domed mosaic ceiling. Daylight shone in from the ceiling through the smaller tiles of sea-glass which created the mosaic. It filled the room with an unearthly green and blue glow. Sivan gasped quietly, awed by the splendor of whatever castle they were in.

"Be on guard, my lord," Black warned as he set Sivan down on the ground. "Calloway and I did not part on the best of terms, so I'm not sure if we will be entirely welcome here."

Sivan used Black's arm to steady himself, finally regaining enough of his strength to stand. "Not welcome?" he hissed. "Why didn't you tell me this before we came here?"

Black looked at him sheepishly. "I'm sorry, my lord. There wasn't time."

Sivan let it go, but he couldn't help but wonder what the nature of the pirate's relationship with the sea witch was. "How do you know the sea witch anyways?"

"I think I have you to thank for that, don't I, Lord Montgomery?" A woman's familiar voice called out to them.

The voice belonged to a busty woman who was well into middle age. She wore a finely tailored blue robe and held herself in a manner that exuded power. Her hair was a brilliant shade of red, tied up on her head in perfect coils.

Sivan's eyes widened when he recognized her.

"Eliza Day?" He croaked.

Eliza smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. "I haven't heard that name in many years. It's Calloway, now. I remarried after you left us on that fucking rock."

Looking more closely at her dress, Sivan realized one of her legs was made of enchanted crystal, just visible from the slit in her hem. "I-I'm so sorry—"

Black slid in front of him, shielding him from the woman with nothing but his bare hands. "Master! If you have any affection left for me, please hear me out."

Master...? It all clicked into place. The Montgomery's old cook had turned to dark magic and taught Black about the craft. Her face twitched at Black's defense, the sight of him stoking her anger. Her open hands crackled with purple magic, the light of it dancing off the polished floor. "How dare you call me that, you ungrateful brat." Eliza's voice was low, full of a threatening rage.

"Eliza, please, we've come here to seek refuge," Black tried to reason with her.

"You will not find it here," she spat. "You stole my ship!"

With that, Eliza hurled a flaming purple fireball at them. There was no time to dodge, Black could only block the attack with a hastily crafted shield of his own green magic. The force

of it knocked them back, Sivan colliding with Black's still damp back. Sivan tripped on the tail that had coiled itself behind him, and he fell between the siren's fins. Black looked behind him, needing to make sure Sivan was safe. While he was distracted, another purple fireball hit him square on the chest, sending him flying across the room.

"Black!" Sivan cried, fear gripping him as he watched the man hit a glass wall. The glass was thick, and it merely cracked where the large man had been thrown against it.

Eliza laughed. "He calls you by your silly little pirate name? I guess that is all you are now, Nereus. A thief!" She threw another bolt of magic at him as he crumpled to the ground. It hit him, forcing him to cough up blood. "You're just a common criminal. My map. My ship. What do you plan to steal from me next?"

Black smiled at her despite the obvious disadvantage he currently had. "The Blackwater was never yours."

This seemed to anger her further, and she began collecting magic in her hands once more. "No matter what you call her, she was always mine!"

She unleashed the attack, but Black dodged, hitting her low and knocking her to her knees. He attempted to slip away, but Eliza was relentless. Purple magic crackled and elongated, twisting until it formed a deadly looking axe. The points of the axe blade curved upward into spikes, creating a U-shape. Eliza drove the tip of the axe into the ground where Black's head was.

Sivan cried out, his heart lurching at the sight. It took a moment for him to realize she hadn't killed him. Either spike of the axe was embedded in the ground, trapping Black's neck in the U that it created. The siren's tail writhed as he struggled to free himself, his hands scratching at the axe despite its firm position.

"Give me my ship back, and I might let you live," Eliza hissed from above him.

Sivan wanted to help him. He wanted to fight back, but he had no sword. No means of saving him. Even if he had a weapon, Sivan doubted it would have done any good against the sea witch. Eliza looked furious, but her hair was just as tightly coiled as it had been when she first appeared. Not a strand was out of place. Meaning that brutal battle she just had with Black hadn't been much of an effort for her. Sivan stood no chance on his own.

"I can't-" Black rasped from underneath the axe. "The Blackwater isn't here."

"Of course it's not here. But that ship is loyal to you for some unknown reason. Call out to her and she will come."

"I can't. I...I'm no longer the captain. There was a mutiny." Black shut his eyes tightly, as if the shame of it were worse than the axe bearing down on him.

Eliza's frown deepened. She seemed to calm down to a degree. "So she abandoned you too."

"Jhaeros is hunting us. Lord Sivan bears his mark. I sealed it before coming here, but...but—" Black trailed off, losing his ability to speak as the axe cut off his windpipe.

"Please, Eliza!" Sivan pleaded. "I may have failed to save you from the Spear, but Jhaeros is the one who sent the legion in the first place. He is our mutual enemy."

An excruciating moment passed as the woman considered her options. Finally, she relented and pulled the axe out of the floor, releasing Black. He rolled over and began coughing violently, blood splattering the polished floor. Sivan rushed over to him, helping him sit upright.

"Are you okay?" Sivan whispered, his hands tight on the man's shoulders.

Black smiled at him despite the obvious pain he was in. "I will be fine, my lord, but thank you for your concern. Sirens heal

much faster than humans.”

Eliza clicked her tongue, drawing Sivan’s attention away from the pirate. “You, my lord, are the reason he’s like this.”

Sivan glared at her. “Like what?”

“He’s weak, because you always coddled him.” She walked over to the entrance to a long corridor. “I will help you, but I want both of you out of here as quickly as possible. Come with me, Nereus. One of my servants will escort Lord Montgomery to a room.”

Black raised himself with the support of Sivan. “I will not be long, my lord, I promise.”

“But—but your injuries...” Sivan was loathe to leave him like this. He had just been attacked by Eliza, and now she wanted him to go with her?

The pirate seemed to sense Sivan’s concern and stood straighter, appearing healthier than Sivan would have guessed. “I told you, sirens heal quickly. I will be good as new in a few minutes. Do not worry about Eliza. We are always like this. This was actually one of the less violent homecomings I’ve had.”

Sivan had no choice but to let him go. He watched as Black’s tail disappeared into the corridor, winding behind him into the dark.

“Please come with me, my lord,” a neutral but elegant voice called out to him. Sivan looked to its source to find a golem made out of the same sea-glass that comprised the castle. It was vaguely human; its facial features were augmented with shards of crystal glass. It wore no clothes, and its torso was seamless glass, revealing a hollow chest. It was beautiful in a way, but Sivan felt that it was a far cry from actually rivaling a true life form.

Sivan followed the golem. The rest of the castle was just as grand as the entrance room, all of it built in mosaics of sea-glass. It bore a similar strange beauty to the golem, but it also bore the

similar shortfall of missing something essential to life. The castle was cold, lacking the touches that made a place home.

The golem led Sivan to a room, depositing him inside before leaving without a word. The room looked much more livable than the rest of the desolate castle. In contrast to the empty halls Sivan had walked through, this room held a great collection of trinkets. A large bed stood against a wall, and a white porcelain tub sat behind a wooden divider. The trinkets were lined up neatly on shelves, on the windowsill, on any surface that was flat. They were meaningless baubles: hand mirrors, gold statuettes of horses, a broken conch shell. This was clearly someone's bedroom, although Sivan didn't know whose.

He went to the window and looked out. He saw the ocean, vast and wide as ever, but as Sivan looked towards the shore he realized with a gasp that the island the castle was built on was moving. The water rushed by as if they were on a ship with all sails open and a strong wind at their back. Yet the island did not disturb the water. It was hard to tell from Sivan's perspective, but it appeared that Calloway Cay actually hovered above the water as it moved.

So this was why the sea witch had never been caught by the Royal Navy or the Uncharted legion. Her power was so great that she could enchant her castle like this, making her impossible to locate and even more impossible to stop.

Sivan drew the curtains, closing out the setting sun. He hadn't realized so much time had passed since they escaped the Blackwater, but taking the portal to get here must have warped his sense of time.

He was tired, but he could not resist the temptation to bathe after the day he had. Black had a bathtub in his cabin, but Sivan rarely felt brave enough to use it when he shared the room with the man. The pirate would have evacuated the room to give him

privacy, but Sivan preferred to avoid such conversations altogether.

He undressed as the porcelain tub filled. As Sivan took off the embroidered green vest he'd picked out the day before he noticed that a breast pocket was now missing a button.

Sivan sucked in a breath and realized that it was the pocket he'd put Black's vial of light in. His fingers scrambled to feel inside the opening, but he could tell that it was empty just from the weight of it.

'It's yours now.' Hayes had told him.

Whether through coincidence or fate, Sivan had become the owner of this precious vial. Black had cast it out into the sea for gods knew what reason, and it had found its way to Sivan. Black didn't even know he'd taken the vial, but somehow Sivan felt that he had become its protector.

And he'd failed to keep it safe, just as he had with Nereus.

Sivan took off the rest of his clothes in a daze. The tub was now full, and Sivan slipped into it automatically. The water was warm and pleasant, and it would have been a blissful experience if Sivan had let himself feel it. The dread of losing the vial outweighed the comfort of a good bath.

His muscles still ached from when Jhaeros had called out to him. The vision of the Uncharted king's beautiful but cruel face in his mind haunted Sivan, but it was a burden he had grown used to in his nightmares. The physical effects of it were new, and he wished they would pass quickly.

The scar on his right arm had turned from a neutral, pinker shade of his copper skin to an angry crimson burn. It did not hurt currently with Black's seal on top of it, but it looked like it should hurt. The mark appeared like it was currently in the process of burning his skin, like there was hot iron being pressed into his arm right then.

Sivan submerged his arm in the water and continued to bathe himself. When he was done he dried off and dressed, continuing to squeeze water out of his hair with the towel. As he was absentmindedly drying his hair he took another look at the trinkets gathered on shelves. He noticed two twin swords laying between everything. They seemed decidedly out of place as they were much longer than anything on the shelves.

The swords also seemed strikingly familiar.

Sivan hesitated, not believing what he saw. He carefully plucked out one of the swords, turning it over in his hands.

The weight of it was even the same.

He quickly turned over the sword to look at the golden hilt. On the tip of the hilt was engraved "S.M." He frowned, not understanding how these sabers were here in this room.

Sivan had dropped these two swords during his battle with Jhaeros.

He had been knocked unconscious at the end of that fight. Presumably the Siren king left him to die, and the ocean had performed a miracle and spit him out on Grenaldian shores.

But what if it hadn't been a miracle at all?

The door opened, and Sivan turned around to find Black walking in. He had dried off enough to return to having human legs, and was now wearing different clothes.

"M-my lord! What are you doing in here? Oh no, did those useless golems misunderstand and put you in my room?" Black was so flustered by Sivan's presence in what was apparently his bedroom that at first he did not realize what Sivan held in his hands.

"Are these...are these my swords?" Sivan asked, unable to contain the emotion in his voice.

Black froze upon seeing what Sivan held. There was a long moment before he swallowed and walked over to Sivan. He

plucked up the second saber and joined it with its brother in Sivan's hands. He sighed, tired and tense. "Yes, they are your swords."

Sivan clutched at them, his hands trembling. "I-I don't understand. I dropped them into the ocean when — when —"

"When you fought Jhaeros," Black finished for him. "I was there."

"What?" Sivan's eyes widened, searching for falsehood in the man's face and finding none there.

"I learned of the Uncharted attack on your unit, but I arrived too late to help you fight him. I only got there after he had marked you and dropped you in the ocean." The pirate's face darkened as he recalled the memory. "I found you and escaped before he could finish you off. I returned to the wreckage later to find your sabers. I planned to return them to you when we were reunited."

Sivan's voice caught in his throat. Black had been watching over him all this time. He brought Sivan back from the precipice of death, and Sivan had thought it had simply been the ocean's miracle. "So you were the one who brought me to land."

"Yes." Black nodded. He made a gesture to touch Sivan, but stopped himself.

Sivan dropped the swords and surged forward to hug the man. The weapons clattered to the floor, and Sivan wrapped his arms around Black, burying his face in his chest. "Why didn't you reveal yourself then?" he sobbed, shaking with emotion. "Why did you make me wait another year?"

Black froze when Sivan embraced him. As Nereus, he had been close with the lord he served, but propriety never allowed them to be intimate, even like this. The Grenaldian man was warm against his chest, a comfort Nereus had always longed for but was never allowed to have. Now his most precious person

was here, holding him of his own accord, and Black felt like he had cheated the world to be blessed with such fortune. Finally, he returned the hug tightly, shuddering at the weight of this simple gesture. “I wasn’t ready. I had to come up with a way to kill Jhaeros before I could face you.”

“Why?” Sivan looked up, and Black was astonished to find tears in the lord’s golden eyes. “Sure, I want to kill the man and end this war, but that has nothing to do with you and I.”

Black frowned sadly and brushed a lock of silver hair out of Sivan’s face. “It has everything to do with us. Jhaeros has marked you, and he wants me dead as well. There’s no escaping him. If either of us wants a future worth living he has to be stopped.”

“I understand that, I just...” Sivan sniffed, wiping tears from his eyes. “I just wish you had returned to me sooner.”

“Please forgive me then, my lord,” Black said dutifully and stepped back to give him a slight bow.

Just like that, the man had gone from pirate to friend to attendant. Sivan swallowed back another swell of emotion as his own heart battled amidst the confusion. Nereus had been an entirely different person on the Spear. He had changed into the dreaded pirate named Black, but Sivan’s attendant was still in there at times. The pirate’s recent behavior made it impossible to tell where Nereus ended and Black began. Sivan cared deeply for Nereus, and he lusted after Black. Striking a balance between those two was proving to be a difficult process for him.

“You may have this room tonight. I will sleep elsewhere,” Black said, gesturing towards the door.

“But it’s your room-“

“And I want you to use it, if you find it suitable,” the pirate cut him off with.

Sivan sighed and watched as Black picked up his sabers from

the ground and leaned them against a wall. Then he extended a hand towards Sivan's marked arm. "I'll refresh the seal for you now. It should last through the night."

Black gently took his arm as Sivan extended it out towards him. The feeling of the man's hand encircling his arm was starting to become a regular experience, but Sivan knew his heart would never stop racing no matter how familiar it became. Green sparks flickered where their skin met as the seal was remade.

Sivan stole a glance at Black, hoping to glean some kind of insight into his heart. Did it stutter fervently when they were close like this, as it did with Sivan? He sucked in a breath when he realized Black was staring at him, eyes half lidded. Sivan flushed furiously. Did he intend to kiss him goodnight?

Black leaned in, getting closer and closer to Sivan's face. The green sparks finished making the seal, and his hand fell from Sivan's arm. Sivan's heart was in his throat. He wasn't sure if he should stop this pirate or pull him closer.

In the end, Black fell on top of him, unconscious.

Sivan caught him instinctively, grunting at the weight of the large man. "Black?" He shook him lightly. The pirate remained unresponsive, his breathing steady.

He was asleep.

Black had fallen asleep standing up as he gave his last ounce of energy to remake the seal on Sivan's arm. "Holy heavens, you're heavy," Sivan grumbled as he struggled to keep Black from toppling over. The bed was fairly close, so Sivan decided to dump him there. It was a difficult task, to put a man much taller and broader than you to bed. Sivan succeeded in backing up into the bed, but when he got there he lost his balance and fell backwards, accompanied by one unconscious pirate.

He roused somewhat at the fall on top of Sivan on top of the bed. Black groaned quietly and blindly pawed at Sivan's sides

until he found room to wrap his arms around him. He snuggled into him, giving a contented sigh as he got comfortable.

Sivan was reminded of how the man had hugged the bolster pillow before Sivan escaped the curtained room on Lissandry. It had almost made Sivan want to stay then, and he was really in no fit state to resist that temptation now. Lying in the bed with Black was comfortable. Sivan was still tired from Jhaeros's call, and his heart was weary from resisting what it wanted most. He carded a hand through Black's long, silky hair, careful to not let his fingers snag on any of the tiny gold beads tied within it. The pirate gave a contented sigh, hugging him just a fraction closer.

There was no way to extract the comforter on the bed with Black dead asleep on top of Sivan, but the quilt on top had been shifted in their fall. He managed to tug it out from under their bodies and draped it over Black. It barely covered him, so Sivan resolved himself to keeping the man warm for the night.

Chapter 20

calloway cay

Once again, Sivan woke to an unfamiliar ceiling. He had always been accustomed to sleeping on his back, so the ceiling was usually the first thing he was aware of in the morning. This view had changed so frequently in the last few weeks; Sivan was surprised he still found it jarring.

There was a weight on top of him, and Sivan looked down to see a sleeping pirate. Black's breathing was steady and slow, indicating he was still within a heavy slumber. The man had not slept the night before, so it was no wonder Sivan woke up before him. Black's arms around him had relaxed during the night, but they were still a warm presence against his body. Sivan was content like this, and sleep threatened to claim his consciousness once more.

He played lazily with Black's hair, wondering what the pirate would do if he woke to find them in such an intimate position. Sivan was still unsure of what the man wanted from him. He

suspected it was more than a desire to return to simpler times of just being a young lord's attendant. Black's forwardness did not go unnoticed by Sivan, but he couldn't tell if there was more behind it.

Even if there was, could he really accept it?

He longed to do so; he knew he desired this man deeply. If he were still in Varis with his father there would be no choice in the matter. Propriety forbade him from seeking out pleasure with commoners, let alone a pirate. Propriety also forbade him from engaging with his old attendant in the same way.

But Sivan was not in Varis, and the only person who was enforcing these rules of propriety was himself.

Black shifted against him, nuzzling into his chest. He let out a low noise when Sivan's thigh slid against the half-hard cock between the pirate's legs.

Sivan stopped breathing. A flurry of memories descended upon him, forcing him to remember that same cock between his thighs in Lissandry and the shadowy tentacles caressing him in the hold of the Blackwater. He shuddered, desire pooling in his gut at the feel of the large man atop him.

But Sivan had gotten so good at compartmentalizing that all of those memories were immediately followed by his brain frantically stuffing them back inside their boxes. He just as frantically tried to squirm his way out from the pirate. It took some doing, but he managed to shove Black hard enough that he flipped over and off of Sivan.

The mildly panicked lord escaped the bed, clutching at his shirt as if he were clutching at a strand of pearls. He refused to acknowledge how he was still shaking with desire, and he refused even more adamantly to not give Black another look.

With the grace of a man trying to escape a lover before they woke up, Sivan dressed in his clothes from the day before. They

were dry now, and he considered that good enough. Plus, he wouldn't have to spend longer in the room to try and find suitable clean clothes.

Once out in the hall, Sivan was startled to find a golem waiting for him.

"Please come with me, my lord," it said, its crystalline face expressionless.

Sivan nodded and followed the strange being apprehensively. He knew the golems served Eliza, and he hadn't been able to ask Black about where the two of them now stood with her.

As they walked through the castle, Sivan was shocked by just how large it was. Every turn seemed to give birth to a new cavernous hall carved from sea glass. Every inch of it was beautiful, but Sivan once again felt like he was trapped in a desolate cavern of ice. It felt lonely in all its splendor.

The golem led Sivan to a large door made of glass. Inside was what Sivan instinctively wanted to call a greenhouse, but it was a far cry from the humid environment needed for plant life. Huge crystals were growing in rows, branching out like trees and ferns. They varied in shapes and colors, and some were even emitting faint glowing lights from within. The walls were made of glass panels, and the light that filtered through them seemed too cold to be the sun.

In the center of the room stood Eliza. She was holding a hand over rows of smaller crystals suspended in water. Purple magic flowed from her palm, and it sprayed over the crystals evenly.

"Did you sleep well, my lord?" Eliza asked without looking up.

"Yes, thank you," Sivan said politely. The woman seemed like she was in a much better mood today, and Sivan silently thanked Black for whatever he had said to her.

"Good, good," she hummed. "I would be ashamed to fall

short of your noble expectations of comfort.”

Eliza’s tone was relatively bland, but there was a trace of bitterness in her voice. Sivan couldn’t think of anything to say. He had abandoned this woman on the Spear just as he had with Nereus. Unlike Black, who had spent the last nine years obsessing over that promise to return, Eliza no doubt hadn’t put as much hope in his words. However, accepting him with open arms after so long was likely a tall task for her.

The purple magic coming from her palm dissipated, and the crystals she had been tending to grew visibly. She then walked over to a much larger crystal, one that rose well above Sivan’s height. It glimmered softly from within at her approach, as if it could sense her presence.

“Hm, this one’s ready, “ she hummed. Eliza raised her hand and gently drew a line of light down the front of the crystal. It shuddered and cracked, unfolding like a flower, petals delicate layers of crystalized sea glass. Inside was another golem, nestled into the crystal cocoon like a fetus. It blinked open its blank eyes and stretched out, looking somewhat dazed. Two other crystal golems approached and helped their new sibling out of the pod. Without another word, they led the new golem away.

Sivan was stunned. Just how many of these things did Eliza have? How much power would it have taken to grow even one? He didn’t know much about magic, especially dark magic, but he understood its basic transactional principle. For the woman to have become the sea witch Calloway, feared by even pirates... just how much had Eliza exchanged for that kind of power?

“I didn’t know they taught dark magic at the culinary academy,” Sivan said hesitantly.

She gave him a dry look. “I didn’t go to the culinary academy.”

“But-but it was on your resume-“

"I lied," Eliza snapped. "My first husband was a sorcerer. He started teaching me casually, but by the time I found out he was cheating on me I was more powerful than him."

Sivan could guess what ill fate that first husband had met. "So why did you become a cook then?"

"Supply and demand." She grazed a hand over the open crystal cocoon. "Back then there wasn't much need for dark magic other than the occasional petty curse. Cooking paid better."

"I see," Sivan said.

"Once the war started that changed. Curses, protections, power. I suppose I should thank your father for starting that war. It made me a very rich woman." Eliza grinned, but once again there was no real mirth in her eyes. "Even if it lost me my leg."

"I am sorry for failing to return like I promised—" Sivan tried saying, but was cut off when Eliza struck him down with a steely blue glare.

She sighed after a moment, seeming to recollect herself before she could spiral back into anger. Sivan wondered how Nereus had become such an angry person after the Spear, and he suspected it was a reflection of this woman's natural rage.

"The boy explained to me how you were forced to join the war. How you tried to return for us, but were stopped by Uncharted." Eliza faced him, looking at him coolly. "Of course I take everything that boy has to say with a grain of salt when it comes to you."

Sivan once again did not know what to say. He had questions for her, but he felt that if he just started asking them she would cut out his tongue.

Eliza seemed to sense his nervousness and tamed her expression once more. "Regardless of our unsavory past, we are on the same side of this war. Jhaeros must be stopped at all costs."

Sivan was a little surprised she felt that way. The sea witch

was known to be an independent wild card in this war, appearing to take neither side and do whatever she wanted as long as there was money in it. Although, the same was said for the pirates, and Black had proved him wrong on that. “I did not realize the sea witch had decided to side with us,” Sivan said cautiously.

“Side with you,” Eliza repeated, her smile flat and disingenuous. “I suppose Grenaldia is the lesser of two evils. I have no love for this country, but I do not wish to live in the world Jhaeros wants to make.”

“And what world is that?” he asked.

“Ah, I suppose you were not there when the Uncharted king made his address to the survivors of the Spear,” she said blandly. She approached Sivan, holding out two fingers which glowed with purple light. “I will show you,” she said before pressing the tips of her fingers to Sivan’s temple.



Sivan was suddenly transported to the Montgomery manor on the Spear. Except it was a far cry from the elegant and pristine home he had known. The walls were cracked, pillars crumbled, roofs caved in. This was after the attack all those years ago. This damage was not from age. It was from a battle between Uncharted and human.

Therefore, it took him a moment to recognize the hall he was in. This was the exterior hall to his bedroom in the manor.

A rhythmic clacking sound resounded from behind him. He turned to find a younger Eliza marching down the hall towards him, a wooden peg leg snapping on the tiled floor. She looked severe as ever, but despite her younger appearance, she looked

far more drained than she had a few moments ago. Her pale skin was sallow and beginning to show signs of blackening veins, the telltale mark of a human practitioner of black magic. Black magic users were rare, not just because it was a taboo form of sorcery, but also because the dark arts almost always consumed the life force of the practitioner. From the look of her here, Eliza was well on her way to an early grave at the hands of her own magic.

Sivan realized he was being shown a memory as the woman stormed past him without detecting his presence. This was the Eliza from many years ago, back when she and Nereus had been stuck on the Spear. The real her, the her of the present, was still in that crystal greenhouse.

The her in the present also did not show any signs of blackened veins despite her heavy use of dark magic. Sivan wondered if she had cast some kind of glamor on herself to conceal them.

He felt a tug towards Eliza as she continued her march down the hall. The memory wanted him to witness what she was about to show him. Sivan followed her until she stopped in front of the door to his bedroom. Eliza paused at the door, seeming to collect herself. She gripped the thigh of her peg leg, face contorting briefly into a grimace of pain.

“This damn leg,” she hissed under her breath. She fished out a small tin from a pocket and popped a few pills from the tin into her mouth.

Sivan knew what they were right away: willow bark pills. He had relied on them quite heavily while he had been recovering from his fight with Jhaeros. They helped with the pain, albeit not by much.

Eliza tucked away the tin and threw the doors open, entering Sivan’s room without even knocking.

“Nereus! If you’re in that fucking bed again I’m going to skin you alive!”

Sivan winced at her threat. Black's anger certainly came from the time he spent with this woman.

"Go away," a miserable and muffled voice came from Sivan's bed. For the most part, his room looked the same. Someone, likely Nereus, had been maintaining it and keeping it clean even when the manor had been falling apart. Yet there was a strange mountain of clothes and blankets on his bed. The mountain moved, as if something was underneath all of it.

Eliza shoved her hand into the mountain and pulled out a hand. "Get up. You're useless to me if you spend all day moping like this."

The mountain of fabric shuddered, clothes and blankets slipping out of place as a rather beautiful but forlorn looking face emerged from the pile. It was Nereus, one year older than when Sivan had last seen him on the Spear. He had finally started to lose that boyish softness his early teens stubbornly clung to and was beginning to look more like the wicked pirate Sivan knew presently. Seeing this, he felt even more foolish at not having recognized Black sooner. He had changed considerably, but if Sivan had just observed his face more closely he would have seen the resemblance.

"I don't need to be useful to you," Nereus whined. "I'm saving my usefulness for when my lord returns."

Sivan's heart dropped. Even after a year, the boy still kept hope that he would return. Nereus attempted to recede back into the pile of fabric, clothes falling off in the process. Sivan then realized the clothes were in fact his, including the vest with green floral embroidery he was currently wearing. The lord's face turned red, and he mentally cursed this impudently shameless boy.

This was beginning to form a pattern. He'd feel bad for the hard life he'd left Nereus to, then it would be followed with blind

embarrassment at whatever Black ended up teasing him with.

Eliza let out a frustrated groan. “This has to stop. If that lord of yours even managed to outrun the Uncharted legion, he is likely caught up in whatever war that has started after it. He is not coming back.”

Nereus sat up, clothes and blankets flying off the bed. “Yes he is! He promised...” His face had contorted into rage, but quickly melted into defeat after Eliza did not respond. This argument must have taken place many times over for the once dedicated attendant to give up like that. He slowly started gathering the clothes that had fallen off the pile, taking the vest with the green embroidery in his hands with care. “He promised. He’ll come back for me.”

Sivan’s stomach churned at the guilt that washed over him once more. Eliza was cruel, showing him this scene. Nereus had believed him so thoroughly, and Sivan’s failure had utterly crushed the boy. He supposed he deserved to witness this. If Sivan had only been able to break through the Uncharted forces he could have saved him from this pathetic state.

Eliza marched forward, wooden leg snapping on the ground loudly. She grabbed Nereus by the collar and slapped him clean across the face.

Nereus clutched at his cheek, shocked and a little afraid of her. The woman was severe, but she never struck him like that before. “That hurt! Why did you — ?!”

“Aren’t you tired of waiting for him?” Eliza asked, glaring down at him. “You wallow in here, but you do nothing to try and leave this island. You know you have the power to do so. You could swim away before they even notice you.”

Nereus’s face darkened and he shifted his eyes elsewhere. “I won’t turn into one of them again. I won’t.”

So Eliza had already cast the siren curse on him. Had it not

been done willingly? Nereus seemed so disgusted by the prospect of turning into a siren.

“Then find another way. If he can’t come to you, then find your own way to him,” Eliza said, softer.

Nereus froze. He froze like he had never actually contemplated that idea. His trust in Sivan was so great that he didn’t even bother to try and find a way off an island invaded by an Uncharted legion. “H-how?” His voice was rough, like he had just found it again.

Eliza slapped him on the shoulder, much more gently this time. “You can start by helping me solidify the protection on the manor. The number of Uncharted out there have increased today. I don’t know why, but I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

Nereus got out of bed, and Sivan realized just how tall he had grown in that year. He was nearly as tall as Black was now, just not nearly as muscled yet. Lifting the same vest Sivan wore now, Nereus inhaled into the fabric, murmuring softly. “I will return to you, my lord.”

Turning red again, Sivan resolved to burn the vest he was wearing.

He followed the two of them through the manor. They passed a small group of haggard sailors and merchants who were also using Sivan’s old home as a shelter. These people nodded respectfully at Eliza as she passed, but Sivan could see the fear in their eyes as they saw Nereus. The boy ignored them, but Sivan could sense the tension that arose in him. Nereus had experienced disdain and rejection at the hands of these same people years ago, before he had become Sivan’s attendant. He never admitted it, but Sivan knew the boy had always had a sore spot whenever others looked down on him. It was probably why Nereus had become so devoted to Sivan after he had showed him an ounce of

kindness and respect.

Now those looks of disdain had turned into anxious glances of fear, but they still had the same effect on Nereus. Yet this time Sivan was not there to make things better for him.

Once they entered the courtyard Sivan got a good look at what the manor had turned into. Many tents and makeshift shelters had popped up on the large expanse of grass, like they had just started growing from the earth after the Montgomerys had left. More commoners nervously loitered around, watching the sky with anxious whispers.

Looking up, Sivan could see a thin shimmer of purple light fluctuate above them. This was the protection Eliza had mentioned. lightning cracked across the sky, bouncing off the barrier with an electric snap. The crowd of commoners cried out, a few ducking and covering their heads.

“It’s getting worse, Mrs. Day!” a sailor shouted as he ran up to them. “Something’s happening at the port. There are three times the number of Uncharted as there were yesterday.”

Eliza’s frown deepened. “Nereus, help me secure the protection spell. Do not fuck it up. Remember what I taught you.”

He nodded firmly and dashed off to the perimeter of the barrier. Sivan instinctively wanted to follow Nereus, but he was forced to follow Eliza as she headed to the opposite side of the perimeter.

As the protection spell was secured, Sivan got a glimpse of what had happened to the Spear outside of the manor. It was virtually indistinguishable from the island he had once known. The manor had been damaged during the initial attack, but it had been protected once Eliza cast the barrier. Outside was a broken skeleton of a town that had been picked away by the Uncharted forces.

Just as the sailor had said, there was a commotion going

down at the docks. The manor was too far inland to really see what was happening exactly, but Sivan felt uneasy just from looking at sheer number of Uncharted gathering around the shore.

There was a crack of lightning at the docks just as Eliza finished securing the spell. “What the hell was that?” she muttered, glaring at the sea.

Nereus joined her, as well as several commoners who followed behind him. “Was there more lightning?” he asked.

Eliza hummed an affirmation, her frown deepening. “Did you finish securing the protection?”

“Yes.” Nereus nodded, expression firmly confident. “I did not *fuck it up.*”

The woman huffed out a low laugh, but it did not ease the tension in her stance. “Well, we may see your skills tested soon. I do not have a good feeling about what is happening out there.”

“What do you mean —“

A mighty wave crashed into the docks with an unnatural clap of thunder. It tore out remaining docks and buildings, a wall of water racing onto land. A great beast emerged from the wave, larger than any ship Sivan had ever seen. It looked like a giant salamander, with huge spikes growing out of it similar to a lion fish. The scales were white and luminous, bright blue globs of magic light seeming to drip from every spike. It was beautiful but terrifying at the same time.

“What is that?!” a sailor behind them shouted frantically.

Eliza’s face had gone slack, wonder and anxiety mixing in her features. “It’s a leviathan,” she breathed, uncertainty in her voice.

“Those aren’t real,” Nereus said firmly. “The sea gods and goddesses were just stories.”

Sivan knew a little about leviathans. Legends described them as divine creatures of immeasurable power, able to transform

into any shape. They crafted the land from the sea, allowing land creatures to grow and thrive. Humans and sirens alike worshipped them. The legends also told how the leviathans used to walk the shores many millennia ago, but at some point they returned to the deepest part of the sea and have never been seen since.

The leviathan crawled out of the water, groaning loudly. It was so large that the sound caused the island to shake as if there were an earthquake. The beast slowly ambled onto land, growing closer and closer to the manor.

“Nereus,” Eliza said, quietly enough so the commoners behind them would not hear. The boy stood closer to hear her. “We are leaving. I’ll ready the portal.”

“But-!” Nereus protested, but lowered his voice when he realized the people behind them would hear. “You said that spell wouldn’t be able to transport more than two people. What about them?”

Eliza was silent for a moment, tension clear in her shoulders. “At this point all we can wish for them is a quick death.”

Nereus look distraught by her words, but the rumbling caused by the leviathan drew his worry back towards the threat. A bolt of red lightning struck the beast, causing it to scream in pain. The leviathan opened its mouth, and blue light started to form at the back of its throat. With a snap that seemed to pierce the air, a beam of blue light exploded from its mouth. The beam tore through the land like a hot knife through butter, carving up dirt and rock with ease. The leviathan closed its mouth as the beam dissipated and groaned again. It shook violently, like it was trying to shake off something.

As it got closer Sivan could see a figure on the head of the creature. Red bolts of magic danced around the figure, occasionally striking the leviathan when it resisted its orders. A long

white siren tail wrapped around the beast's spikes.

It was Jhaeros.

Sivan's chest constricted automatically at the sight of the man, even from so far a distance. So Jhaeros had actually come to the Spear himself, and with a leviathan no less.

"He's controlling it," Eliza said, disgust clear in her voice.

Jhaeros brought the leviathan to the edge of the protection barrier. Sivan wondered if it would actually do anything against such a powerful beast. His fear was overridden with another worrying thought. If Jhaeros still had this leviathan under his control, why hadn't he used it in the war? It had been eight years since this memory, yet the Uncharted forces had never unleashed this ultimate weapon upon them.

Maybe Jhaeros held back just to keep the war going for longer. To draw out their suffering.

The leviathan settled in front of the manor, and the Uncharted king gave his address.

"People of the Spear! I commend you for lasting so long during our little seige. Whoever is protecting you has quite the talent, although I imagine their power is dwindling at this point."

Sivan's stomach grew queasy at the sound of the man's voice. His head started to throb, but was startled out of his panic when Eliza suddenly threw a purple fireball at the siren. Jhaeros didn't even bother to dodge. He caught the attack easily and dissipated it into the sky with a crackle of lightning.

He laughed, narrowing his unearthly blue eyes on the woman who had attacked him. "Impressive! How would you like to join our cause? We can always use good sorcerers."

Eliza did not drop her guard, but did not ready another attack. "And what cause would that be?"

"Ah, you must think me a tyrant, flaunting all his power. In reality I'm seeking to make the world a better place. By uniting

the land and sea once more.”

Now that he was closer, Sivan could see the siren was holding a red whip in his hand. He rose it, lightning twisting around it as it snapped against the back of the leviathan. It roared and reared back, gathering blue light in its mouth once more.

“The old gods created the land from the sea! And now the leviathans will bring the land back to its rightful place!”

The bolt of immeasurable power pierced the length of the island, driving through the earth and into the sea. Water rushed in through the crevice it created, instantly forming a massive inlet where there had previously been land.

Jhaeros pulled back his whip again, but this time the leviathan did not scream when it struck. It growled, deep and more menacing than anything Sivan had ever heard. It started flinging itself around wildly, trying to get the siren king off its back. Jhaeros held tight, continuing to whip the divine creature, but it would not settle. It began gathering light in its mouth again and unloaded the beam upon the Uncharted legion behind it. Jhaeros whipped harder, shouting at it, but it did not relent. The leviathan became frantic, shooting bolts of godlike power into wherever it was pointed.

Jhaeros had lost control, and the leviathan was going to tear apart everything around it.

The barrier Eliza and Nereus had erected dissipated the moment the leviathan’s light hit it. The commoners in the manor screamed, yelling at each other to run. Eliza began working quickly. She used a knife at her waist to slice open her arm. Blood began pouring out immediately, and with a snap of her arm, she flicked it onto the ground. Somehow it formed the exact magic circle Black had used to transport them to Calloway Cay. Black had drawn the circle quickly, but Eliza had done it all at once in an instant and with her own blood.

The blood circle shone brightly, purple light shooting up to form the portal. Without so much as a glance at the panicking commoners she had spent a year protecting, Eliza seized Nereus by the collar and entered the portal.

Chapter 21

calloway cay

Sivan was wrenched out of the memory, stumbling back as Eliza pulled her finger away from his forehead. The experience had left him feeling weak, and he was woozy from seeing Jhaeros again. His arm hurt. It didn't burn like it had when the Uncharted king had called out to him, but it ached and caused Sivan to fall to his knees.

He clutched at his arm, trying to reassure himself that it was not another call. Black's handprint wrapped around the mark, reminding him that it was sealed. Sivan clung to that handprint like it was his only lifeline.

"Give me your arm," Eliza said coldly. Sivan looked up to once again see an older but much healthier looking Eliza. She was no longer close to death like she had been in the memory.

Sivan offered his arm. The woman took his hand firmly, holding his arm steady. She held her other hand over the two marks on his arm, purple magic dancing at her fingertips just like

it had with the crystals. This caused green sparks to flicker from Black's handprint and red sparks to jump from Jhaeros's scar. Her face was a mask of intensity, pure concentration pinpointed on Sivan's arm. Her hand clenched suddenly, and the two marks were yanked off Sivan's skin.

It didn't hurt, but it felt like a great pressure had been pulled off of him. For the first time in a year, Sivan felt like he could breathe in fully, and he gasped for air deeply.

Examining his arm, Eliza looked satisfied upon seeing that the two marks were completely gone. There was no scar, no handprint. It was just Sivan's copper skin, pure and smooth as the day he had been born.

"I've removed both your marks. You're a free man, my lord," she said derisively before dropping his arm.

Sivan didn't know what to say. Maybe he should have thanked her, but he hadn't even asked for her to do that. He almost certainly would have agreed to it, but he hadn't been prepared to suddenly have them removed. Eliza had turned into a powerful woman. She deserved every ounce of respect the sea witch title gave her.

"H-how...how did you get such power, Eliza?" Sivan asked quietly. "I saw you in that memory. You had used most of your life-force by then."

She had been looking at him coldly, but turned away before answering. "Humans have a limited amount of magic power, tied in to their life-force. Magical beings like sirens have an unlimited supply, which I always found rather unfair." She touched a crystal, which thrummed at the contact. "So I found a way to cheat the system."

"Which is?"

The smile she gave him was devoid of mirth. "A trade secret."

"My lord!" Black's voice rang out through the crystal green-

house as he entered. He dashed over to the still kneeling Sivan, and immediately began fussing over him. “I sensed a disturbance with the seal. What happened? Did it break? Is Jhaeros—”

“I’m fine, Black!” Sivan insisted, batting away the man as he stood up.

“It’s gone,” Black breathed when he saw Sivan’s bare forearm. His expression was an odd mixture of concern and disappointment.

“Jhaeros won’t be able to track Lord Montgomery anymore,” Eliza said. She waved a hand and a crystal chair sprouted from the ground. Taking a relaxed seat, she leveled Black with a cool glare. “And neither will you.”

Black’s face darkened, and he turned around sharply, heading back from where he had stormed in. Sivan sighed, hoping this wasn’t the beginning of another one of the pirate’s bad moods. Eliza probably had the power to dissipate whatever storm the man’s mood could summon, but it didn’t save Sivan from having to deal with him.

“That boy will never grow up, will he?” Eliza groaned, leaning back in her newly grown chair.

Sivan frowned at her. “He’s been through a lot.”

She turned her cold stare on Sivan. “Like I said. You coddle him.” With another wave of her hand, the door to the greenhouse flew open, inviting Sivan to leave. “You two can stay here as long as you need to recover. My golems will get you anything you need if you ask.”

Sivan nodded gratefully even though he felt no warmth in her invitation. “Thank you, Eliza.” He turned and left the room, hoping that Black hadn’t run off too far.

By the time Sivan found Black it was well into the afternoon. The castle was large by itself, but it was only a small section of the floating island. It was nestled against a stark landscape of withering forest and harshly cut rock. Just like the castle, the land surrounding it shared its cold beauty. Sivan had a hard time picturing Nereus in a place like this. Even after seeing Eliza's memory of the boy in the remnants of the Spear, Sivan still could only imagine his long lost attendant in the golden summer light of their youth.

The overcast sky did not contribute to Calloway Cay's atmosphere. Sivan had walked far from the castle, yet the massive structure still loomed large in his periphery. He had been wandering through the forest of gray-green trees when he came upon the ocean.

Yet it wasn't the ocean. Not quite.

The island curved around a stretch of water, fading from shallow sandy shores to the deep blue. Yet where the water should have opened up to the rest of the ocean, it suddenly disappeared. It was like the curve of the cay had snatched up a bite of the sea. Sivan wondered if somewhere there was a chunk of the ocean missing.

Black was standing on the shore, toes facing the waterline. He looked like an idyllic silhouette in a landscape painting, his tall form breaking up the line of the horizon.

"Eliza showed me Jhaeros's leviathan," Sivan said as he joined the pirate on the shore.

"Yes," Black murmured, his green eyes flickering to Sivan before stubbornly returning to the horizon.

"If he truly has control over such a force, why hasn't he used it outside of the Spear?" Sivan pondered.

"He's likely waiting for a land invasion. The war has been going on for nine years. By now, inlanders will not expect an attack

from an enemy they've only known to have power in the sea."

Black's logic held, but Grenaldia had been losing the war for a number of years. Inlanders had long expressed their lack of hope in the country when they refused to send help. What was the purpose in waiting for so long?

"This is one of the reasons why I'm hunting for the corseque. Jhaeros needs to be stopped before this invasion comes to pass. Grenaldia will be finished once that happens."

Sivan was a little surprised the man still held any affection for the nation that had abandoned him on the Spear. "You still care about this country?"

"I care about finding peace." Black narrowed his eyes on the horizon, as if he could see something off in the distance. "One day I'd like to return to something similar of what we had on the Spear. Those were the happiest years of my life."

Sivan's heart stuttered. A vision struck him. One of him and Black resting peacefully in the golden summer light filtered through the vine-covered trellises in the courtyard of the Montgomery manor on the island. The man's head resting on his lap, Sivan's fingers sifting through his long, dark hair.

He blinked a few times fast, pushing the vision out of his mind. Sivan realized he longed for this. A life without war and without constant threat. A life with Black.

"Is...is there another reason you search for the corseque?" Sivan asked, trying not to sound breathless.

Then the pirate looked at him, green eyes shaded with a familiar darkness. "Revenge. For what he did to you."

Sivan was a little startled by this admission. Surely he himself wanted to put an end to Jhaeros's reign of terror, but it was never for any selfish reason like revenge. "Black...you don't have to seek revenge for me. It's enough that you want to--"

Black suddenly seized his arm, wrapping a hand around his

wrist. “It’s not enough.” The man seemed to see Sivan’s alarm and relaxed his grip on him. He sighed, steeling himself. “I know I have not given you many reasons to trust me since Varis. I’ve been cruel and deceitful. But...but please do not doubt my devotion to you. I cannot abide the fact that Jhaeros hurt you. As long as he still breathes I will hunt him.”

Sivan’s heart continued to pound. He could not condone this blind commitment to a petty revenge, but he could feel how genuine Black’s devotion was. It scared him a little, this fervent loyalty.

It also pulled at something deep within his soul. Sivan had been seen as the noble class for all his life, and a hero for part of that. But there was no one who would worship him like Black did. It was genuine and painful and deeply intoxicating.

“Then, I will help you hunt him,” Sivan decided. “Jhaeros has decimated my home, killed countless of my family and friends. And if his death helps you move on, then I will be there for you.”

Black looked at him with wide eyes as Sivan took his hand and threaded their fingers together. He stepped closer, holding the pirate’s hand to his heart.

“The Spear was also the happiest part of my life. I wish to return as well.”

The sky was beginning to clear. A dramatic cut in the clouds sliced open the gray to reveal a dazzling blue.



The guests of Calloway Cay were surprised to find themselves invited to dinner. Sivan had accurately judged that Eliza

was not entirely happy to have them there.

However, judging from the unhappy way Black was stabbing at his food and the smug way Eliza was swirling her goblet of wine, this dinner was simply an opportunity for the sea witch to flex her culinary superiority over her former student.

“How is your meal, my lord?” Eliza asked pointedly, raking Sivan deeper into his chair with her steely blue eyes. The glare reminded him of how Eliza wormed her way into being the head chef of an earl’s kitchen even though she had no references or background.

“Hm,” he hummed, noncommittally.

Sivan didn’t dare draw comparisons himself. The sea witch intimidated him into silence, but Black’s inevitable tantrum if Sivan even marginally ranked his cooking as inferior would be inconsolable.

“You don’t have to answer that, my lord.” Black desperately tried to make eye contact with Sivan, but he kept his golden eyes firmly shut in an attempt to block out the bizarre competition he had been thrown into.

“Hm.”

In truth, the food was delicious. Sivan honestly couldn’t rank it better or worse than what he had eaten on the Blackwater, because they were nearly the same. Black had obviously learned how to cook from Eliza, so of course the food he made would be similar. If they had succeeded in getting an opinion out of Sivan he would have had to say that Eliza’s cooking was more refined, but Black’s cooking was more comforting.

Somehow he knew that voicing that opinion wouldn’t give him any points on either side. So he changed the topic.

“Eliza, your last name changed. When did you get remarried?” Sivan asked politely.

She laughed to herself quietly and stabbed her fork into a

slab of meat on her plate. “Not too long after we escaped that desolate rock.”

“Oh,” Sivan warbled.

“And I suppose you think he left me a fortune to build all this with,” she scoffed, waving vaguely at the vaulted ceilings made of crystal.

Sivan didn’t know how to navigate this conversation safely. He felt like he was in a social mine field. “I...should I think that?”

“No! That wretch was only good for one thing.” She began spinning her dinner knife in one hand. “You know, I built my fortune up from nothing. No man helped me do that.”

“Oh, don’t bore him with the ‘rags to cook to sea witch’ monologue again,” Black whined. Sivan held in a chuckle. Seeing them like this reminded him how Eliza had really been Nereus’s parental figure growing up.

“Quiet,” she snapped. “I only became a cook because it paid better than practicing the dark arts at the time. Once the war started there was a sudden and desperate need for good mages. Anyone powerful enough to keep both Uncharted and Grenaldian troops at bay had a lot of value to merchants who simply wanted to keep their businesses afloat.”

Sivan’s head was starting to hurt. If Grenaldia had sorcerers like her on their side, maybe the war would have gone more their way. If only he hadn’t left them behind on the Spear...

“But I suppose I should thank you, Lord Montgomery,” Eliza said smoothly, lazily pointing the knife at him. “If you hadn’t left me on that rock to die I wouldn’t have been forced to cultivate my power to survive. You created the sea witch just as much as you created the pirate lord Black.”

“Eliza!” Black hissed, glaring at her.

“What?” She huffed, stabbing the slab of meat with the knife.

A tense hush fell upon the dinner table. Sivan could feel the years of struggle between all three of them. The war had not been easy on any of them.

All he could do now was to try and move forward.

“I tried to go back and retrieve you both, but the war with the Uncharted made that island impossible to get to,” Sivan explained quietly.

“Yes, yes, he’s told me all about your half-assed rescue attempts. That’s fine, but it didn’t do any good for us.” She ignored the furious glare Black was shooting her.

Sivan breathed out a bitter laugh. “I suppose not. After a certain point my father stopped letting me sacrifice sailors and ships to try and get anywhere close to the Spear. I had to focus on the front line.”

“It’s okay, my lord,” Black said soothingly, detecting the pain in Sivan’s voice. “We know you never gave up hope.”

“Did you?” Calloway’s bitter edge was replaced by cold curiosity. “Surely at some point you would’ve had to think we were dead.”

Sivan flinched, and Eliza noticed. “I don’t like to admit it, but as the years went on I considered that possibility more and more.” He couldn’t meet Black’s eyes. The blind trust Nereus had placed in him was foolish, and Sivan didn’t want to watch the pirate realize that. “But I kept finding excuses to try and take back the Spear, as suicidal as those missions became. My last attempt to reach the island ended with my fight with Jhaeros.”

“My lord...” Black’s plate clattered as he locked eyes on the lord. But Sivan still couldn’t stand to look at him. Not now.

“It scarred me physically and psychologically. Took me out of the war.”

Eliza scoffed, unimpressed with Sivan’s excuses. “You nobles are all the same. You blindly run wild with your own ambitions

at the expense of others. Then when things go wrong you blame everyone except yourselves.”

“I’m not trying to blame anyone for—“

“For abandoning Nereus, yes. But you are making excuses for it.” She took a long drink of wine and leaned back in her chair. “At the end of it all, you failed him, and we had to crawl out of hell to save ourselves.”

Sivan chanced a glance at Black, but the man was no longer looking at him. He stared at the decadent meal before them, eyes somewhat unfocused, expression pained. This was Nereus realizing that the lord he had worshipped for so long was only human, more human than he was.

“You’re right,” Sivan whispered. “I failed you.”

Nereus looked up at him, his green eyes lost yet still so hopeful.

“My lord—“

The younger man’s voice broke, and it was more than Sivan could handle. A sob threatened to rip out of his throat, and he stood up, shoving it back down. “I-I’m sorry, I—“ His chair slid out with a skid, and he turned and ran out of the room.



Sivan wandered the castle, desperate to find anywhere comfortable to sort his head out. But this castle made of glittering crystal was cold and sharp and every turn was a new cavernous hallway that lead to nowhere.

Eventually he stumbled upon a bridge overlooking a waterfall rushing down a steep crystal wall. Looking up, he had no idea where there water was coming from. It somehow just

appeared at the top of the ceiling and disappeared into nothing below. The bridge was once again made of transparent crystal, looking so fragile but somehow stronger than any stone.

Sivan sighed and leaned on the railing of the bridge, trying to collect his emotions. This place was by no means more welcoming than the rest of the castle, but if he closed his eyes he could pretend the sound of the rushing water was that of the windy ocean shore from the endless summer days on the Spear.

He had meant what he said to Black earlier. Sivan wanted to go back to those days when he could look at the ocean without getting nauseous. He wasn't sure he'd ever be the same carefree youth he had been back then, but the safety and comfort of the island was what he really longed for.

And to share it with Black, with Nereus...it was a future Sivan yearned for. He could no longer deny that his feelings for his former attendant had matured and changed with them both. It still wrecked him with a certain amount of guilt, but the longer he spent with the pirate lord Black, the less he felt beholden to maintain the purity of his attendant from so long ago.

"My lord!" The pirate lord sighed in relief as he joined Sivan on the bridge.

Sivan glanced at him, but didn't let his eyes linger on the panting man. "You found me so quickly."

Black huffed out a laugh, regaining his breath. "I just went to the place I always ended up when I was upset. I'm lucky you found it as well."

"Lucky, huh?" Sivan reached out a hand to the stream of water, feeling the mist collect on his copper skin. Whether or not the waterfall was made by magic, it was still real water. "It's hard to imagine you in a place like this."

Black stepped closer, a hand on the railing. "What do you mean?"

“This castle is so cold and desolate. My memories of you were always on the Spear, lit with sunlight. Or, on a pirate ship.”

“To tell the truth, I did not spend a lot of time here. I really only came back to train or to recover. I spent most of my time out there, getting into trouble.” Black chuckled as he said this, as if ‘getting into trouble’ was just him getting a schoolboy’s detention rather than a harrowing experience at an Uncharted prison.

Sivan stared down at the spot the waterfall disappeared into. “I’m sorry for failing to return. You put so much faith in me, and I was just never the man you thought I was.”

Black was silent for a long moment before answering. “It’s not your fault...really, it’s not. I had the ability to save myself, but I was stubborn. I even thought of returning to the Spear after we’d escaped on the chance I’d find you looking for me.”

The admission was expected, but it still dragged on Sivan’s conscience. Then Black took his hand and pressed it to his lips.

“I didn’t know you had tried so many times to return. I didn’t know...your fight with Jhaeros was because of that.” His words were hot and earnest against Sivan’s skin, making him tremble.

“It doesn’t make a difference. It was just one more failure of mine.” Sivan tried to pull back his hand, but Black held fast.

“You’re not the only one who failed here. I should have swallowed my anger and pride and just returned to you myself. Maybe I could have helped you turn the tides of this war.”

Sivan pushed his hand forward to touch Black’s face, pushing a lock of ink-colored hair to the side. “This war has been hopeless since the day it started. I don’t know if the tide can ever be changed in our favor.”

“All we need to do is to kill Jhaeros. Without him, the Uncharted legions won’t have the coordination to continue fighting. The corseque is the key to that. With you by my side I’m certain we’ll be able to end this.” Black’s voice was sure and earnest. For

the first time in years, hope welled up inside Sivan. He nodded, blinking back tears.

Black kissed him, sealing an unspoken pact between them.



Chapter 22

calloway cay

“Shall I give you a tour of the castle, my lord? Maybe you won’t find it so desolate if you have someone with you.”

Black’s tone was light, but hearing his own words to describe the castle thrown back at Sivan made him feel a little embarrassed for being so blunt about the man’s home.

“Ah, my apologies if I offended you. I did not mean to criticize this place. It is very beautiful,” Sivan said, looking up to admire the crystal chandeliers dripping down the hallway’s ceiling.

“No, you’re right, this place is cold and desolate. I thought my adverse feelings to the Cay were due to my bad memories of it. I’ve never actually brought anyone else here before. It’s good to hear someone else agree with me.”

Sivan frowned. “Bad memories?”

Black grimaced and placed a hand on Sivan’s back, leading him further down the hallway. They had left the bridge and waterfall, but Sivan had no idea where they were heading. Every

turn was marked by the same glittering crystal and polished floors, making it impossible to discern one hallway from the next. But Black seemed to know where he was going.

“It might be easier for me to show you,” Black murmured. “Did you ever wonder where I learned to fight?”

Sivan’s mind rushed back to that night in Varis, when the pirate lord had beaten him back with such ferocity it had shaken his swords right out of his hands. “I guess not.”

“Well, a fair share of it originally came from the lessons you gave me on the Spear.” Black smiled down at him warmly, his eyes light and glittering. “But you know best how fencing and real battle are like night and day.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that.” Internally, Sivan laughed bitterly, remembering his first year into the war, and how he had been only slightly more than useless thanks to his fencing training. Fighting for his life against Uncharted legions was what forced him to turn his showy fencing skills into something more deadly.

They turned yet another corner, and there was finally a break from the pristine crystal. Ahead of them loomed a set of iron doors that looked like they had been regularly beaten with meat cleavers.

“Just past these doors is where I trained,” Black said, a tense vein in his tone.

Sivan was led inside. He had been a regular at many training arenas in his time. Some of them were like the shaded rooftop on the Spear. Some of them were more like the dimly lit back alley of the Royal Navy barracks. However, he had never seen one quite so stained with blood until now.

It took him a moment to register that the walls were not in fact painted a deep rust. They were layered with years and years of dried blood. Some of them had been layered over so many

times they were starting to turn black.

“Eliza refused to clean the bloodstains. She said it was to remind me of my past mistakes. So I could learn from them,” Black tried to offer to Sivan’s stunned silence.

“Wh...is this all your blood?” Was all Sivan could think to ask.

“Hm, most of it, probably.” Black took a moment to survey the walls. “I can’t really remember anymore.”

Sivan gaped at him, wondering how on earth the idiot could still be alive. Even with his superior healing abilities this was an obscene amount of blood.

“But it’s not all my blood!” Black tried to soothe over Sivan’s horrified expression. “A lot of it’s from beasts Eliza would bring me to fight.”

“Beasts,” Sivan repeated monotonically.

Black nodded sheepishly, squirming under Sivan’s disbelieving stare. “Most of them were Uncharted beasts. Like the serpent you killed on the Spear!”

“I see...”

“Although, one time she made me fight a land shark.” Black looked up at a particularly large bloodstain near the ceiling. “Have you ever seen a land shark? They live in the sands on the Eastern continent and are heavily armored. Terrible things.”

Sivan vaguely recollected seeing an illustration of one in a book before and had genuinely thought they had been mythical. However Eliza procured these beasts was something he wanted to keep well away from.

“Why make you fight monsters, though?” Sivan asked.

“I think she reasoned that if I can fight a land shark I can fight Jhaeros.” The man shrugged, walking to a wall lined with swords. Some of them were a little rusty, but overall they looked fairly well maintained. “Besides, it’s always just been me and Eli-

za here. She's really not one for swordplay. I didn't have anyone else to spar with."

A mixture of guilt and heartache that was beginning to become familiar to Sivan washed over him. "I wish I could have been there for you."

Black smiled, all white teeth and a dash of mischief. "Then will you spar with me now, my lord?"

Sivan's mouth opened to shut him down, but the guilt made him promptly shut his mouth again. He frowned slightly, realizing once again that Black was using his own abandonment issues to manipulate Sivan into getting what he wanted.

"You know my skill with the blade hasn't been the same since I lost to Jhaeros. I'm not really a match for you," Sivan said slowly.

The pirate plucked a training sword off the wall. "Nonsense. You were just as quick as I remember back in Varis. If you're that worried about it, I'll use a training sword. Maybe having your old twin sabers in your hands again will help you gain that confidence again."

Sivan opened his mouth again to protest, but Black had already called forth a crystal golem to go fetch Sivan's swords from his room. "You've learned how to twist my words quite well over the years," Sivan muttered under his breath.

Black heard every word and seemed very pleased by it. "I'm not twisting anything. I just want to spar with the Two-Headed Viper."

Sivan's face burned red upon hearing the moniker he was so embarrassed by. "Wh-where did you hear that dreadful title?"

The pirate chuckled, swinging the practice sword in a large arc to get a feel for it. "I believe it was from one of your officers while you were a commander for the Royal Navy. I infiltrated the ranks every now and then to make sure you were doing

alright.”

Sivan made a note to never speak to any of his former officers ever again.

“You shouldn’t be ashamed of it, my lord. It’s a fitting title.”

Sivan let his face warp into a rare grimace. “It’s really not. It’s far too romantic a term for someone like me.”

Black opened his mouth to argue that, but the golem appeared again with Sivan’s swords. The pirate had managed to ruffle Sivan’s feathers enough to goad him into accepting this sparring request, so he took the swords from the golem readily.

This only made Black grin wider.

“I promise not to use any of my siren powers,” he offered nonchalantly, spreading his stupidly muscular arms wide.

Sivan knew he was doing this intentionally. They had spent just enough time together over the last few weeks for the pirate to learn exactly what kind of provocations would get under the skin of the more mature version of his precious lord. Yet Sivan still let him do it, and it gave him a little thrill to do so. No one else dared toy with a lord like this. Whether it be because he was the Earl’s son and a respected war hero, or because everyone walked on eggshells around his broken body and spirit after his retirement...either way, Sivan was always treated like something fragile.

But he wasn’t fragile. Not with Black.

They stepped into position, swords drawn, eyes locked. Maybe the pirate did not expect Sivan to attack first. Maybe he expected Sivan to hold back, like he used to when they trained on the roof of his father’s manor.

So when Sivan came at him in a rush, it genuinely made the pirate lord lose his footing and step back several steps. The clanging of metal on metal reverberated through the bloody arena, satisfying Sivan’s ears in a way he’d almost forgotten about.

Black looked surprised for a moment. Then Sivan grinned. “Don’t you dare hold back on me, Black.”

The pirate gaped at him, a faint blush growing on his high cheekbones. Then he smiled devilishly and returned Sivan’s blow with a powerful swipe of his blade.

The attack was as powerful and rattling as it was when Sivan faced off with him in Varis. However, now he wasn’t equipped with flimsy decorative swords. Now he had his favored sabers, the ones that had lived through the war with him. Sivan gripped the familiar handles, his fingers perfectly notching into the metal that had molded to his hand over many battles. Now he had his right and left hands again.

So he was able to parry the slash and slip out of Black’s angle of attack. Yet, as fond as he was of Nereus, and as fond as he had grown of the man he was now, he was still facing a skilled pirate. Black followed his every move, advancing and retreating wherever he found room, and forcing it if there wasn’t any.

They danced around each other, their swords slashing to meet one another over and over. Sivan had learned the classic waltzes he was required to know if he found himself at a ball, but he had always preferred this dance of blades. Black was a fitting partner; he could match Sivan’s speed and give him a challenge when he needed it. The pirate’s style of fighting was much more brutal than the lord’s. Sivan tended to go for speed and finesse over strength. If he could, he would choose to avoid an attack entirely, letting his fast footwork and slim frame dance just out of danger.

Black liked to make every attack count. If he landed a blow, Sivan would feel it shake his whole body, all the way down to his toes. Yet the man often sacrificed his footing in order to deal such terrifying hits.

Sivan saw the pirate begin to lunge, and stepped into the

attack, turning his body so the sword slid past him harmlessly. Another quick turn brought him behind Black, allowing him to line up a sword to his throat.

“Your footwork has gotten sloppy,” Sivan panted. “Did you forget all I taught you?”

Black chuckled, looking back at Sivan with a glint in his green eyes. “Forgive me, my lord. It’s hard to keep up with my footwork when fighting Uncharted legions.”

Sivan pulled back his sword, letting Black step back. “That never stopped me.”

Black’s smile did not falter. That same eager expression Sivan had seen back in Varis was once more focused on him intensely. “Not everyone can be you, my lord.”

Black attacked again, his face alight with joy as the two of them battled across the arena. The man was growing impatient, and his footwork was getting worse by the minute. It was so easy for Sivan to avoid his attacks entirely, only parrying when he felt like it. Sivan could feel that same eager expression affix to his face. He had forgotten what this felt like. What it felt like to feel invincible with a blade in each hand and the wind at his back.

They were both sweating now, bodies working in overdrive. Sivan hadn’t sparred like this in so long, and he could already tell his muscles were going to be furious with him tomorrow. But Black had a seemingly endless supply of energy. Unlike Sivan, he had been in active combat on a regular basis for the last year, and there was the siren curse which factored into that.

Eventually Black backed Sivan up against a wall and landed a blow on both of Sivan’s swords that was so powerful it shook his shoulders visibly. Then Black dropped his sword.

He stepped forward, grabbing both of Sivan’s hands. One of Black’s hands ripped the sword away from him, and the other gripped Sivan’s wrist tightly and brought it over his head, caus-

ing him to drop his other sword. One of the finely crafted sabers clattered to the floor next to Black's training sword. The other, in Black's hand, was held inches from Sivan's throat.

Both of them were panting, breath mingling as the tension of the moment settled. Sivan's golden eyes danced with fire, meeting Black's capricious green with a challenge.

"You cheated," Sivan said, breathless.

The pirate grinned. "And you lied."

"Lied?"

"Mm, yes," Black hummed while looking Sivan up and down. "You said you weren't a match for me. If I hadn't cheated you would have cut my head off."

Sivan chuckled. He hadn't even realized he was so on top of his game during the match. It'd been so long since he'd even felt comfortable with having a sword in his hand, but when he was with this man he felt no issue in bringing out the decorated war hero he once was.

"Even so, you still haven't grown out of your cheating ways. Not playing fair won't get you anywhere."

Black's grin turned toothy. He inched closer, his voice dropping an octave. "Well, I did become a pirate."

"You did," Sivan acknowledged. His heartbeat quickened; he could almost feel the heat coming off the man's lips. "And I feel like I should reprimand you for that."

Black's grip on his wrist tightened a fraction, the sword between them lowering. Somehow, his voice dropped another octave lower, becoming deep and sinful. "If it's from my lord, I'll take it with pride."

The pirate's words stoked the embers in Sivan's gut that had been growing for Black. He was dizzy with it, weak to resist the pull that drew them closer and closer together.

Sivan surged forward, meeting Black with a fire that he could

no longer contain. His lips were hot, salty with sweat, and hungry to open Sivan up. The pirate kissed him like he was starving, desperate to swallow up every breath and sound that came out of him. Black could not let go of his wrist, and Sivan didn't want him to. His hand so perfectly encircled his thinner arm, reminding Sivan of their vast difference in power and size. He thrilled in this contrast, the arousal in his body burning when Black pushed him further up against the wall. Sivan's feet left the ground, his legs parting to accommodate the man between him.

Sivan wrapped his free arm around Black's neck, tangling his hand in the thick mess of dark hair that had started to stick to his sweat-slicked skin. Their mouths moved against each other with a furious purpose, weeks if not years of pent-up need struggling to find a release through their lips.

Black thrust his hips between Sivan's legs, grinding his growing erection against Sivan's own. "My lord..." he groaned, parting only for a moment to allow Sivan to gasp for air.

The lord in question couldn't even process what to say. Heat gathered in his body in a way that was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. This was a heady and dangerous passion, wanting this pirate, this man. Just this kiss was enough to consume his mind with an obsession that could never be satisfied.

Sivan shuddered, his legs wrapping tightly around the man. It had only been a few weeks since that night in Lissandry, but his need to find release was stronger now than ever before. He could feel Black's arousal press up against his ass, and he hummed with the desire to be filled by that large cock.

He was dimly aware that they were in a blood-stained training arena, and there was nothing from stopping the crystal golems or Eliza from walking in, but all the propriety that Sivan had been trained to obey dissipated in the face of this pirate.

Sivan gasped as Black pulled back once more. His lips were

glossy and red, a faint trace of blood on his chin from where the siren's sharp teeth had pricked him. Black's lips went to Sivan's neck, lifting him up further with an arm snaked behind his back. Sivan felt subsumed. He had no room to move, but still felt like he needed to get closer.

"My lord-" Black rasped against his throat. He sucked and nipped at copper skin, peppering the line of Sivan's neck with marks. His teeth would catch on his skin, drawing small drops of blood that would be cleaned up by more kisses.

It was a brutal form of affection, one Sivan did not have much experience with. It was exciting, but a shadow of fear crossed his mind every time he felt the teeth against his neck.

Then his arm began to burn. Sivan did not notice it immediately because he was so intoxicated by this intimacy, but when he did, it flared to attention over any pleasure.

"B-Black!" Sivan choked out, the pain intensifying as the pirate's grip on his wrist tightened. He remembered the night in Varis when Black had placed his mark over Jhaeros's. The heat was the same, but the pain was far more dizzying than he remembered. "Stop-ngh!"

The man holding him passionately against the wall was beyond Sivan's reach. Even if he could struggle to free himself, he had no strength to. The siren's grip around his burning wrist was draining him of energy.

Still, Sivan attempted to struggle. His other hand was still in Black's hair, gripped tightly. If he could just get Black to snap out of this, out of whatever tunnel he'd gone into, maybe the burning would stop. He tightened his fist of black hair and pulled with all the strength he had left.

Black growled, immediately pulling back from Sivan's bloodied neck. This seemed enough to bring him out of his trance, and he let go of Sivan, who dropped into a heap on the floor.

Darkness began to overtake Sivan's vision, but he saw Black fall to his knees next to him, tears and fear in his eyes as he sobbed, "no, no— My lord! I'm so sorry—I—"

Sivan's world faded into unconsciousness, totally drained of energy.

Chapter 25

calloway cay

This was the fourth time Sivan had passed out in front of his long lost attendant since their reunion, and by this point he was really growing tired of it. Sivan laid in bed as the murky morning crept in through the windows. He tried to remember where he was and why he had been forced into unconsciousness. Rubbing his face, he noticed a pitch black handprint encircling his right wrist.

The evening sparring match tumbled back into his mind, and Sivan groaned out a sigh. Eliza had gotten rid of the marks on his arm, and in less than a day he managed to acquire another one.

'At least this one isn't from Jhaeros,' he thought mildly as he sat up. Sivan recognized the room as the one he and Black had slept in the night before. Black's baubles and trinkets were still lined up meticulously on the shelves, but Sivan noticed his twin swords had been conspicuously placed back where he had origi-

nally found them.

Black was nowhere to be seen. Looking out the window he could see rainclouds encroaching upon the cay, dark and morose. A vein of irritation showed up on Sivan's neck, and he realized he had most likely been the unintended instigator of another one of Black's foul moods.

He got out of bed and dressed quickly, grateful that someone had delivered him clean clothes this morning. It occurred to him that Black had probably been the one to do this, since the day before he had not had fresh clothes laid out for him. Which happened to be when Black had slept through the morning in his arms. Part of Sivan longed to rewind time a day. If he had just stayed in bed with the man and not sought out Eliza, maybe things would have turned out different.

Before he left the room, Sivan slid both of his twin sabers into his belt.

He opened the door and was immediately met with two crystal golems. Judging by their sharp looking spears, they were here to guard him. Against what, he could not guess.

"Where is Black?" Sivan asked them.

They stared at him blankly, their crystal eyes devoid of any emotion.

Sivan sighed and turned to walk down the direction he thought the waterfall bridge might be. However, he was stopped when two more crystal golems folded out of the wall and blocked his path. Sivan froze, anxiety pricking up the back of his neck. These things had been nothing but polite and helpful to him before, so this sudden implied threat set him on edge.

"We will take you to see Lady Calloway," the golems chimed in unison, their voices cold.

Sivan clenched his teeth, trying to hold back his frustration. "Fine, I want to talk to her anyways."

All four of the golems ushered him through the halls. Two led the way, and two followed behind. They were feeling less like helpful servants and more like an armed escort.

Eliza was once again in her crystalline greenhouse, feeding her growing golems with magic from her glowing hands.

“What’s with the armed guard?” Sivan asked as a greeting.

Eliza looked at him with a small smirk, but it failed to reach her eyes. “Poor Lord Montgomery was attacked by a vicious siren last night. You’re far too valuable to be left unattended.”

Sivan frowned. He did not like the way she said that.

“Where is he? Where is Black?”

Eliza stopped feeding her golems and sat down on a crystal chair. “Why should I tell you that? I don’t know what happened between you two, but it must have been something intense for Nereus to lose control like that.”

Sivan couldn’t hide the blush on his face, but he soldiered on. “It’s nothing serious. I just need to talk to him.”

“Oh, I don’t believe that for a moment,” she laughed. “That boy has been in love with you since he dragged you out of the ocean. He should have left you to drown, but instead he let you warp him into this sniveling fool.”

Sivan’s heart skipped at the mention of ‘love.’ He suspected the man’s intense devotion towards him was due to something like this, but he had hoped to hear it from Black himself first. “I admit I have been consciously ignorant of his feelings for me. But that does not mean I do not care for him, surely you know that.”

“Pah!” Eliza scoffed. “You have a funny way of showing it. Parading around Grenaldia acting like a war hero when you’ve been senselessly murdering any Uncharted that crossed your path. I was honestly surprised to hear that you let a siren capture you and you haven’t tried to kill him yet.”

“What does that have to do with Black?” Sivan didn’t like

what she was saying. It's not like he wanted to kill Uncharted. It was the cost of this war, and his position and talent had elevated him to hero status.

But Eliza looked at him with such undiluted censure that he doubted himself.

"Do you have some kind of love towards Uncharted? Is that why you cursed Nereus?" Sivan had hoped to strike a nerve with these words, but the blank look of disbelief on Eliza's face was not what he was expecting.

"Curse...?" She chuckled bitterly. "Oh, is that what he told you? That poor boy. Even now he's terrified of your judgement."

Sivan frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Nereus, or, Black, as you love to call him now...is a natural-born siren."

The words logically made sense to Sivan, but his mind would still not accept it.

"Well, half siren," Eliza continued. "His mother was human, supposedly. That's why he only turns into one of those *fell creatures* when he touches seawater." Her tone was mocking, as if she was trying to mimic Sivan's father.

"But...how can that be? I'd seen him in the ocean hundreds of times on the Spear."

"The Uncharted attack and you consequentially abandoning him triggered his first transformation. I wonder if he'd still have his humanity if you'd never left him to die."

Sivan wanted to argue with her. He felt frustration and rage roil in his stomach at this woman who insisted on blaming him for everything that happened on the Spear. But, he realized he was not angry at Black. How could he be? It wasn't his fault he was born like this.

"Just tell me where Black is."

Eliza stared at him for a long moment, her icy eyes trying to

read him. Eventually she waved behind her. “He’s likely in the dungeon. The boy likes to lock himself away when he’s feeling especially pitiable.”

Sivan nodded, refusing to actually voice a thank you. He stormed past her, heading towards the door she had pointed at.

Despite his previous experiences with getting lost in the winding castle, Sivan found the staircase leading down without much difficulty. The walls grew darker as he descended, the crystalline perfection of the rest of the castle corroding into damp walls and a faint stench of death. His descent seemed to last a lifetime. No windows or doors were present to indicate how many floors Sivan had gone down. He was generally not claustrophobic, but the further he went, the more confining the staircase felt. It seemed like it spiraled into the very darkest place of his mind, plucking out fears he hadn’t realized he harbored.

Then there was a door, and Sivan didn’t care to wonder if this was the dungeon or not. He barged right in.

It was an office, so covered in messy piles of papers and scrolls it made Sivan’s worst desk tornado look passable. “This must be Eliza’s office,” he muttered to himself. The room wasn’t much better than the winding staircase, but there was a window half visible through the stacks of documents at least. Somehow, he seemed much higher up than he would have thought.

Hazy morning light, filtered by the oncoming storm lit up the desk in front of it. At least, Sivan assumed it was a desk since it seemed to be the origin point of the mess.

A pale green light thrummed on the other side of the room, just around a corner. It seemed weak and listless, but Sivan couldn’t see where it was coming from. Unable to resist his curiosity, he turned the corner.

The green light was emanating from a huge glass tank. Sivan couldn’t see what was inside because there was so much algae

coating the inside of the glass. Looking closer, he could faintly see runes etched lightly onto the glass. They looked suspiciously like sirenath characters, so he stepped right up to the tank to observe them.

He touched a finger to the glass, tracing the runes, and the whole tank shook.

Sivan jumped, stepping back. He could hear the gurgling sounds of bubbles from within, like someone was inside it.

A hand smacked the inside of the tank and wiped away a stripe of algae.

Sivan's blood ran cold at what he saw.

It was a siren's corpse.

At least, Sivan presumed it was a corpse due to the gaping hole in its chest. Yet the creature seemed to live still, in some sense of the word. It gurgled at Sivan, wiping away more algae to see him better. Or, it would have, except its eyes had rotted away to empty sockets.

It was suspended by tendrils of kelp, allowing it minimal motion in the water-filled tank, but somehow prevented it from escaping. Why on earth would Eliza capture a half-dead siren? This type of confinement was cruel, no matter who it was.

Then Sivan remembered what Eliza had just told him. 'Nereus...is a natural born siren.' He thought about Black being strung up in a tank like this, and his blood turned icy.

Was this what Eliza planned to do with Black one day? She had been like a mother to him on the Spear, but now there was a seemingly irreconcilable feud between them. The sea witch had even tried to kill Black when they first showed up here.

The distant sound of a Grenaldian horn tore Sivan's attention back to the desk with its singular window. He rushed to look out, and any unfrozen blood he had left evaporated into nothing.

The Royal Navy was at the Cay.

Sivan's knees grew weak, and he stumbled backwards into the desk, papers falling around him. This was not good. If the Navy found out they were here, there would be no mercy from Sivan's father. Black would be executed.

A document, floating down from the desk he'd just disturbed, caught Sivan's attention. He snatched it midair.

'On behalf of the Queen, I, Earl Tristan Montgomery, Admiral of the Royal Navy, hereby grant Eliza Calloway a full pardon. Effective after the exchange of the criminal known as 'Captain Black'...'

Sivan crumpled the pardon in his fist. Anger frothed at his senses, drowning him in the urge to go back the way he came and spear the sea witch on his sabers.

She was trading Black for a pardon. Sivan likely had something to do with this exchange since his father was involved.

The Royal Navy's horns sounded again, and Sivan snapped into action. He fled the office as quickly as he had entered it, and began his way back down the disorienting staircase.

He had to find Black. He had to save him.

The shock of discovering Eliza's betrayal had cleared his mind, and Sivan found himself at the door to the dungeon in no time. Throwing open the iron door, he walked into a hall of cells lined with iron bars. The ones Sivan could see were all empty, but there were so many of them. Did Eliza really jail so many guests she required this number of cells?

The cells were dimly lit with white crystals, and the last cell's door was cracked open. As he approached, Sivan could just make out familiar shadowy tendrils inching out of the bars.

Inside was a man huddled on the ground. It was Black, human as ever, but covered in the same shadowy sludge Sivan had experienced in the bowels of the Blackwater. Sivan assumed this

was a product of the man's severe emotional distress, siren form or not. Since Black was not currently a siren, the tentacles were less lively here than in the hold, but Sivan still made a note to step carefully around them.

"Black?"

No response. The tendrils reacted to his voice, but they did not reach out to grip him like they had on the ship.

"Black, you need to snap out of this. Eliza's betrayed us."

There was still no response.

Sivan frowned at the pitiful-looking man before him. The black handprint recently burned into his arm was oddly cold now, making part of his skin feel like it was not his. He looked at the mark, finally realizing how little animosity he felt towards Black for doing this to him. It was just skin, and he had lived with a far worse mark on his heart for so much longer.

Yet, remembering the deep regret and panic on the pirate's face before Sivan had passed out, Black had clearly dug himself into a pit of self-loathing over the act.

It was so childish, to run away and hide like this, but Sivan willed himself the strength to be patient. He stepped close to the man and kneeled down into the shallow pool of black slime. Black shrunk away from him instinctively, although there was not much room in the cell for him to escape to.

Sivan had to find a way to calm him down somehow.

Cautiously, he offered his hand to a tendril snaking off one of Black's legs. It seemed reluctant to hold him tightly like they did before, but it slowly and gently wrapped around Sivan's palm and wrist. The shadowy tentacle wandered up his forearm, inspecting the black handprint. Sivan felt a faint buzz of warmth from the mark at the contact, as if it and the tendril were happy to connect like this.

It was supremely weird, but it somehow caused a well of

emotion bubble up inside Sivan.

“My lord...?” A faint voice rasped from the curtain of ebony hair.

Sivan pushed aside Black’s hair, revealing his green eyes, still hazy but now focused on Sivan. “There you are.”

The man blinked at him slowly, struggling to shake off the trance he had worked himself into. “My lord-“ his voice cracked, distressed. “I hurt you. I didn’t mean to, but— I couldn’t keep myself from thinking of how you no longer bore my mark and I— I just—“ Tears poured down Black’s face, dismay on his face.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m fine. We can talk about that later, okay?” Sivan waited until the pirate gave him a small nod before getting to the danger waiting for them outside. “Black, listen to me. Eliza has betrayed us. The Royal Navy is here. I think she’s traded you in for a pardon.”

A fraction of a frown appeared on Black’s face. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

Sivan sighed at his passive response. “We need to run, Black. If the Navy catches us they will arrest you.”

Green eyes flicked to the black mark on Sivan’s arm. “Good, I deserve to be arrested.”

“You don’t understand-“ Sivan bit back a growl of frustration. “You are too notorious to simply be thrown in jail. My father has been hunting you for years. He will execute you, no matter how hard I try to stop him.”

There was a longer pause, but Black’s tone grew even more sullen. “That’s fine, too. If I can’t stop myself from hurting you, then I don’t see future for me.”

Sivan heard his own neck crack, and it snapped the last vestiges of his patience.

“Nereus!” He barked, sitting up on his knees to look down at him. “I am not a fragile thing for you to treasure! Yes, you hurt

me, but it did no serious harm.”

Black blinked at him, the torrent of his mind swirling to understand Sivan’s words. “You don’t want me to treasure you?”

Sivan sighed, giving up on reprimanding the pirate while he was in this state. “You may treasure me if you wish. But please do not treat me like a porcelain doll. I’ve been labeled as a broken man for too long. I don’t think I can bear it.”

The shadowy tendrils reached out to Sivan, pulling him back down onto the floor. “You’re not a broken man, my lord. That duel yesterday proved it. I really did have to cheat, you know.”

“I know, dirty pirate,” Sivan chuckled. Then he looked into Black’s green eyes, pleased to see they were finally starting to focus. “But you did promise me you were going to redeem yourself to me,” he said, bringing a hand up to brush the curtain of black hair out of the handsome man’s face. “How are you going to do that if you’re not in my future?”

Black’s eyes welled with tears, and he embraced Sivan tightly, like he had been drowning and the man in his arms was a life-saving breath. “My lord!” he sobbed, trembling terribly.

Sivan hugged him back, smoothing out the hair at the back of his head with his fingers. “If you wish to truly treasure me, all you have to do is continue to stay by my side. I ask for nothing more. I promise to never leave you. Not again.”

The pirate in his arms sobbed harder, nearly a decade of struggle and misery culminating in this one breakdown. Sivan would have stayed there for hours, as long as Black needed, but the threat of capture still beat down upon his mind.

“Black, I was not kidding about Eliza’s betrayal. The Royal Navy is right outside.” Sivan released the pirate, satisfied in seeing the man’s serious expression. “Do you know any way out of here besides turning ourselves in?”

Black was silent for a moment, his eyes flickering with ideas

as he assessed the situation. "We could leave the way we came."

"The portal?"

"Maybe," he nodded. "I can't see a way out of here through conventional means. Eliza's bewitched this entire castle. Even if I knew of a safe passage, her enchantments would have us walking right into her hands."

Sivan thought about the strange, unending staircase he took to get here. "Is that why I can't find my way around here?"

The pirate couldn't help but grin. "That, and you have no sense of direction."

Sivan pouted, but let Black continue.

"There is a strong possibility she has also cast a spell on the Cay. Any portal I cast might be completely under her control."

"So there's no way out of here?" Sivan asked tentatively.

"Well," Black looked at him, his tone cautious, "the portal we used to get here is only as strong as the seal. The strength of the seal is dependent on what is used to create it. If I can draw it in something stronger than sand it may be enough to overpower Eliza's hold."

Sivan remembered the memory Eliza showed him the day before. "Something like blood?"

Black nodded solemnly. "It would be strongest if we used your blood."

"Why?" Sivan asked, although he did not necessarily reject the idea.

"Siren magic is influenced by emotion..." The pirate's green eyes met his for a brief moment before flicking to the ground.

"And I have very strong feelings for you."

"O-oh," Sivan breathed, his face flushing. His heart hammered in his chest, and the urge to embrace the man once more bubbled up inside him. But he reminded himself of the situation and merely stuck out his arm. "Take as much as you need."

Black nodded. "I don't need very much."

The two of them stood up, Black retracting his shadowy tendrils and clearing a space in the cell for the circle. He pulled Sivan closer with an arm around his waist. His other hand took Sivan's wrist gingerly, feeling his quickened pulse.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"O-of course," Sivan tried to say, like he wasn't more flustered by the man's hand around his wrist than the impending force of the Royal Navy.

Black hummed, a sly little grin on his face. It was incomprehensible, how they could be in such dire straits and this man would still find ways to ruffle Sivan's feathers.

Then he gently lifted Sivan's wrist to his mouth and carefully bit down. It only hurt for a moment, and then Black was sucking at his skin, drawing blood into his mouth. It was a strange sensation, and Sivan couldn't help but gasp at the intimacy of it.

This wasn't the time or place, but his body did not care.

Black pulled back once his mouth was full, and turned Sivan to the side to keep him out of the way. Then inhaled through his nose and spit out the full mouthful of blood onto the ground.

Just like Eliza had done in the memory, Black had laid out an entire magic circle in an instant. Sivan couldn't even imagine how long it had taken to master that.

Black held a hand out over the circle, letting green sparks crackle over it. The sparks lit up the blood, making it glow a bright green. The portal opened, but they could not see inside. There was no way to tell if they would be interrupted by Eliza when they entered.

Still, Sivan took Black's hand, nodding at him before they both stepped into the portal.

Chapter 24

calloway cay

If the portal had led them to safety, maybe Sivan would have been able to convince Black to run away with him. His own moral compass was directing him towards continuing the good fight in their hunt to find the corseque and end the war, but his heart was growing weary from years of loss. Sivan had finally been reunited with Nereus, was finally starting to understand his feelings for him, and all he wanted was to keep him safe by whatever means necessary.

Maybe they would have gone west, to the other side of the Great Sea that had not been touched by the war. Sivan had learned the common tongue of Belatore from a visiting merchant, and he had always wanted to visit the country he hoped was as vibrant as its language.

And maybe Black would begin to let go of his anger. Maybe over time Sivan would be able to coax the starry-eyed Nereus into showing himself again.

Unfortunately the portal had been intercepted by Eliza, and from the savage look on Black's face, this betrayal was another nail in the coffin of Nereus's battered innocence.

When they stepped out of the portal, Black was immediately hit with something and knocked into the wall. Their hands were ripped apart by the force, and Sivan was firmly held in place by two crystal golems.

They were in the entrance room they had appeared in when they first arrived at the Cay. Black howled against the wall, pain evident in his voice. A strange black net held him in place, sparking against the man where it touched his skin. It looked agonizing, and Sivan could even smell his burning flesh as it seared into him.

"Eliza! Let him go!" Sivan shouted, raking his eyes over the room to search for her. He found her, standing next to a fully uniformed Renalt.

"Renalt?"

"My lord, I've come to bring you—oh, heavens, what has he done to you?" Renalt stuttered, his face flushed with horror as he took in Sivan's appearance.

Sivan was then starkly aware of the blood dripping from the wrist Black had bitten down on. On top of that, the black handprint on his forearm was attracting attention right next to his obvious injury. Then, like a cruel recording of the previous day's events, the bruises and bite marks Black had made on his neck during their so-called sparring match were just beginning to bloom viciously on his skin. Even though Sivan did not hold any of these things against Black, from Renalt's perspective it looked like his lord had been wholly ravaged by the pirate.

The golems released Sivan, and Renalt stepped forward, looking like he wanted to embrace him. "Don't worry, I'm here to rescue you."

Instead, Sivan stood up straighter, reestablishing his status with a firm glare, and stopping the sailor in his tracks. "I don't need rescuing. I'm perfectly fine."

Black groaned in pain as he tried once again to thrash against the restraints, and it pulled at Sivan's heart. "Don't you fuckin' touch him, you traitor!"

Renalt just shot the pirate a dirty look, but there was a flash of a frown on Eliza's face when Black sobbed in pain. Sivan didn't miss it. She had betrayed them, and her and Black had been estranged for god knows how long, but Sivan knew Eliza had at one point considered Nereus a son.

"Eliza! You can't let them take him!" Sivan pleaded with her. "I don't know what my father told you in exchange for that pardon, but there won't be any mercy for Black. He will be executed."

The sea witch's face was cold now. Any cracks that appeared when Black was howling in pain had been sealed up by her own resolve. "That's about what the earl told me. That boy's been dead to me for years. An eye for an eye."

Sivan couldn't believe this. She had practically raised Nereus! And now she was selling him out without a second thought! Sivan growled and attempted to pull out a saber, but the golems reached out and held him back.

Renalt blinked away a flurry of anger and confusion at Sivan's stubborn defense of the pirate lord. "He's completely brainwashed you..."

More crystal golems retrieved Black from the wall, wrapping him in the black netting to keep him restrained. Then they carried him off to a large set of doors that opened to the Grenaldian ships waiting in the cay. Eliza waved a hand and a bundle of the thick black netting appeared next to her. She stepped over to Renalt and passed the bundle to him.

“Iron kelp,” she explained. “It’s the only thing that will restrain a siren.”

Renalt took the kelp and nodded at her in thanks. Then he turned to Sivan. “My lord, your father is waiting on a ship. Please allow me to bring you to him. Perhaps seeing him will break whatever spell this criminal has you under.”

Sivan ground his teeth, swallowing the urge to spit in this man’s face. He knew Renalt meant well, but he was doing far more harm than good in handing both of them over to Tristan Montgomery.

“Fine,” he spat. “Show me to my father. I have a few words I’d like to say to him.”



Sivan counted twelve ships as he was led out of Calloway’s castle. It seemed excessive, especially when there was a war going on. He knew Grenaldia had no ships to spare. Bile rose at the back of his throat at the thought of his father sacrificing sailors in order to go on this rescue mission. As always, the needs of the nobility outweighed the greater good.

He was led to the largest ship in the fleet. Crystal golems carried Black’s barely conscious body across the beach and loaded him onto the dinghy waiting for them. Sivan didn’t ask for permission and climbed on in to sit next to Black. He could feel Renalt’s stare, but willfully ignored it.

The small ship inched across the turbulent shallows, the dark storm clouds gathering pressure the further they got away from the Cay. Sivan frowned at the sky. It was heavy with rain, but something held the deluge back.

“My lord...” Black rasped out weakly. Sivan turned his attention to him immediately. “Does your arm still bleed?”

Sivan didn’t even bother to check the bite mark on his skin. “I’m fine, don’t strain yourself.” The iron kelp was still tightly wrapped around him, and Sivan could smell the acrid sear of flesh burning. Black looked ashen, his eyes miserable and dark. There wasn’t a hint of the light green that sparkled whenever he locked eyes with Sivan.

He brushed back a dark lock of hair and wiped off a few beads of sweat from the man’s shivering skin. This iron kelp was doing something brutal to Black, and Sivan wanted nothing more than to free him from it.

“Don’t even think about it,” a sailor warned when he noticed Sivan testing the strength of the kelp. He waved a spear in the lord’s face, the point wavering when the water rocked the boat.

Sivan glared down the tip of the spear, golden eyes warning the man not to challenge him.

But the spear was tipped out of Sivan’s face by Renalt’s hand. “Careful, the admiral will be livid if you injure his son.”

Of course he would be angry. The only value Sivan held to his father was that of a pretty face to win marriage prospects. He had only ever been as important as his best asset to his father. That hadn’t changed, even after his capture.

Black hissed when the dinghy jolted down a swell and jostled the kelp wrapped around his body. Sivan hovered over him again, worry wrecking his features.

“Black, please hold on. I’ll figure out a way out of here.”

The pirate looked like he wanted to say something, but he could only breathe shakily through pained groans. Sivan knew then that he would do anything to save this man from the guillotine. Even if it meant using his own future to barter with his father.

Sivan looked up and caught Renalt staring openly at the two of them. His upper lip was curled slightly, brows knitted upwards in disgust over Sivan's affection towards the criminal. Jealousy and hurt colored his eyes, and despite himself, Sivan felt a brief moment of shame.

Yet the moment was brief, and Renalt turned away just as quickly as he had been caught.

They were separated when they boarded the ship. Sivan had kept quietly reassuring Black before they took him away, but he wasn't sure if his words had reached him through the haze the iron kelp kept him in. They'd also taken away Sivan's twin sabers, further cutting off his connection to the pirate who had kept them safe for the last year.

Renalt led him to his father's cabin. Sivan stared at the tall man's back, ramrod straight with pride. He had helped Renalt out while he was facing the Belatoran crocodile, but he never asked the sailor to return the favor.

"How did you escape the Blackwater?" Sivan asked.

Renalt paused several feet from a door that probably opened to the waiting earl. "I didn't escape. Hayes let me go when we made port after you went overboard."

Sivan cocked an eyebrow. "She did? It seems unlikely the crew would just let you go."

"I'm not sure the crew knew. Hayes told me Black most likely took you to Calloway Cay. We just got lucky that the sea witch was up for negotiations."

It was a flimsy story, but Sivan didn't have the patience to suss out if he needed to add Hayes to the list of people who had betrayed them.

Renalt stepped to the door and opened it for him. "Admiral Montgomery is waiting for you, my lord."

Sivan raised his chin and walked through, Renalt following after.

His father looked to be in the same scene Sivan had last seen him in. Tristan Montgomery stood at a war table, frowning severely at the dwindling number of silver ships amongst the red ones. He looked up at his son passively, much as if he were still in his office back on Varis.

“I never thought you would be the one to stir up trouble like this, Sivan. I had to pull these ships out of the northern line to come get you.” His words were not harsh, but they were stern to a fault. This was much like his father had done most of his life. He had brought up Sivan kindly as long as he listened to every word he said.

“I never asked you to do that. I was doing perfectly fine on my own. I didn’t need a rescue.” Sivan glared at his father as the old man rubbed his temples, teeth grinding.

“Did that pirate even kidnap you? You’re making it sound like you went along willingly.”

Sivan knew not to answer that. There was so much more to his story with Black, and his father would not even begin to listen to it if he knew of his attachment to him and the Blackwater.

“Leave,” the earl barked at Renalt, haphazardly waving him off in the direction of the door. Renalt looked like he wanted to hear the answer to that question as well, but he obeyed the command and left them alone.

The second the door shut, Sivan began grilling his father. “I understand you’ve been hunting Black for years, but you must hear me out-“

“I don’t have to listen to anything!” the earl spat, louder than he usually spoke. He straightened his back, crisped the hem of his sleeves, and composed himself.

Still, Sivan continued. It was strange, how the fear of disap-

proval he used to feel when his father chided him was gone. “Father, please. Black and I may have found a way to kill Jhaeros. It’s why he stole the Siren Seal.”

The Earl’s stern face didn’t falter, but did not stop Sivan from continuing.

“There is a map on the Blackwater. If we can get it we can find the Corseque of Estes. It’s—”

“I know what the Corseque of Estes is. It’s a fairy tale.”

“But what if it isn’t? What if it’s the only thing that can end this war?” Sivan stepped closer to the table, motioning to the dwindling Grenaldian forces.

His father was silent for a long moment, frowning deeply at the war table. Then he sighed. “This war ended long ago. We’ve only been limping on because they’ll kill us if we don’t.”

Sivan shook his head. “It’s like you’ve already surrendered.”

There was a long pause from the older man. Lines of weariness on his face were now more apparent to Sivan than they had ever been before. “We tried once.” His father breathed the words out like it was a shameful secret. “When the famine started taking its toll on Grenaldia we attempted to sit down with Jhaeros. To begin the negotiation of our surrender.”

Shock was evident on Sivan’s face. Surrendering was never an option he thought his father would consider. He thought the man would die before lowering himself to admitting defeat. “How long ago was that?”

“Three years ago. The Uncharted king took delight in refusing to accept our surrender. He said the point of the war was not to negotiate, but to cleanse the land of our kind.”

Sivan was stunned into silence. His father had always been a man of pure certitude. The earl never doubted his decisions, never wasted a moment to idleness. Hearing him admit that he had lost hope long ago was almost too much for Sivan.

“Then why not put a bet on a fairy tale? Even if this map doesn’t lead to the corseque, at least we’ll have a powerful ally on our side. Black has the same goals that we do.”

The earl plucked an obsidian ship off the table. “Grenaldia allied with a pirate...?” For a moment Sivan hoped this was the turning point for his father. But he tossed the ship back onto the table, where it landed amongst a sea of red ships. “Never.”

“Father, please listen to reason—“

“Reason?! The only reason I need to execute that monster is that he is a pirate! He’s committed countless capital crimes, the latest of which is the kidnapping of a noble.” The earl stomped around the war table and collapsed into a chair behind a writing desk. “It doesn’t matter what his goals are. Black will die once we make port.”

Sivan’s blood ran cold at the thought of Black being executed. He fell to his knees in front of his father, desperate to show his sincerity in the matter. “Please reconsider. Father, do you remember my attendant on the Spear? Nereus, the boy who saved me from drowning when I was young.”

A flicker of recognition flashed across the man’s eyes. “Yes...”

“We left him on that island after Jhaeros attacked. I kept going back to search for him, but I never considered he would have made it on his own. Black is Nereus. I’ve finally found him.”

His father remained silent, but he looked down at Sivan with such pity. He brushed back Sivan’s silver hair, the familiar hand warm and calloused against his cheek. “Oh, Sivan. I am sorry. It was never supposed to be this way.”

Sivan gripped his father’s hand. “Then don’t make it so. Let Black go. I’ve already translated the map. I have no doubt he can find the corseque on his own. I’ll come back with you and marry Prince Gregor, or, or anyone. It doesn’t matter. As long as...”

His father pulled his hand away, and Sivan’s words died on

his lips. "Prince Gregor has called off the engagement. After your kidnapping, Vhelta wants nothing to do with Grenaldia."

Sivan was at a loss. His only bargaining chip left was to give away his hand to someone he didn't want in order to gain favor in the war. But now he was worth nothing to his father, and Black would die because of it.

"You have your mother's empathy. Nereus died long ago and was replaced by a criminal. I cannot spare what is already dead."

"No."

"Black's crimes are too great. No amount of sentimentality can pardon him."

"No, father, please—"

But the earl was no longer interested in what Sivan had to say. He rose from his chair and left the cabin, locking the door behind him.

Once again, Sivan was locked in a cabin on a ship. Except now he was utterly alone.



The next few days were spent in a nervous and furious haze. Renalt would bring him food, try to make conversation, and Sivan would ignore both the meal and the man in favor of drafting endless notes for arguments to have with his father later.

Except those arguments never happened. The earl would come to check on him and fetch something from his desk, but he pointedly left before Sivan could steer him into a meaningful conversation. Even if Sivan had succeeded in bringing up the topic of Black, he doubted he would have been able to keep a level head about the matter. His nights were bookended by

worrying thoughts over Black's fate and nightmares induced by those same thoughts. Sivan was losing his focus, and he was running out of time.

"We should arrive in Lissandry by tomorrow morning," the earl announced. He was rifling through a mess of papers on his desk, equally as untidy as Sivan was with his paperwork.

Sivan managed to maintain his calm veneer even though dread roiled through his gut. He was picking at his food, obstinately refusing to eat. Anything he put in his mouth tasted bland and inconsequential, and he wasn't sure if it was because of his high level of stress or if he had spent too long eating Black's meals and nothing could compare to it.

It crossed Sivan's mind that he may never be able to eat the pirate's cooking again if tomorrow happened without someone intervening.

He pushed his meal away, the sight of it causing him more grief that it should have. His father was still pretending Sivan wasn't there. Much as the rest of his life, Sivan had become an ornamental fixture for the Earl. Before Black, he would have resigned himself to sitting back and doing as he was told. Before Black, he wouldn't have put hope in a mythical weapon that probably didn't exist. Before Black, Sivan was fractured and resigned to a life of loss. But the man had made him whole again and infused him with a hope he'd long forgotten.

"Father, what do you intend to do with me when we return to Varis?"

The earl looked up, his steel gray eyes finally landing on his son. All other conversation topics had failed, but naturally, the man was more than willing to give an answer when it came to Sivan's usefulness. "I'll start looking for new marriage prospects for you. Hopefully one with better manners."

Renalt, standing guard at the door, flinched, and his spear hit

the frame of the door with a loud thwack. Twin sabers at his side rattled against each other, drawing even more attention to Renalt. Sivan narrowed his eyes slightly at the man, but he continued staring directly ahead.

“And if I refuse?” Sivan asked his father.

One of his eyes twitched, but he didn’t change his expression. “You don’t have a say in the matter.”

“Of course I don’t. When have I ever had a say in the matter?” Sivan knew he was starting to sound like a petulant child, but his father always treated him like it regardless if it was justified.

The earl rubbed his temple, the lines around his eyes multiplying when he squeezed them shut. “Well...do you have someone in mind? I’m not even sure I can secure favor in the war with your hand now that everyone in Varis knows about you absconding with a pirate.”

“I’ll find someone myself.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and I guarantee I’ll get you a better favor than rations,” Sivan said firmly. He had no plans to actually make this happen, but he would say anything at this point.

Tristan Montgomery leaned back from his desk, giving Sivan his full attention. “And what do you want in return?”

Sivan inhaled. “Just let me see Black.”

His father flipped over a stack of papers, sending them flying to the floor. “Absolutely not!”

“Just-just for a few minutes. I need to speak to him one last time.”

Shaking his head, the earl stood up from his desk. “No! Just where does your loyalty lie, Sivan? Is it with Grenaldia or is it with this criminal?”

Sivan glared at him, resolute golden eyes giving his father the

only answer he needed.

“Unbelievable,” he hissed under his breath. “You best wash off this infatuation with danger you’ve devoted yourself to. You’ve already made my job infinitely more difficult with this whole debacle. You’ll be lucky to wed someone even close to your status now!”

These words meant little to Sivan. All he understood was that he’d failed. He’d never see Black alive again, and it tore him apart. He put his head down on the table and listened miserably as his father stormed out of the cabin, slamming the door shut behind him.

Sivan sat there for a few moments. That had to have been his last real chance to convince his father. Tears welled up in his eyes, threatening to overflow into full sobs.

A hand touched his arm, and Sivan jolted, not realizing there was still someone in the room. Tiny droplets of tears scattered from his eyes as he sat up to see who it was.

It was Renalt, a faint blush on his cheeks. “My lord, are you okay? Can I assist at all?”

Sivan blinked, rubbing tears off his cheeks. “I’m — I’m fine. It’s not like you can help me see Black, right?”

A shadow of hurt crossed the man’s face. “No, I cannot. I truly do not know where he is being held. I arrived at the Cay on a different ship.”

“Then why are you on this one now?”

Renalt hesitated, wavering on how much he wanted to reveal to his lord. “I requested to protect you personally after we captured Black. It would ruin me if I saw hurt come to you again.”

“Oh,” Sivan breathed, a wave of realization washing over him. He’d understood Renalt was a fan of him from his war hero days, but he hadn’t realized it went further than that. From the man’s earnest expression, it went much further than that.

“May I sit?” Renalt motioned to the chair next to Sivan. The motion once again alerted Sivan to the pair of twin sabers strapped to his belt. He narrowed his eyes at them, now recognizing the swords as the two that had been taken away from him.

Unable to find a good reason to refuse him, Sivan nodded awkwardly. His devoted guard moved the chair closer and sat down, the sides of their knees touching. He placed a hand over Sivan’s own resting on the arm of the chair.

“My lord, please forgive me for being so forward, but I could not help but overhear your conversation with the admiral just now.”

A different kind of dread crept over Sivan. It was a stifling fear of what Renalt was going to say next.

“I understand your engagement has fallen through. And, as selfish as it may be of me, I was quite relieved to hear it.”

“Relieved,” Sivan repeated, unable to fully process the man’s words.

Renalt nodded earnestly. “Yes, relieved. You see...I have been an admirer of yours since the Spear.”

“The Spear,” Sivan repeated again, once again not making sense of the man’s explanation.

“Yes, I...I was stationed at the Spear for a time. I often saw you by your father’s side.”

“Ah.” Suddenly Renalt’s face seemed very familiar to him. More familiar than the memories of knowing him for the last few weeks. “You were the one who dragged me onto my father’s ship when the Uncharted attacked.”

“Yes, that...that was me,” he said, abashed, like he was a little proud of that fact.

In truth, Sivan’s opinion of him dropped instantly. Sure, he had most likely saved Sivan’s life, but he had forced Sivan to abandon the one person he ever considered a true friend.

“Regardless, I never voiced my feelings for you because the war broke out afterwards. But, by the time I had heard you were honorably discharged it was too late. You were already engaged to the Vheltan prince, and there was no way for me to compete with royalty.”

Sivan felt a little pulse of indignation that he was ostensibly a prize to be competed for.

“But now...well, I’ve never had a chance to reveal my lineage to you, but my aunt is in fact a baroness of Yeverney. My mother is Grenaldian, but I’m still close to my father’s noble side. I could persuade my aunt to assist Grenaldia in some way. She is at least sympathetic to our fight.”

Sivan pulled away his hand, a tentative revulsion building in his gut. This was only reaffirming his father’s view of him as a token to be traded in for wartime relief. “What precisely are you saying...?”

Renalt’s hand twitched in the direction of Sivan’s, like he wanted to snatch it back up again. “I’m offering my hand in marriage, if you’ll have it.”

His eyes were the same steel gray as Sivan’s father, but where the Earl’s eyes were cold and hard, Renalt’s eyes were full of hope and earnest warmth. Sivan could never love him the way Renalt wanted him to, but he wasn’t sure how to turn the man down without breaking him entirely. This sailor had taken him away from Black not once but twice, but Sivan could not discount that he had done it with the intent to save his life.

Sivan’s reluctance to answer was evident to Renalt, and he darted his hopeful eyes away. “Anyways, please think about it.” He stood up, bowing to Sivan properly. “And thank you for listening to my offer, my lord. Please know I meant everything I said.”

Renalt left the room hastily, clearly uncomfortable with his

lack of an answer. Sivan let out a long sigh after the door closed, folding his forearms on the table and collapsing on top of them. He'd spent the last few weeks on a pirate ship, but these last few days on a Grenaldian war ship had been more draining than the entirety of his time on the Blackwater.

The black handprint on his wrist pulsed slightly, and Sivan opened his eyes to frown at it. This had happened a few times since he and Black were separated, but nothing had happened beyond that. This wasn't like the time on the Blackwater when the pirate had willfully avoided him for days on end after Sivan found out he was a siren. Black was somewhere on the ship, likely still bound with the iron kelp that ate into his flesh. Just the thought of Black suffering like that wrung Sivan's heart until it hurt.

He traced the edges of the black handprint, wondering if Black could sense where he was. The mark was warm to the touch, far warmer than the rest of his skin. Sivan overlay his own hand over it, lining up their fingers. Black's hand was so much larger than his own. It wrapped around the entirety of his wrist and down his forearm easily. Sivan's hand just barely encircled his own wrist. The warmth of the mark and the contrast in size to his own hand comforted him in some way. It was his only tangible connection to Black while they were in confinement.

"Black..." he whispered to the mark. "If you can hear me, please...please don't give up. They're making port tomorrow. They're going to execute you-" Sivan's voice broke, and a quiet sob wrenched out of his body. "I won't let it happen. I swear, Nereus. I won't let them take you from me again."

Chapter 25

Lissandry

Sivan's second arrival at Lissandry was far more gruesome than his first. The Royal Navy had gotten to work on executing the pirates they'd arrested when they captured the pirate capital. Their heads were displayed on spears around the docks. Sivan recognized a few of them as previous members of the Blackwater, and his stomach churned at the realization.

He shut the curtains of his father's cabin, blocking out the grizzly view from the ship. Sivan couldn't bear the thought that Black would be joining them if he did not do anything.

The skeleton of a plan had been worked out overnight. But Sivan knew that the only way they were going to get out of Lissandry alive was if a miracle graced them. No plan was good enough to save them from the fleet of the Royal Navy.

But he had to try anyways.

His father hadn't returned since their argument the night before. Sivan assumed he was already on the island, preparing

for the execution. And, judging by how many sailors walked off the ships, most of them had opted to watch the decapitation of the dreaded pirate lord. Meaning the ship Sivan was on would be mostly deserted.

He stood at the door, steeling himself for the task. A glint of silver flashed in his palm: the pin he'd found in his father's desk and mutilated into a lock pick.

But before he could even try to escape, the door opened, and Sivan jumped, dropping the pin.

Thankfully, Renalt did not hear the plink of metal on the wooden floor, but he did give Sivan a look of questioning disapproval.

"My lord," he said slowly, looking Sivan up and down. "What are you doing?"

"I—" Sivan's lips twitched momentarily, frustrated color rising to his face. This ended up working to his advantage, as the blush immediately dispersed Renalt's disapproving gaze. He wasn't sure if his guard had gone to watch the execution or not, but Sivan had a backup plan, just in case. "I, ah...I wanted to speak with you, Renalt..."

The sailor's mouth dropped open for a second, his eyes dilating at the mere mention of his name on the Sivan's lips. "Oh, o-of course, my lord, um—" he floundered. "Shall we speak inside?"

Sivan nodded, and led the man to the table he had poured his feelings over. They sat awkwardly, much further away than they once sat the night before. Renalt fidgeted in his chair, and Sivan could actually see a vein in his neck that broadcasted the sailor's nervous pulse.

Renalt really, truly, had feelings for Sivan. It almost made him feel bad for what he was about to do.

"I've been thinking about your proposal," Sivan started.

Renalt nodded, like he had to reassure him that he still knew

what the proposal was.

“Well, I-“

“Please, my lord, before you turn me down, I want you to promise me that you won’t treat me any differently after. I do not wish to raise tension between us.”

Sivan blinked at him, schooling his expression into hurt when he only felt mild annoyance that the man was making this so difficult for him. He was really making Sivan feel badly for him. “I cannot do that, Renalt.”

The sailor looked at him like a kicked puppy, one who still had the instinctive hopeful reaction to having his name called.

“I cannot do that...because I’m accepting your hand in marriage.”

It took a moment for Renalt to process Sivan’s words. He blinked very fast, mouth opening and closing silently. “R-really? I-I-I’ll send word to my aunt at once, I’m sure she’ll make a generous offer to your father.”

Sivan knew he was being cruel at this point, but he couldn’t help but rebuke his father, even in this made up scenario. “Please leave my father out of this. He’s treated me as nothing but a token to trade in for favors. If your Yevernian aunt wishes to assist Grenaldia, she can do so free of our union.”

Renalt’s eyes glistened, happy tears springing to his eyes. He was really nailing Sivan’s guilt home.

“Oh, my lord—Sivan—“ he reached out for Sivan’s hand under the table, but made contact with the paperweight the lord had surreptitiously picked up from the Earl’s desk. “Wh-what’s that? What do you have?”

The fear of being caught rose to Sivan’s throat, and he leaned forward to kiss Renalt. Whatever doubts the sailor had were wiped clean at the feeling of his beloved kissing him. He melted, completely unaware to his precious lord raising the paperweight

high before crashing it down on his head.

Renalt crumpled onto the table, falling into unconsciousness. Sivan panted slightly and stood back. He dropped the paperweight, where it clattered against the hard floor. The lord felt quite bad for playing with the sailor's heart like this, but he'd been given no choice.

Sivan stepped forward and started by reclaiming his twin sabers from Renalt's belt.



Sivan stepped out of the Earl's cabin dressed in Renalt's uniform. The sailor was significantly taller than Sivan, so the clothes were far too large for him, but he managed to make it somewhat believable by tightly synching the belt around his waist and rolling up the cuffs. His twin sabers were strapped onto his belt, as was an empty canteen he'd pinched from his father's wardrobe.

As he suspected, the ship was relatively free of other Grenaldians. Even if he were to run into someone, the outfit would just make them think he was a sailor who was running late to the execution. He disembarked without incident, and slipped down to the shore. Sivan took out the canteen and filled it, nervously watching for patrolling sailors as the seawater bubbled and the canteen filled.

Once it was full, he started walking towards the southern tip of Lissandry, towards the tavern. It was where he had witnessed the throng of sailors migrating towards.

The burned down pirate fort was hauntingly empty. From the looks of it, every single sailor who was not required to keep an eye on the ships had gone to the execution. Their fascination

with the dreaded pirate lord and his subsequent death in his own stronghold was too tempting to turn down. It left a bitter taste in Sivan's mouth, making him walk faster and faster until he was outright running towards the tavern. It was where Black and him had kissed for the first time, and now it was being used for the pirate's execution.

Sivan's lungs burned as he ran, but the pain could not compare to the heartache he felt at the thought of his Black, his pirate, his beloved Nereus, losing his life.

As he neared the southern tip, Sivan began spotting sailors milling about, leisurely chatting about the execution.

"I thought he would be more frightening."

"Didn't the commander say he was part Uncharted or something?"

"He just looks like a broken man."

Sivan grit his teeth, holding back tears. He wasn't prepared to see Black like this, but he couldn't stop running either.

The tavern was crammed full with sailors, commanders, nobility, anyone who sought entertainment or retribution in the form of murder. Sivan knew Black was a hated man, he knew he had stolen from nobility and made a mockery of the Royal Navy, but seeing so many people excited for his death was still heartbreaking. None of them knew the man. None of them knew where he came from, what he'd gone through. Yet they all thought he deserved to die without even knowing him.

Sivan pushed his way through the crowd, and he began to hear his father's voice over the din of the gathered sailors.

"...your crimes. That of which include piracy of public and private property, smuggling, jailbreaking, assaulting a royal official, kidnapping, and murder," the earl announced loudly, his booming voice carrying over the crowd and into the pit where Black was tied up.

Sivan could see him now, just a smudge of black hair and iron kelp. Where the pirates had used the pit to build a bonfire, Sivan's father had erected a guillotine. An executioner stood next to Black. The pirate was on his knees, but he was clearly struggling to say upright. The executioner kicked him, reminding him to keep kneeling.

Sivan's heart lurched painfully at seeing Black like this. He'd always been so vibrant and full of life, even when Eliza had nearly killed him. Now he looked broken, disheveled and beaten.

Black spit out a mouthful of blood and somehow managed to raise his head to look up at the Earl, seated on an ornate chair someone had brought up from the Black's manor. There were other nobles and commanders seated around him, all of them leaning in slightly to enjoy the show. Black had been a notorious pirate, after all. Of course they would want to see his fall from on high.

The pirate glared at them. Judging from his shaking body, the man should not have been able to muster such vitriol, but more than anything, Black had to express his contempt for these people.

"How do you plead?" Tristan Montgomery asked, wholly unaffected by Black's glare.

"Guilty! To all that and more!" Black spat, earning a few mocking chuckles from the crowd of sailors.

"Oh?" Sivan's father sounded bored. Like this was simply another criminal with some errant excuse. "And what else do you plead to?"

"I plead guilty to providing food to the common people of Grenaldia when the nobles kept it all for themselves. I plead guilty to slitting the throats of smugglers who use a war to take advantage of those who are in need. I plead guilty to stealing from those who have it all and giving it to those who have been

abandoned in the wake of this war they had no choice in!”

The crowd was eerily quiet. Black’s words cut right to the unspoken resentment felt by the commoners of Grenaldia. A handful of sailors were minor nobles like Renalt, but the majority of them came from common households. In fact, many of them were drafted or forced to join this war in order to provide food for their family.

Still, they were the lowest ranked in the Royal Navy, and the silence was broken by their commanders booing at the pirate.

Sivan’s father was not laughing. He had not broken eye contact with Black. He had given up the fight against the immovable Uncharted, so the earl could only refocus his frustration and anger upon anything that was still under his control. That happened to be the pirate lord who he’d finally captured. “You think just because you feel righteous in your actions it makes you less of a criminal? Your crimes don’t make you a good man. They make you a criminal. Whomsoever does not respect the law just because they feel like it does not serve them are not fit to be citizens under the flag of Grenaldia.”

Black snarled at the Earl, baring his sharp teeth. “Grenaldia was never my flag.”

“It was, once. And you abandoned it to sail under the black. You even renamed yourself after it.”

The sailors laughed at the Earl’s jibe, and Sivan used the break in tension to push to the edge of the pit.

“I sentence you, Captain Black of the Blackwater, to death by beheading.”

The sailors cheered, the executioner pushed Black’s head towards the guillotine, and Sivan’s blood ran cold.

He jumped over the partition, sliding down into the pit. The executioner looked surprised, but nimbly drew his sword when Sivan drew his sabers. His boots landed on the platform with a

clack, and he quickly put himself between Black and the executioner.

“My lord!” his beloved pirate exclaimed, joy bubbling up through his voice even though it’d grown weak from use. Sivan spared him a glance to nod at him, and could now see just how haggard Black looked up close. They seemed to have wrapped him up in even more iron kelp, except now it looked withered and encrusted in the man’s blood. He was shaking, like even sitting upright was a challenge. But Black still managed to give Sivan an enamored grin.

“Sivan Randolph Montgomery!” His father used his middle name. Sivan didn’t need to hear the anger in his voice to know he was furious with him. “Step away from that pirate!”

Sivan ignored him and swung at the executioner. The man was using a cutlass similar to the one Black liked to use. Except it was rusted brown with human blood instead of stained in the black blood of *Uncharted*. He parried Sivan’s blows easily, his brawny arms having no issue in tossing back the slim man’s might.

“My lord! You should have just run—you didn’t need to come save me!” Black offered quite unhelpfully.

“Like I could have—” Sivan lost a step to avoid the executioner’s swing. “—done that!”

“Ah,” Black breathed. “Do you mean that?”

“Of course!” He side-stepped, narrowing his opponent’s range of attack while parrying a blow. “But now’s not the time, Black!”

“But, my lord...” The pirate’s voice wavered, and Sivan didn’t need to look at him to know he was looking at him pitifully. “How do I know you’re not doing this just to rebel against your father?”

“Because!” Sivan growled in frustration and used both

swords to beat back the executioner. “I promised I wouldn’t leave you!”

The executioner balked at Sivan’s aggressive footwork, somehow unable to stay steady against a man far weaker than him. Stealing a move from Black’s playbook, Sivan used both swords to swing down hard on the cutlass, rattling it right out of the man’s hands. This caused the executioner to step back, trip, and fall right back into the guillotine.

The force of his head hitting the lunette jolted the device so badly it caused the blade to fall.

The man’s head was cleaved in half by the guillotine, the top half of his cranium landing on the platform with a wet thud.

The crowd gasped, and as horrified as Sivan was at the man’s death, he knew he didn’t have much time. He rushed to Black’s side, ignoring his worried ‘my lords’ and slicing the iron kelp away with his sabers. The kelp was much tougher than Sivan expected, and it took several passes to cut all of it off. Black’s body and clothes were burned from the kelp restraining him for so long. Some of his skin had turned black from the contact, and blood had trailed down his body and clothes, turning anything not already black into a deep crimson.

“Can you stand?” Sivan asked, but there was no answer from the pirate. Black’s eyes rolled back, his consciousness slipping away as the last of the iron kelp was peeled off. Evidently the only thing keeping his internal organs from bleeding out was how tightly the iron kelp had been wound around him. Now that it was gone, his body was starting to shut down. “No! Black, come on, you have to stay with me!”

Sailors were scaling the perimeter of the pit, and were drawing their swords as they descended upon them.

Sivan fumbled with the canteen he’d filled before. His hands were wet with Black’s blood, and he couldn’t find purchase on

the cork. Instead he bit into it, flinging it off with his mouth.

The sailors were on the platform now, ready to strike them down.

Sivan raised the canteen and poured seawater over Black's dying body.

It was just as instant as it had been when they'd jumped from the Blackwater. Black's human body rippled and snapped, transforming violently into a twenty foot long siren. His arms wrapped up Sivan's body, holding him close as his tail whipped around violently, knocking back all the sailors who had dared to attempt capture.

Held close to Black's chest, he witnessed the wounds from the iron kelp heal right before his eyes. Just as Sivan had hoped, the siren magic within the pirate's body healed him instantly. Shadowy tentacles snaked from Black's tail, forming a writhing wall that prevented any sailor from attacking them again.

"Are you okay, my lord?" Black asked, his voice deeper than usual from the sudden display of power. For some reason it made Sivan's toes curl even though they were in mortal peril.

"I-I'm fine, Black. What about you? You were almost dead a second ago."

The pirate smiled at him cheekily. "Sirens can only be killed by the *Corseque of Estes*."

Except the man was half-siren, and he really did look almost dead. Sivan figured if he felt well enough to make quipping remarks he was well enough to fight.

"Sivan!" His father yelled furiously. "Get that monster to stand down!"

Black's shadowy tentacles built up beneath them, raising the two of them to eye level with the earl on his throne. "I'm sorry father, but I cannot do that. I won't."

His father's steel eyes twitched. His face, usually so placid

and controlled, was seething with anger. “If-if you do this, I’ll disown you! You will lose all power and title. You will no longer have a home!”

The threat hurt, but Sivan continued to frown at the man who he’d once respected. “If that’s the price I have to pay, then so be it. This war has caused you to lose your way. You no longer recognize what makes a good man. Because Black is one, and I will stand by him whether or not you approve of it.”

“My lord...” Black whispered, awe in his voice. The words had sounded so righteous in his head, but when the pirate murmured the title he was about to lose in his ear, Sivan couldn’t control the embarrassed flush that bloomed on his face.

“D-do you have any way to get out of here?” Sivan hissed. “I was kind of banking on you being able to open another portal or something.”

“Oh, I have something better than that,” Black said lowly before giving Sivan a smile so wide he could almost see every sharp tooth. It made his heart stutter, that grin that was as sharp as a blade. That smile drove right into Sivan’s heart and made it skip a beat. Black held Sivan tight around the waist and the tentacles pushed them upwards as the wind began to whip around them relentlessly. The waves caused by the wind crashed against the side of Lissandry, battering it with a sudden torrent of wind and water.

From their higher vantage, Sivan could see the sea before them. A disturbance lay just past the shallows, the water seeming to boil from below the surface.

“I can’t say the time spent in your company has been pleasant, but I bid you a fond farewell nonetheless!” Black shouted to the clamoring crowd of sailors. “And I apologize for not giving you a better show, but I don’t particularly feel like dying today!”

Seemingly at the signal of his words, the Blackwater rose up

from the ocean on a tidal wave that crashed into the tavern. The sailors trying to fend off Black's perimeter of shadowy tentacles were washed away by the water.

Black's hand tightened on Sivan's back. "Are you sure about this, my lord? You do realize you'll be defecting if you come with me now..."

Sivan's jaw clenched. His father's words hadn't quite sunk into him yet, but he'd already made up his mind. "Yes, I realize that."

"Then..." Black's voice dropped to a tone only Sivan could hear, as if he tuned his words for Sivan's ears alone. "You really meant it? You'll never leave me?"

Sivan's father was screaming at him, and it was an outburst so unlike the earl it would have shaken Sivan to his very core if he'd been looking at him. But Black's glittering green eyes took all of the man's breath away along with his full attention. The majority of the remaining naval force was watching them, but Sivan didn't need to be reminded of that to justify the flush that spread over his face. Black was looking at him like he'd seen starlight for the first time, and it was making his stubborn composure crumble.

All he could do was nod and wrap his arms around the pirate's neck.

"Aye, I see 'em! We be right upon 'em!" Brand's voice called out from over the railing of the Blackwater.

"Brand!" Black called out joyously, waving at the man. "So good to see you've finally made it!"

Brand tossed a rope over the edge of the ship. "Ye better get up deck quick, Black! Hayes got a bone or two to pick wit ya!"

Black chuckled and grabbed onto the rope, tugging once. It pulled the two of them up easily, and Sivan spared one last look down at his father, who had stopped shouting and was merely

glaring balefully at the ship.

He wasn't sure if he'd ever see the earl again, but the warmth he felt between Black and himself far outstripped any sorrow caused by this familial rift.

Black hoisted Sivan over the banister of the Blackwater, setting him down carefully on the deck. At the same time his long tail slithered up and over, smacking the wood floor with a wet noise. The pirate squeezed Sivan's waist one last time before letting him step away and face the Blackwater crew.

There were slightly more than half the Blackwater pirates left. Some of them could have been below deck, but somehow Sivan doubted that was the case. They looked haggard; whatever had happened to the crew after Black and Sivan jumped ship must have cost them.

"You took your sweet time getting here, Hayes!" Black shouted lightly at the woman steering the helm.

"Fuck off!" She snapped, dark eyes ringed with an annoyance that could only be felt by someone repeatedly taken for granted. "You know I couldn't read your signal when you were on the sea witch's island, yet you still stayed there for days! It's your own damn fault!"

Sivan couldn't imagine what kind of signal she meant, but he was too grateful to be out of the executioner's pit to care. The crew tentatively surrounded Black, looking very much like school children who were being made to apologize to their teacher.

"We were wrong to vote Vivianne in," an Uncharted pirate with spiraling horns on her her head said. "We tried to defend against Jhaeros. It didn't go well."

"I see," Black said. His voice was even, but Sivan could see the smallest hint of a prideful curl to his lips. "I would volunteer to captain again, if you'll have me."

There was a murmur of approval just as the Blackwater was shaken violently. Brand rushed to the side of the ship. "They've got a cannon!"

Tension spiked in the crew. "Do ye have a plan, Captain?"

"Do we have to split like before? I don't think I can stand another underwater ship exit!"

"Underwater...? Is that what that was?" Sivan asked Brand.

"Aye, ye saw th' white Uncharted ship breach th' surface, didn't ye, me lord?" Brand replied.

"Yes...and, it's just Sivan now. I'm no longer a lord." he said awkwardly.

"Oh, apologies!" Brand seemed relatively unfazed by the loss of title. "Anyways, th' Blackwater be a special ship of sorts. She can travel through some kind of portal or something underwater."

"Yes, but it takes great power and effort to do, and can't be repeated so quickly," Black explained.

Another cannon rocked the ship.

"Black!" Hayes shouted, sweating profusely while gripping the wheel. She threw him a black cutlass, which he caught handily. "Get us out of here!"

Black grinned, all sharp teeth, and nodded at her knowingly. He snaked through the pirates towards the bow, and climbed onto the tip of the ship, like a living figurehead. A cannonball whizzed towards him, but he narrowly dodged it.

The siren raised his cutlass high above his head, pointing it towards the heavens. His arm rotated slowly, and with it the clouds began to darken and swirl in its direction. Black's eyes began to glow a brighter green, and the shadowy tendrils oozed off his body like an oil slick. The tentacles roamed the deck, politely avoiding the other pirates, but when they reached Sivan they began to gather around him like a pack of excited puppies. The

former lord's ears turned pink as they wrapped around his ankles playfully. Brand raised an eyebrow at him, and Sivan willfully did not acknowledge the other Grenaldian man.

The wind was picking up, making the Blackwater creak from its precarious position on the tavern's perimeter. Another cannonball shot towards Black, but a sudden unnatural gale of wind steered it off course completely, missing its mark.

Then Black stopped swirling his sword, seeming to have caught something intangible on the tip of it. High above in the sky, a bubbling flash of lightning threatened to break the surface of the blackened clouds.

Black slashed his cutlass down, and a huge bolt of lightning struck Lissandry at his command.

The pirate crew gasped, a few of them chuckled. The tavern that had been turned into an executioner's arena was on fire, the sailors and commanders and nobles running in all directions as they tried to avoid the fire and continuous crackles of lightning that danced just above their heads.

Black sheathed his weapon and turned around, raising his hands and summoning another tidal wave. It crashed onto the burning tavern, catching the Blackwater and pulling it back out to sea.

The pirates, cheered, slapping Black on the back as he slithered down from the bow. They had their captain back.

Hayes turned the boat around, her arms shaking at the exertion of controlling the wheel. Black crossed the deck and motioned at her to step aside. "I'll take it from here, Hayes. Thank you for getting us this far."

She shook her head stubbornly, glancing back at Lissandry. "They're still after us."

Black looked where she was nodding. The fleet of Grenaldian ships were unfurling their sails, beginning to make chase after

them.

The pirate captain hummed before raising a hand, his eyes flickering bright green.

A wall of water shot up from the ocean, surrounding Lissandry.

The crew didn't gasp this time. They had seen their siren captain use his powers many times before, but those instances had all been cheap tricks in the wake of Black's absolute mastery over the sky and sea on this day.

"Y-ye be quite powerful today, Captain," Brand said shakily.

Black grinned, all teeth. "I've been fired up by sweet words today, Brand!" Then the captain winked at Sivan, who was being increasingly constrained by Black's friendly tentacles.

The former lord flushed furiously as the entire crew turned their eyes towards him. Realization was apparent on their faces, and true mortification washed over Sivan.

Chapter 26

The Blackwater

Sivan made an excuse to leave the deck and escape the curious stares of the Blackwater crew. He'd seen Hayes stumble to her cabin to presumably pass out, and the only other private quarters he'd been allowed to barricade himself in were Black's. So, Sivan swallowed his pride and let the pirates think whatever they wanted as he disappeared through the ebony doors with sea serpent molding.

He turned to make sure the red curtains were shut firmly, but managed to catch a pirate's knowing grin outside before it'd been blocked out. Sivan knew what the crew had thought Black and he had been doing behind these doors, but he'd so far been able to ignore it since the pirates of the Blackwater had been hostile strangers to him. But now that he'd defected, he no longer had a home waiting for him to return to. This beast of a ship was the closest thing he had to that for now. Who knew how long he'd end up staying here? And now everyone on the ship had almost

definite confirmation that Black and him were involved.

Which, wasn't wholly untrue, but that didn't mean he wanted it advertised.

"Shameless pirate," Sivan muttered to himself.

"In what way have I been shameless, my lord?" Black's voice singsonged from behind him.

Sivan jumped, startled by the man's unexpected appearance in the cabin. "B-Black! Wh-?" He turned back around to peek out the window. The pirate captain was still at the helm, steering the ship. "But you're out there?"

The pirate grinned and slithered to Sivan's side. He was still wet from the tidal wave caused by the Blackwater, meaning he'd be in his siren form for some time.

He pressed a hand to Sivan's back and motioned to the window. "Look closer," Black murmured, and a pulse of warmth snuck into Sivan's bones through the man's hand. Then the image of Black at the helm dissipated, and Brand was standing in his place. "I asked Brand to take the helm, but a little bit of illusion to keep up the crew's newfound appreciation for me couldn't hurt."

"But shouldn't you be out there? How can you be so sure that you'll lose the navy?"

Black's eyes drooped, exhaustion creeping into his expression. "Do you not have faith in me, my lord?"

Sivan frowned, but didn't have the heart to correct the man on his title when he looked so tired. "It's not that."

"That wall of water will surround Lissandry for the next hour or so. That should give us plenty of time to disappear over the horizon. Besides, I could use a rest."

The exhaustion on Black's face grew even more pronounced with his words. Sivan gasped when he remembered the man had been on the brink of dying not long ago. "The iron kelp! Dear

gods, Black—are you okay?” Sivan reached up to feel the pirate’s face, several days of stubble rasping underneath his touch as he turned his head to look for wounds.

Black’s color improved significantly at Sivan’s touch, and a pleased grin danced on his lips. As if the exhausted expression had been nothing but a ploy. “I’m delighted my lord is so worried about me, but I’m quite alright. The kelp’s effect on me wore off long ago.”

Sivan’s golden eyes twitched, and he narrowed them at the siren who enjoyed toying with him so much. “If you can play with my concern for you then you must feel well enough to go steer a ship.” He pulled his hands away and stepped back, turning around to the war table that still held his translation notes. Sivan picked up a few of them and motioned for the pirate to leave the way he came. “Go on.”

Black’s mouth dropped open before turning downwards into a pitiful line. “But, my lord—”

“Ah-ah!” Sivan snapped at him. “I’m no longer a lord, remember? You don’t get to use that title anymore.”

The pirate made a frustrated noise and thwacked the end of his long tail on the ground, irritated. “You were being so kind to me before! Do I really have to be facing a guillotine in order for you to care for me?”

Sivan rubbed his temples. The young Nereus had always listened to him, but his turn to piracy in adulthood had truly turned him into a stubborn child. “I just expect for you to behave yourself. What happened to the attendant who never spoke out of line?”

Black leveled him with a long and intrusive look. One that made Sivan totally unprepared for the speed at which the man snaked over to him. He grabbed the backs of Sivan’s thighs and sat him on the war table, the siren’s scaly waist slotting between

his knees.

“I thought I told you he was long gone, my lord. I’m just a shameless pirate. One you’ve cast your lot with.” Black’s tone was challenging, daring Sivan to go back on the last day’s events.

But Sivan wouldn’t take the bait. He wasn’t interested in tearing down a man who’d already been broken so many times before. He remained silent, unable to push away Black, but also unable to be forthright about his feelings. Sivan couldn’t be sure if this was out of some lingering sense of propriety, or if he was simply afraid. The panic that had gripped his throat when he’d seen Black on the precipice of death had upended Sivan’s sense of self. If he truly lost this man it would end him entirely.

After an excruciatingly long glare from those haunting, viridescent eyes, Black’s frame sagged, and he took Sivan into his arms. The pirate’s hands on his back were trembling, gripping desperately at the Royal Navy uniform.

“Thank you, my lord.” Black’s voice came out muffled from Sivan’s chest.

Sivan sighed, letting a hand fall on the top of his head. “Not a lord anymore, Black.”

“You’ll always be my lord. Especially now.”

Sivan’s heart skipped a beat, and the swell of emotion within him was matched by the equally large swell of shame. For unwittingly seducing his attendant, for failing so miserably to save him, and now for falling into his arms so easily. “Y-you don’t need to thank me.”

“Yes, I do.” Black looked up at him, his eyes earnest and open. “I have been in love with you ever since I pulled you out of the water at the docks. Everything I’ve ever done, everything I’ve needed to become, it’s all been so I can return to you. Even if it’s just as an attendant.”

A flush crept onto Sivan’s face with every passing word.

Nereus had never been this honest with him, and now as a pirate he was pouring his heart out of his chest and right onto Sivan. “I-ah-but would you be satisfied as only an attendant?” he asked simply, unable to come up with anything more meaningful.

Black smiled, warm and genuine. “Well, it will be difficult, but I did it for years when we were young. I just wish to stay by your side for the rest of our lives, even if I have to restrain myself to do so.”

Sivan couldn’t take the man’s blinding expression any longer. He shut his eyes, trying to regain his composure in any sense of the word. “Why...why have you turned out this way?”

“What way?” Black’s voice sounded honestly hurt by Sivan’s words.

“You- You’re always so much. Everything you do is amplified tenfold. Even your feelings. You have so many of them.” Black was silent, and Sivan could feel his eyes on him, but he soldiered on nonetheless. “You speak about them so openly and so fervently that it simply crushes my ability to form coherent thoughts.” With his eyes closed, he could pretend he was just speaking to a wall or some harmless inanimate object that didn’t have piercing green eyes that could see through him.

“I am...I am sorry my lord. I will restrain myself.” Black’s tone wasn’t any less pitiful, and Sivan knew without even opening his eyes that the man was pouting in a very un-pirate-like way.

So Sivan exhaled, letting out any hopes he had of maintaining his dignity. “I-I meant...for the first time in my life I’ve wanted something badly enough to defy my father and country. So, I...I do not believe it is proper for you to restrain yourself... in this case.”

Black was silent for a long moment, and Sivan almost opened his eyes just because he thought the man might have disappeared

into the ether.

Then hot, wanting lips brushed against his own, and Sivan tugged at Black's shirt to kiss him firmly. The pirate made a noise akin to a starving man eating bread for the first time in weeks. Black kissed him like he was an idol, a decadent meal, a man more precious than all the gold in the world. It made Sivan open up, his lips, his heart, his everything. He wanted to give this man anything he asked for. It wasn't a sacrifice, it wasn't a compromise. It was a desire Sivan felt in the same way a flower craved sunlight: a deep and unfathomable need.

They parted, and Black's hot breath panted against the moistened lips of his beloved lord. "You do realize what I want from you, right, my lord?"

Sivan felt the urge to chase the pirate's lips, to fill his head with more dizzying, obsessive thoughts. "Not a lord."

Black grinned at the weak correction. "Ah, but you are. High and mighty, with all these scruples and integrities to uphold." He kissed Sivan chastely, which felt like a cruel contrast to the obscene fire the pirate's words were stoking in him. "And I want to defile you so thoroughly you forget what beliefs you even held in the first place, my lord."

Sivan made a weak noise that was dangerously close to a whimper. He could feel himself growing harder, his body aching at the proximity of the pirate between his legs. He hazily thought that it shouldn't be like this, that he should draw the line between being with Black as he is now and engaging in this deranged fantasy that made their relationship seem even more twisted than it had become.

But as Black kissed him again and dragged a hand underneath Sivan's shirt to dance along the ridges of his spine, Sivan could not stop himself from giving in to this idea that the man was going to rework him from the inside out.

Maybe that was exactly what Black had always intended to do, and Sivan was just growing worryingly at peace with it.

Black's tongue was working Sivan's mouth open, his hand on the slender man's back gripping him tightly as he pulled their hips together. Sivan wrapped his arms around the siren, letting his legs fall open wider.

Surely he could feel Sivan's arousal now. His pants were too big for him, but they still strained to contain his leaking cock. Black undid the fastenings to his pants smoothly, but broke away when he realized they were not ones he recognized.

"These aren't your pants."

Sivan's mind was hazy with desire, but he managed to frown at Black who had cruelly stopped kissing him. "I stole them."

"Ah, who's the pirate now?"

"I took Renalt's uniform to blend in."

Black froze, his hand stilling amidst undoing Sivan's clothes. "Why were you with that traitor?"

Sivan frowned, his head clearing a bit with annoyance. "He was guarding me." Still, Black looked sullen and jealous. He hadn't even told him about the marriage proposal or the kiss. "If you don't like it, then take them off."

The pirate gaped at him for a moment before a frenzied blush spread on his face, and he tore off Sivan's clothes as quickly as possible. It was a heady experience, being wanted this way. Sivan never doubted that he was good-looking or desirable, but it was always presented to him in a way that left him feeling like nothing more than a pretty thing for his father to train and trade off. Even in the war he'd had his share of admirers, but there was always an air of restraint that lingered. No sane man would truly devour the earl's son.

But with Black there was none of that. His restraint had been uncapped, and he had wanted Sivan for so long that even if he

cared what the earl thought of him, it would not have dampened his desire. It was carnal, it was beastly, and Sivan trembled in the face of it.

Black's large hand was on his cock, pumping him slow and steady. It was nothing like how Sivan would jerk himself off. That was always done to a fevered tempo after hours of tossing and turning in bed as he tried to ignore his body's needs. Now Sivan couldn't remember why he'd ever hesitated to pleasure himself. Nothing that felt this good could be that shameful.

"Ahh! Black—"

The pirate chased away Sivan's moans with more and more demanding kisses, turning the man's lips swollen and red. "I never thought I'd get to see you like this, my lord. You're as beautiful as I envisioned."

The memory of their drunken intercrural night and the friendly tentacles Sivan had been introduced to in the hold danced to the forefront of his mind. He really should tell Black that this wasn't the first time he'd seen him like this. But, just as Sivan was about to push Black away to say something, one of said friendly tentacles snaked onto the table and pushed a slippery tip inside of him.

Sivan shuddered, gripping onto Black as he moaned and his toes curled.

"Oh no-!" Black's voice was panicked, angry, and he reached behind Sivan to pull the offending appendage out of him. "Bad!" He snapped at the shadowy tentacle, but it just writhed in an attempt to break free. "My lord, I'm- I'm so sorry. I can't always control them..."

The mortification on the siren's face was obvious, but Sivan was too aroused to be delicate about the situation now.

He took Black's hand holding the tentacle and pushed it back down. "It's okay. I enjoyed it." The tentacle sought out his

entrance again, this time brushing against him in gentle strokes. “They groped me in the hold. I’ve been thinking about it ever since.” The tentacle pushed in a fraction, toying with him independent of Black’s control.

The pirate blinked at him, eyes wide with shock. But he let Sivan continue, and slowly released his hold on the tentacle. It pushed further into the man on the table, opening him up with ease.

“And the night the navy attacked Lissandry- In the tavern— oh, gods!”

The tentacle found Sivan’s prostate and had started to massage it vigorously. The waves of pleasure crashed through his body, his synapses sparking with white hot heat.

“I thought...I thought those were more dreams.” Black finally said, his voice hoarse.

“More?” Sivan responded, impressed with himself that he even had the brain power left to make a retort.

The pirate’s expression shifted, pinning him with a hungry gaze. “Yes. They’ve been endless.”

He kissed Sivan again, fully releasing the tentacle and letting it thrust into Sivan’s body. The former lord whimpered into the kiss, and let his arms wrap around the pirate he’d chosen. Black held him closer to his chest, letting his shadowy tentacles explore the slender man’s body freely. They wrapped around his ankles, spreading his legs wider while another slim tentacle jointed the one already inside his body. Sivan shook, nails digging into Black’s shoulders as he was stretched further open. It didn’t necessarily hurt, but it was a sensation he was not all that familiar with, and it was only made more intense by the inclusion of the slippery magical tentacles.

“Are you okay, my lord?” Black asked, but the concern in his voice was not as panicked as it was just a moment ago. The des-

perate moans coming out of Sivan made it obvious he was more than okay.

Still, Sivan nodded into Black's hair. One of the pirate's hands slid back between them to grab Sivan's cock once more. The slow, careful strokes of the man's hands contrasted with the near frenzy of tentacles that writhed inside of Sivan. It wasn't like anything he'd ever experienced, and he knew right then that he'd be chasing this concentrated pleasure for the rest of his life.

Sivan came with Black's name on his lips. It rocked through him, breaking over every dam a life of propriety had built within him.

The tentacles let go of his ankles first before sliding out of his ass one by one. It left Sivan feeling empty, his entrance still tingling with the slick the tentacles produced. Black hugged him, pressing his face into Sivan's neck.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," he murmured.

If Sivan had been able to feel more embarrassment he certainly would have. Being thanked for simply orgasming...he was probably the one who should have thanked the pirate for that. Sivan's mind idly went to the night in the tavern when he'd felt Black's cock between his thighs. But the siren's hips were between his legs, and Sivan could feel nothing but smooth scales.

"Can I repay the favor?"

Black's breath puffed against Sivan's skin. "Maybe later. Unfortunately I won't be fully human again until I fully dry off."

Sivan swallowed, not believing what he was about to ask. "Do...do sirens not have...anything down there?"

Another puff of amused laughter brushed against his skin. "They do, I just do not spend much time in this form. I..." Embarrassment colored the pirate's voice. "I don't know how to make it work."

Sivan wanted to laugh at Black's words. They were so inno-

cent for a man who'd been handed a death sentence an hour ago. But he held it back in fear of insulting the pirate. Sivan just let himself be held even though his bones felt like goo and his skin felt sticky.

Shadowy tentacles watched Sivan curiously. He found it strange that the things seemed to operate somewhat independently of their owner. Perhaps it had something to do with Black's own lack of self control. He couldn't control his emotions, the bad weather that came with them, or his shift into a siren. Sivan doubted the shift was entirely reliant on seawater. He'd swam in the ocean with Nereus countless times, and the boy never seemed bothered by it.

Sivan reached out a finger to make contact with the tentacle. It poked the tip of his finger before wrapping delicately around a knuckle.

"These things are rather friendly," Sivan chuckled.

Black smiled into his neck. "They just like you."

"I've noticed." The tentacle slithered up his arm, skipping over Black's shoulder to touch Sivan's cheek. "They're quite — mph!" It slipped right into Sivan's open mouth.

Black noticed right away, and shoved Sivan back onto the war table, yanking the tentacle out from his lips. "My lord! They didn't- wait, don't swallow—"

Sivan had already gulped the sweet slick down. It sent an almost instant wave of heat through his body, lighting up his nerves and making his bones tingle. It had only made his mind hazy in the hold, but the effect it had on Sivan now was ten times more powerful by comparison. Images flashed through his mind: in the courtyard of the manor on the Spear, his own silver hair wafting softly in the late afternoon sun. His heaving chest as he trained with two sabers. A peek of his exposed ass as he lay sleeping, moments before he was woken up by his attendant.

“-lord? My lord?!”

Black was shaking his shoulders, but Sivan continued to tremble even as the man stopped. He was helped to sit up, but the moment he was upright a groan ripped out of him. The heat coiled down his throat and into his gut.

“You’ll have to throw it up,” Black told him, panic rising in his voice.

Sivan’s jaw clenched, the thought of expelling the slick making him uneasy. “Wh-what is this?”

The pirate hesitated, his lower lip twitching nervously. “Please throw it up. I don’t wish to subject you to it.”

Sivan glared at him, but the power in it was worn thin by his current state. “Well, this isn’t the first time. I swallowed some when we were in the hold too. It didn’t kill me then. What is it?”

“It-it’s not supposed to kill you...” Green eyes darted around the room, torn between wanting to help his precious lord and wanting to find somewhere to hide. Then he faced Sivan, swallowing. “It’s the residue of my siren magic. It can form a link between me and whoever has it in their system. From what Eliza has taught me...it’s usually used to control the minds of others.”

Sivan blinked at him, wondering faintly if he was being controlled right now.

“But- But I would never try to control your mind, my lord! But-“

“But what? What is it doing to me?”

“...even when I’m not using the connection, my mind still unconsciously projects itself onto you. It’s only feelings, suggestions, memories, but...but it can be powerful. Apparently.”

“Memories,” Sivan repeated. Another series of images flashed in his mind: Late at night, waiting outside Sivan’s room. Sounds of pleasure, slipping out through the door. Pressing an ear close, desperately needing to hear every gasp, every sigh. Taking a full

minute to turn the handle so it would not make a noise. Opening it a hairline, just enough to witness Sivan pumping his hand around his dripping cock, so lost in pleasure he would not have noticed if Nereus had opened the door fully.

“My lord, please-“ Black’s voice brought him out of the memory.

“Stop calling me that-nnh!” Desire wrenched through Sivan’s body in the strangest way possible. It was a desire for himself, as seen in Black’s eyes. He could feel just how badly the man wanted him. Had wanted him, for over a decade. It was a potent, intoxicating feeling. “What-what exactly am I feeling, here?”

Black hesitated again, and the vulnerability on his face shaved five years off him. “My love for you. I’m sorry.”

A flash of embarrassment slipped in between the desire, and Sivan knew it was not his own. Followed by a pang of pain. He knew the pain was his own because the idea that Black thought he would never accept this love was too terrible. It was a little unnerving, to know it had been going on for this long, but he now knew from firsthand experience that it was a pure and devoted love. It made Sivan feel like he was desired, not just for his beauty or his skill with a sword or his nobility. Black desired him as he was, heedless of the war happening around them.

How could he not accept him?

Sivan kissed him. It landed to the right of Black’s lips due to his unsteady state. “Do not apologize, Black. You’ve shown me exactly what kind of love you have for me. It’s beautiful.”

Black blinked very fast, tears clinging to his lower lashes. “Ah,” he gasped, surprised, and looked down at his own hips.

Sivan followed his surprised look and saw it too: the tip of a cock, slowly emerging from the siren’s lower body. It was a slightly paler black than the rest of his tail and was coated in the same slick the tentacles were excreting.

It unsheathed itself fully, and it was about the same size as his human cock, but with a slightly different shape. Ridges ran up and down the length, collecting slime between its divots.

Without realizing where his hand was going, Sivan wrapped his fingers around the siren's cock. Black gasped, his hand flying to snatch up Sivan's wrist. His fingers fit around the palm print as he prevented Sivan from touching his cock again. Sivan watched, fascinated, for as his hand was pulled away, soft lights sparked on the length. It pulsed, the lights growing and fading precisely where Sivan had touched him. As he watched the lights dissipated, waiting for his touch once more.

Black was looking at him, eyes wide, trying to read the situation, but too paralyzed by his own arousal to act. His breath was coming fast, and the trembling of his hand around Sivan's wrist was finally starting to match the former lord's.

Sivan felt that desire, that all-consuming craving which throbbed in the pirate's veins. He could feel himself being watched, feel himself being lusted after. So he took his own fingers, coated in the slick from the siren's cock, and slipped them into his mouth. Sivan cleaned them, letting the same sweet taste light fire down his throat.

Then Black made a noise halfway between a growl and a whine, and pushed Sivan back onto the war table. "You're testing my restraint, my lord."

"Don't call me that." Sivan arched his back on the table, unable to lay still while Black's desire coursed through him.

The pirate chuckled, and snatched up Sivan's wrists, holding them down on the table. "Oh, I'll call you whatever I want, *my lord*."

Sivan could practically feel the heat of the siren's cock near his ass. He squirmed, trying to get closer to it, but the strong hands holding him down prevented him from moving. He

whined, the heat in his body so maddening, so intense, that he had half the thought to tie Black back up with iron kelp to keep him from teasing him further.

“Ah, do you want my cock that bad? Even though it’s a monster’s cock?”

He nodded, half delirious with need. “I don’t care, I don’t care- I told—I told you that restraint wasn’t proper.”

Green eyes widened, a flush burned across the pirate’s face. “Good gods, my lord, you’re going to kill me one of these days.”

Then he pushed up Sivan’s thighs and slowly sank his siren cock into his body.

Sivan’s eyes fluttered shut, his mouth open slightly. The feeling of Black’s cock splitting him open, inch by inch, was both grounding him and making him feel more delirious at the same time. He’d been so well stretched by the tentacles that the large cock had no issue breaching him. Sivan could feel the ridges of Black’s cock dancing through his entrance, stretching and relaxing him over and over.

“Black-“ he moaned, looking up through his silver lashes. The pirate was braced over Sivan, his mouth open and panting. Black hair cascaded in waves over the man’s shoulders. The one shorter lock Sivan had managed to cut off in their fight in Varis escaped into Black’s face, the gold bead on the end sticking to his cheek. “You’re so beautiful...” Sivan slipped a hand out of Black’s grasp and brushed his fingers against his face, stubble scratching at his fingertips.

The man looked like he couldn’t decide between crying and fucking relentlessly into Sivan. So, true to form, he did both, thrusting deep inside while biting out a broken “my lord...!”

The slide of Black’s cock into him connected with the heat already coiling in Sivan’s body. He gasped, gripping desperately to the pirate’s bicep to try and keep himself steady. Sivan was a



man who was used to maintaining a certain poise about him. It was what he'd been trained to do since he was young. Even in battle, even when he was facing an endless storm of Uncharted, Sivan never lost his composure.

But with just a few thrusts of Black's cock, Sivan was quickly spiraling into a fog of unrepentant debauchery, his face losing all poise it ever possessed.

Pleasure thrummed in his skin, in his bones. The siren was picking up his pace, spearing Sivan with his ridged cock at a dizzying tempo. It caught his prostate, ripping a groan out of Sivan.

Black dipped his head and used his tongue to follow a trail of sweat up Sivan's copper-toned chest. His hot lips closed around a nipple and sucked. Sivan never thought of his chest as an erogenous zone. He'd never experimented with it, and none of his hasty lovers had been intimate enough to initiate it. But Black's mouth on the sensitive peak drew a line straight from Sivan's chest to his cock. He wined when the siren's sharp teeth nipped gently at his skin, not hard enough to break skin, but hard enough for Sivan to feel the delicious burn of pain followed by unbearable pleasure.

"Th-that feels good," Sivan whimpered as he fisted a hand in Black's hair.

The pirate grinned against his chest, his smile dangerous and far too pleased with himself. "That makes me so happy, my lord. I can't tell you how long I've waited to do this to you."

Another flash of a memory was pushed into Sivan's mind: Nereus, older, buried in the nest of Sivan's clothes he had made on the Spear. His face was pressed into the pile, searching desperately for his lord's scent. His hand made a fist around his cock, and he fucked into it, moaning Sivan's title.

"My lord-!" Came Black's husky voice in the present.

The pirate fucked into him just as he had done into his hand

in the memory. Ecstasy lined his face, tears glittered in his green eyes. This was a man who had wanted someone for so long it had nearly driven him mad. A decade or more of pining fueled his desire, and Sivan felt every bit of it from the cock in his ass to the influence of Black's memories in his own.

"My lord- My lord—" Black was chanting like a prayer, right into Sivan's skin.

Despite the situation, despite Sivan's current state, despite everything, he still felt the embarrassed shame bubble up inside him. "Don't- Don't call me that—oh, gods-!"

Black thrust in fully, seating himself inside Sivan with a purpose. "Why not?"

Sivan whined. The cock inside him was being deliberately aimed to just miss his prostate. He tried to tilt his hips, to get Black to go where he wanted him, but the pirate held his hips so tightly he could not move them.

"Because-nh! B-because I said so," Sivan bit out through a frustrated moan and pushed Black's stupidly handsome face away with a hand.

"But, my lord, I've been calling you that for as long as we have known each other. How am I supposed to stop now?" Black gave him a pitiful look, and Sivan just knew he was doing it on purpose, but it had the same melting effect on the former lord as it always had.

This was really starting to get out of hand. Sivan had his reservations with Black initially because he was a pirate. Then after he'd discovered he was Nereus, nearly a decade of internalized guilt was piled on top of that. But far outweighing either of those was the fact that Nereus had once been his attendant. A noble coming on to their servants was considered a taboo, no matter the status of said noble. Yet Black seemed to relish in clinging to the job that hadn't been his for nine years.

“A good servant will attend to a master’s *every* need,” Sivan muttered so quietly the man above him could barely hear it.

Black blinked at him, the flush on his face deepening a shade. “What was that?”

Sivan scrunched up his face and turned his head to the side so he wouldn’t have to watch the man’s reactions anymore. “It’s a saying among nobles who engage intimately with their servants. One I don’t abide by. A proper lord would never force their staff to do anything of the sort.”

The pirate looked at him for a long moment, his green eyes boring holes in Sivan’s defenses even while the former lord did not make eye contact with him. Then he plucked Sivan’s hand from his face and kissed his ring finger.

“But I want to attend to your *every* need. It wouldn’t be force, my lord.”

Sivan felt a different kind of desire well up inside him. One to kick the man in the throat and jump off this wretched pirate ship. Instead, he steadied his breath and said, “for the last time, I am no longer a lord. I’ve lost my title. Please don’t remind me of that by calling me by it.”

Black kissed up the back of his hand, ending where the black handprint was burned into his copper skin. “Perhaps I should clarify: it doesn’t matter to me what your title actually is. You’ll always be my lord and master, no matter if we’re sitting on piles of gold or facing the gallows.”

Sivan’s throat went dry, his heart hammering in his chest. No matter what outlandish things this man said, he would always find some way to beat it with something more embarrassing. Black kissed him, soft and sweet, a desperate contrast to the brutal pace of his hips as he resumed fucking into Sivan.

“I’ll make you a deal. I’ll stop calling you ‘my lord’ when you stop giving me a reason to worship you.” Black’s voice was rich

and dangerous against Sivan's lips. Being revered like this was a heady experience. It was nothing like the sailors that respected him for being good at killing Uncharted. Black's love was a fathomless depth of obsession, one fueled by good intentions but twisted by the war that surrounded them.

The pirate let out a deep and animalistic noise, his face pinching in pleasure as he lost himself inside Sivan. He pushed the man's legs up higher, displaying him on the war table much in the same fashion their first feast together had been displayed. His thrusts were growing erratic, wild, and Sivan could feel the translation notes beneath him crumpling and tearing from the force of their lovemaking. Sivan dimly thought he should care about the notes he worked so hard on, but the lightning strikes of pleasure being pumped into his ass were making anything other than this moment meaningless to him.

His back arched on the table, his hands gripping at the notes, trying to find purchase so he could meet Black's thrusts. It was terrible, how needy this was making him. It should have been too much for anyone, but as much as Black was giving him, Sivan was desperate to take. He'd take anything from this man as long as it felt like this.

"My lord-" Black practically sobbed, bent over Sivan as he thrust into him deeply. "I'm never letting you go now."

All Sivan could do was whine, the immense pressure building inside him filing him so completely it left him speechless. The look Black gave him was dangerous. So intent, but so vulnerable. It scared him a little to think of what lengths the pirate would go to hold onto the one thing he desired. He should have stopped it there, should have prevented him from going into this with the wrong mindset. But instead Sivan spread his legs wider, allowing Black to fall deeper into obsession.

Somehow, Black's cock delved even further into him, reach-

ing the most intimate part Sivan had to offer. The former lord came with a sob, Black driving into him with no restraint. His orgasm seared into Sivan, burning so brightly he was certain he'd never be the same again. Black had branded him from the inside, and now no other man would ever be able to satisfy him in the same way.

Seeing his precious lord come undone beneath him tipped Black into the same ocean of pleasure, fucking into him deep and filling Sivan with his seed.

The siren collapsed on top of him, his hips undulating gently as he spilled completely into him. Sivan trembled with how full he felt. He trembled too when the desire linking their minds morphed into a thrum of satisfaction. It settled into his bones, shattering Sivan's nerves with the force of it.

They lay on the war table for awhile, utterly drained of energy. Black was so heavy and so perfect on top of him. It gave Sivan a sense of security he'd never known before. He was all at once vulnerable and at peace with himself.

Eventually he found the energy to drag his golden gaze to the window of the captain's quarters. The wall of water surrounding Lissandry still held, but it was far off in the distance now. Somehow, Black had found the control to keep the Royal Navy at bay while they had been fucking. Once again it made Sivan suspect that the siren was far better at controlling his powers than he gave himself credit for.

Sivan felt a shift inside of him, and he looked down to find Black's scales retreating into his pale skin. The ocean water that had triggered the siren transformation had now been replaced by the man's own sweat, and he finally turned back into a human. Sivan immediately felt the mental connection that had been forged between them dim. It wasn't completely gone, but it would require one of them to call upon it again to bring it back to

life.

Black pulled out of him slowly, followed by a sticky stream of seed. Sivan squirmed as the man worked it out of him with his fingers, letting it further ruin the translation notes on the war table. As much as Sivan respected the art of translation, he could not bring himself to vocalize his complaint while his limbs were still made of jelly.

“Hold onto me,” Black murmured in his ear, and Sivan held fast to his shoulders as he was carried to the bed.

Sivan had been on this bed before, but he had not appreciated how comfortable it was until now. In contrast to the hard war table, the pirate captain’s bed was a nest of finely-made sheets and silken pillows.

Black set him down gently and made to pull away, but Sivan was not having it. He gripped a thick bicep, lazily gazing at the pirate with warm golden eyes.

“Stay,” he ordered.

Black nearly looked like he was going to cry all over again, but Sivan didn’t give him the chance. He pulled the man back down, letting him slot easily against Sivan’s naked body.

It was an embarrassing gesture, but one Sivan would do again in a heartbeat. He let the pirate embrace him, the stubble of his cheek scratching lightly against his chest as Black settled in with a pleased sigh. Sivan’s slender fingers hesitated above the sweeping locks of pitch dark hair, longing to touch but feeling the last thread of reservation. Somehow, Black noticed his hand and raised his head to meet the waiting touch. He lowered his head back down and Sivan’s hand followed, unable to resist threading his fingers through the man’s hair.

Black’s hair was still damp from seawater and sweat, but it was still a luxury to play with. Sivan wondered idly if the man’s natural beauty or his siren blood contributed more to the unreal

softness slipping through his fingers.

His petting was eventually snagged by one of the gold beads that decorated the pirate's hair. Sivan took it between his thumb and forefinger, raising it to look at the small drop of precious metal. It was simple, but made of pure gold, and the sheer number of them in the man's hair amounted to a decently sized wallet.

Perhaps it was a clever way of always ensuring Black had some of his wealth on him, so even if he were robbed blind he would not be entirely penniless.

"Is there a reason you have a small treasure hoard in your hair?" Sivan asked lightly.

To his surprise, Black flinched on top of him, letting out a hesitating sound. "There is," he mumbled, refusing to look at Sivan.

The silence stretched for longer than was appropriate. Clearly Black was not going to come forward with an answer.

"Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"I—" Black looked up at him, face flushed, eyes the brightest green Sivan had ever seen them. "I, um, I purchased them several years ago. They reminded me...they reminded me of your eyes."

All the sexual tension and rippling muscles and wicked grins did nothing to Sivan's heart in comparison to this admission. The bashful gaze coupled with this quite frankly maidenly sentiment carved the widest gap with the shameless pirate who had been fucking Sivan senseless moments before.

It was adorable.

Sivan could do nothing but hold the man closer, hiding his own face in the gold-dotted dark hair to avoid those viridescent, adoring eyes.

Chapter 27

The Blackwater

Sivan woke once again to an unfamiliar ceiling, but he knew where he was even before he opened his eyes and slipped on his glasses. Black's scent permeated the blankets and pillows of his bed, and Sivan would not soon forget the reason his whole body ached deliciously.

He was disappointed to find the pirate captain not in bed with him when he opened his eyes. Judging by brilliant light slipping in through the cracks of the drawn curtains, it was well into day. Sivan had slept far longer than he had meant to, but he had been having but restless nights since being taken into his father's custody. Black could not have been any better rested than he had been, considering the pirate was bound with iron kelp for the last few days.

Sivan drew back the heavy curtain to the bed and did not see Black in the cabin. Meaning he had to be on deck with the crew. A small frown appeared on Sivan's face, concern for the

man bubbling up his throat. Siren or not, he had been near death before Sivan had dumped the seawater on him. Surely he would need longer to fully recover.

He groaned as he sat up in bed. Black had not hurt him, but Sivan had never been fucked that well in his entire life, and his lower back had not appreciated the war table driving into his spine.

Still, a faint blush rose in Sivan's face when he felt the aching throb of his lower body. He felt like he'd always imagined a new bride would have felt after their first night. He'd long abandoned his wildly inaccurate teenage fantasies of sex and love, but the youth in him bubbled with a delirious happiness that left him lightheaded.

That happiness was immediately dulled when Sivan saw the perfectly pressed clothes laid out on the war table along with a ridiculously lavish breakfast.

He massaged the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply and cursing his own stomach for growling as he smelled the decadent meal. Black was going to continue treating Sivan like a proper lord whether or not he wanted it.

He could at least be grateful for the steaming basin of hot water prepared for him. The hot washcloth against Sivan's body did wonders for the persistent aches.

The clothes were another set from his wardrobe on the Spear: a deep gray blouse embroidered with sparkling silver flowers, plus another pair of breeches that were too small for him. The former lord pulled on the clothes without much enjoyment. He had nothing else to pick from, and was thus cornered into letting a pirate dress him.

The breakfast was frustratingly delicious. Rosemary focaccia, spread with a sumptuous soft cheese, capers, and a type of fish Sivan was too annoyed to try and identify. He almost wished that

Black would just once serve him something terrible so he'd have an excuse to turn down his endless indulgent servitude.

These gestures clearly made the pirate happy, but they only served to remind Sivan of their former relationship. He longed to accept Black with an open heart, but there was no way Sivan would have let it go this far if the man was still truly his attendant. Even in some remote possibility where the war hadn't happened and Nereus had been allowed to remain as his attendant for longer than the age of sixteen, Sivan wouldn't have looked at him in the same way.

Right?

The former lord nibbled on the focaccia as he remembered the vision Eliza had shown him. Nereus had only been a year or two older in the memory, but he looked like an entirely different person from the scrawny teen Sivan had last seen. Was he always destined to grow into this terribly handsome devil of a man with a wicked grin?

Would Sivan have been able to resist falling into bed with him even if Nereus had stayed his attendant?

Just the question turned his ears red, and Sivan quickly ate the rest of the delicious meal without tasting much of it.

Hayes entered the captain's quarters to find Sivan piling up the dishes of his breakfast on a platter. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"The captain's not going to like you cleaning up after yourself."

Sivan jolted a little, not having noticed her nearly silent entry amongst the clatter of porcelain and silver. He spun around, looking guilty even though he was simply trying to ease Black's burden. "Ah, well, I figured the least I could do was to clean up after myself since the captain still insists on treating me like a

lord.”

Hayes made a disgruntled sound, but it sounded far more amused than annoyed. The woman had been on the edge of collapsing behind the wheel the day before, but today she looked just as healthy and severe as she always was. Sivan wondered what kind of witchcraft powered the Blackwater that allowed her crew to recover so quickly.

“Perhaps it’s well enough you try to interfere with Black’s persistence. The crew is not used to such sunny weather. Two deckhands have fainted from overexposure just today.” There was a barely detectable hint of light humor in her voice, as though she found the fainting crew rather funny.

“Anyways, I’ve come to bring the map to you. Now that you’ve returned I assume you’ll pick up where you left off.”

Sivan blinked several times before realizing she was referring to the sirenath translation. “Oh! Yes, yes, of course.” He tried to hide the wince when the pain from his lower back lanced up his side as he sat down at the table.

If Hayes noticed she did not care enough to point it out.

The translation notes were still on the war table, and Black had evidently organized them after Sivan’s ass had strewn them all over the table. Hayes pulled out a worn leather scroll from inside her shirt and dropped it on the table gracelessly.

“That’s it.”

The woman was hard to read, so Sivan couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. He tentatively took the scroll and unfurled it, revealing a very old but very detailed circular map inscribed with the strange characters Sivan recognized as sirenath.

“You- You just had this very valuable map on your person this whole time?”

Her expression did not change. The same severe but placid set to her mouth barely moved as she spoke. “Yes, of course. I’d

drown anyone before letting them take it.”

Something about her stiff posture made Sivan think that she had indeed drowned someone for taking it.

“What...what precisely happened to Vivianne?”

Her dark eyes glittered with hatred for a moment before responding. “She drowned.”

“Ah,” Sivan responded quietly. So he’d been right. Then he remembered how Renalt had escaped the Blackwater. “Why did you let Renalt go?”

Hayes narrowed her eyes, quickly catching on to Sivan’s suspicion. “I cannot enter the sea witch’s lair myself. I used him to flush the two of you out.”

“Wrapped in iron kelp. Black almost died.”

“But you were with him, so he did not.”

Sivan opened his mouth to continue arguing, but abruptly realized Hayes had indirectly revealed her trust in him. She let Renalt go knowing he would lead the Royal Navy to the Cay, but she knew that while Sivan was no match for the sea witch, he would do anything to protect Black from the wrath of Grenaldian law. It was the closest thing Sivan would get to approval from Hayes, so he shut his mouth and started to sort through his notes.

Just from glancing over the map, Sivan could tell that it was a set of islands not seen in Grenaldia. The islands that littered the coast of the country were utterly random, clustered in groups and vaguely shaped into varying degrees of ovals and circles.

The islands on this map were carved into alternating curving daggers. It was like a giant beast had carved into the land before it had filled with the ocean. The collection of islands formed a staircase from one another, twisting the sea into a deadly maze that would be near impossible for a ship to navigate safely, map or not.

A small red 'x' was pinned upon the entry of a diamond-shaped cave at the center of the map. The ink had faded over time. What was once assumedly a brilliant vermilion was now dark and browned, as if it had been inked in blood. Sivan felt that was more appropriate, considering the danger one had to journey through to get there.

"Do you know where this is? It seems like a rather distinctive set of islands."

"Somewhere in Uncharted waters." Hayes gestured vaguely to the far more sparse side of the war table. It wasn't that the Uncharted territory was entirely devoid of land, but true to its name, the majority of it was still not charted on a map. At least one which any Grenaldian knew of. Few sailors had escaped the Uncharted waters alive, let alone any cartographers. "I believe it lies somewhere in the northern sea, but that's why you're here. To give us exact coordinates."

Sivan chose his response slowly, dread pooling in his gut. "Even if I give you the coordinates, there's no way the Blackwater can make it through these narrow passages. We'll be grounded as soon as we enter."

"Of course it can." Hayes's face soured, as if Sivan had just insulted her child. "As long as I navigate we will make it through without so much as a scratch."


Despite Hayes's reassurance, the dread was justified. Sivan wondered if these pirates' blind belief in themselves was a plague brought on by Black's terrible influence. Even if Sivan knew how fragile he was on the inside, Black still managed to strut around his crew like a self-important, incredibly dangerous peacock.

Sivan got to work, spreading out his mended translation notes. "This shouldn't take long...I hope."

He could almost feel Hayes's patience breaking. "...hope? It

better not. We've already lost more than a week thanks to Black's carelessness. I need those coordinates now."

"Okay, okay," Sivan tried to sound annoyed that she was interrupting his work and not very intimidated like he actually was.



It was sundown by the time Sivan stumbled upon the coordinates. The map hadn't been given a proper ruler, so there was no way of referencing the drawing itself. He had to read through every single piece of sirenath on the document to glean anything helpful at all.

He scratched the coordinates down upon scrap paper to give to Hayes. He'd also learned of several tips that would help with trying to navigate the treacherous waters, but somehow he doubted Hayes would listen to him.

Sivan lingered at the door leading out of the captain's quarters. No doubt the crew would stare openly at him the moment he stepped out of Black's cabin. He'd doubted their fervent love-making had gone completely undetected the night before, and the collar of his dark gray blouse was not nearly tall enough to conceal the mottled mess of marks Black had made on his neck.

He never enjoyed facing other's judgement, but he stepped out onto the deck nonetheless.

Brand was mopping the far corner of the deck and waved to him when Sivan stepped out. But, other than him, the pirates gave him no more than a passive acknowledgement of his existence. Either the crew was truly nonplussed by their captain having an affair with their former captive noble or Black had

threatened them into being polite.

Unable to decide which option was worse, Sivan trudged his way up to where Black was steering the wheel, Hayes at his side. He noticed that the crew was all wearing their lightest, thinnest clothes today. The sun was nearing the horizon, but it still shone so brightly it cast a heavy, oppressive heat over the sea. The pirates were sweating as they worked, a few of them collapsed to the side of the deck, unable to withstand the unending heat.

“My lord!” Black called when he saw him. The man’s voice was far too excited, and the entire crew glared at their captain for his happiness at the expense of their misery.

Sivan sighed and climbed up the stairs to the helm. Black completely abandoned his station at the wheel to snatch Sivan’s hand up and kiss it gently. He could practically feel the man’s joy through their skin contact, and it caused the furious blush to return to his face.

“Did you sleep well, my lord?” He murmured, breath ghosting across Sivan’s knuckles.

Sivan nodded and pulled his hand away. This was too much affection for him to deal with publicly. It was too much for him to deal with privately, either, but still Black persisted.

He pulled out the scrap paper and handed them to Hayes, who had angrily taken over the wheel when Black abandoned it. “Here are the coordinates.”

“About time,” she snapped.

Black smiled at her kindly, but his eyes clouded over with a shadow of irritation. “You’ll have to forgive my lord, Hayes. Facing death so often does interfere with his translation work.”

She grumbled, heedless of his sour tone. “Whatever, go away. I’m taking over the night shift.”

Black’s smile widened genuinely, and he turned away, gesturing for Sivan to follow. But Sivan waved him off to speak with

Hayes first.

"I've discovered a secret passage through the islands on the map," he told her.

She barely spared him a glance. "An unnecessary discovery. I can navigate those waters fine."

"But—"

Hayes cut him off with a dark glare. "There's no part of the ocean I can't travel. Uncharted or not." Yet she motioned to him, beckoning him to lean in so she could whisper in his ear. "If you truly wish to help, find some way to dampen the captain's mood. We can't enter Uncharted waters with him shining the sun on us at all times. It will attract too much attention."

Sivan sighed and nodded. Hayes was a far more intimidating task than Black was. He'd work on persuading the woman to listen to reason later. Toning down Black's mood was a far more realistic goal for the day, even if he didn't want to prevent the man from enjoying his happiness.

He followed the captain back to his quarters, and the crew broke whatever vow of deference they'd made to stare at the pair. Black opened the door for him, and Sivan did not like the far too pleased look the pirate captain gave him as he entered the cabin.

The door closed and Black was behind him instantly. Strong arms wrapped around Sivan, drawing him into the man's heady warmth. Black nuzzled into his neck, kissing his bruised copper skin tenderly.

"Are you sore today, my lord?"

Despite his aching back and perpetual embarrassment, Sivan shivered when Black's words ghosted against his skin. The part of him that had been blazing with passion the night before stirred, interested in how large the pirate felt behind him.

"A little, but nothing unbearable," Sivan murmured breath-

lessly.

“Amazing,” Black hummed behind Sivan’s ear, breathing against his earlobe. “You can take my cock so easily and still stand the next day. Perhaps I was too gentle with you...”

Sivan was grateful he was not facing the man, or else he would be sorely tempted to kick him away out of sheer embarrassment. Words like these reminded him that Black was indeed a pirate and was every bit deserving of that sincerely wicked grin. It was such a thrilling part of him, but it was also completely at odds with the part that wished to be Sivan’s overindulgent attendant.

As much as Sivan wanted to let Black seduce him back into bed, he couldn’t let this sit unaddressed any longer. “Black,” he sighed and pulled one of the man’s large hands from his waist. “I must speak with you about something. Will you listen?”

“Of course, my lord,” he said and let Sivan turn around.

“Good, well, it’s...it’s about that, actually.”

Black looked at him quizzically. “About what, my lord?”

“That.” Sivan sighed again as Black still seemed to not understand. “You know I’ve appreciated everything you’ve done for me. On the Spear, now, everything in between. But...” Sivan briefly lost his train of thought as the man’s green eyes glittered at being praised for practically nothing. “But I am no longer a lord, and you are no longer my attendant.”

Black was silent for a moment, his eyes refusing to come to any kind of realization. Sivan suspected he was being selectively slow-witted on purpose.

“But I’ve told you, my lord, it does not matter to me what your official title is. To me you’ll always be—”

“That’s not the point! If you wish to be intimate with me you cannot act like my attendant any longer!”

In lieu of any sensible reaction, Black merely shifted his gaze

to the platter of dishes poorly stacked on top of each other on the table. “You should have left the cleaning up to me, my lord.”

Sivan had to step back. The pirate’s willful ignorance was starting to irritate him more than any of the attendant issues had. “This is what I’m trying to tell you. Even if I were still a lord, I can still feed and clothe myself without your assistance.”

Black’s expression finally drooped as Sivan’s words set in. “I know, my lord, but—”

“If I were still a lord and you were still my attendant I would not have allowed this relationship to get this far. It’d be improper. That is why you can’t act like my attendant anymore.”

The pirate’s eyes grew stormy, his mouth setting into an indignant pout. “Why does that matter? It’s not like anyone on the Blackwater will care.”

“I care. Proper lords shouldn’t engage intimately with their attendants. I don’t want to feel like I’m taking advantage of you every time we kiss.” Sivan’s words were sincere, and he tried to be gentle, but they still provoked a humorless laugh out of Black. The pirate left Sivan at the pile of poorly stacked dishes and stomped over to the worn armchair in front of the unlit stove to collapse into it.

Sivan sighed for what seemed like the thousandth time since he’d boarded the Blackwater. Dealing with the petulant pirate his dear Nereus had become always extracted the most out of Sivan’s well of patience.

The room darkened, the blinding light coming from the windows suddenly tempered by a dreary cloud. There was a muted cheer from the crew behind the doors. At least he’d succeeded in souring the captain’s mood, although he felt quite bad about it.

Sivan followed the pirate over to the cold stove and sank to his knees next to the chair. “Black, I don’t wish to fight with you. I just want you to understand where I’m coming from.”

The man sighed, taking Sivan's hand when it was offered. "I'm trying to. But, I've always called you that. I cannot let go of it that easily."

Black's voice was soft, and for a moment Sivan was stunned by the resemblance he bore to his younger self. He could not fathom how he'd gone for so long without recognizing Nereus. His heart clenched, the former lord's weakness for the boy crushing the stubbornness inside him.

"Fine, you can still call me by my former title. Just promise me you'll at least try to let me take care of myself a bit."

The pirate nodded, his dark eyes lightening a shade. "I can do that."

Sivan smiled, squeezing his hand. "Thank you. I haven't taken a personal attendant since you, so I'm actually quite unaccustomed to it."

Green eyes sparkled above him, and Sivan found himself hoisted into Black's lap.

"Really? No one since me? You have no idea how happy that makes me, my lord."

Sivan flushed, but shot the man a disapproving frown. Honestly, this pirate was shameless. "There was a war, Black. I couldn't exactly bring an attendant to the front lines."

Black pulled him even closer, nosing against his cheek. "I would have gone with you."

"Of course you would have." Sivan sighed, again, exasperated.

The room brightened once more, the dreary cloud passing abruptly. A muted, collective groan came from the door to the deck.

"Black," Sivan said. He pushed the man away gently and motioned to the door. "There's something else. Hayes requested I try to sour your mood in order to assuage the effect it has on the

weather. It could be a problem if we are to bring such brilliant weather into Uncharted waters.”

He frowned slightly. “Is this why you brought up your title?”

“No, no. That was a genuine concern of mine. But, I don’t particularly wish to be on bad terms with you. I wouldn’t be able to bare it, actually.”

“My lord...” Black’s voice was touched, tears prickling his eyes. He hugged Sivan tightly, burying his face into the deep gray blouse he’d picked out for him. “Thank you. My heart is much weaker than it appears to be.”

“Oh, I know,” Sivan huffed. He began stroking the back of his head, his fingers sliding over the dark locks and occasionally ghosting over the gold beads. “But Black, I think you may be able to control it. You were able to keep up that wall of water surrounding Lissandry yesterday. Even while we were-ah, distracted.”

Black puffed a silent laugh against the gray fabric. “That’s one word for it.”

Sivan smacked the back of his head lightly. “You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Black confirmed. He pulled back, his expression more serious. “But I don’t think I can control this. I’ve never had much of a handle on the skies.”

“Hmm. Well, I have a feeling you have more control over it than you give yourself credit for. Can you at least try? For me? I don’t want Hayes glaring at me more than she already does.”

The pirate nodded, his doubtful frown melting into a warm smile. Sivan let Black hold him, giving in to his warm embrace.

Chapter 28

The Blackwater

Ever since Sivan had lost his title, he had been having dreams of being a lord every night. Sometimes they were benign, fleeting glimpses into his everyday life as a young lord before the war. Studying, fencing, sitting prettily for his father's guests. More often than not they were long stretches of boredom; sitting idly in the shade of the terrace, spending far too long deciding what to wear that day.

But these dreams were never his own. He'd watch himself play out the mundane events through another set of eyes.

Sivan suspected these were Black's dreams. Or perhaps they were his memories, bleeding into Sivan's consciousness through skin to skin contact while they slept.

If they were memories, they had to be altered in some form. The second person view of Sivan's own younger self felt strange enough, but the way the vision focused solely on the former lord was far too unrealistic.

Surely Nereus didn't stare at him that much.

Sivan found himself waiting at the door to his room on the Spear. A sense of anticipation and nervousness roiled inside him, yet the person he watched this scene through opened the door anyways. Sheer curtains billowed from the bedposts of Sivan's large bed. On the mattress lay a younger Sivan sleeping on the bed. It must have been just before the Uncharted attacked the Spear, for he appeared to be around eighteen.

The person he was watching this dream through swallowed, the heat of the summer air making his throat dry. Even though there was a slight breeze wafting through the windows, it was still unbearably hot in the room. The sheer curtains were lifted generously by a gentle gust of wind, as if it had been summoned to do just that. On the bed, the younger Sivan groaned, shifting uncomfortably in the heat. He had a thin shift on, and the movement hiked the hem of the fabric high up onto his hips.

His past self's ass now bare, Sivan now realized what this dream was.

As a youth he'd adopted a terrible habit of undressing in his sleep. Varis was a far more mild climate, and he'd never had to worry about losing sleep in the summer because the nights were always cool. But on the Spear the nights were almost as hot as the days, and though Sivan could manage the heat during the day, he was far less in control of his actions when he was unconscious.

Nereus had berated him for it endlessly. The young lord had never noticed, how the boy would refuse to make eye contact during those reprimands. How he would sometimes quickly leave the room after he'd set his lord's breakfast.

The sharp, low breaths coming from the Nereus he was possessing now painted those mornings in a drastically different light. He approached the bed, catching an edge of the curtain to

hold it back as he gazed upon him.

Even though Sivan in the present would object to confronting his own nakedness like this, he was compelled to observe in the same way Nereus had observed him. It was unfair, the way the morning light practically painted a target on his body. Sivan couldn't tell if he'd been struck by a moment of madness or if this was Nereus's influence, but the sight of his ass set so perfectly in the pale light was intoxicating.

He wanted to jump onto the bed, to lay his hand on that flawless copper skin, to spread him open and make him beg for his cock—

“Good morning, my lord.”

Sivan was woken up by Black's deep voice in his ear. He had been ripped out of the lewd dream or memory or whatever it was and thrown into yet another lewd situation thanks to this man.

Sivan found himself in the same position his dream self had been: on his stomach, bottom up. His shirt—Black's shirt—had been hiked up around his waist, revealing his ass. Except a very real pirate was touching him, a large, calloused hand dancing along his hip. Black was behind him, hovering just above his body, his weight carefully kept propped up to keep from crushing Sivan.

He hummed as Black kissed his nape, remaking the tender marks that had started to fade overnight. Sivan was annoyed to find that he was already hard. The dream had gotten under his skin despite himself.

“Black, I had a dream,” he groaned.

“Ah.” He smiled against Sivan's neck. “I had the same dream.”

It took a moment for that to sink in. Sivan suspected something like this had to have been possible with the pirate's siren

magic, but he hadn't thought it would actually be used on him like this. "Did you put your memories into my head?"

Black stilled behind him. "Not...not a specific memory. They might as well have been dreams, for how often I've replayed them in my head. It's as much fantasy as memory by now."

Sivan rubbed his temples, his patience wearing thin. "Don't do that. I don't need to know how perverse your younger self was when I wasn't paying attention."

"Hm, but you should." Black lifted away from him, sliding down Sivan's back. "And take responsibility for it."

"What?!" he snapped, neck twisting so golden eyes could glare at the pirate. "There's no way--"

Large hands gripped his ass, a hot kiss pressed to the start of the cleft. Sivan jerked a little, but the strong grip held his hips tight. "You have no idea what you did to me every summer. Every hot morning, you'd find some new way to present your body to me."

Sivan flushed crimson, Black's breath on his skin hot and dangerous.

"I know it was unconscious, but it still drove me mad. You had no idea how desirable you were to me. All I wanted to do was to climb into bed with you. I thought about it constantly."

His cheeks were spread open, and the man's hot breath ghosted over his opening. "Y-you never brought it up." Sivan's voice was unsteady, his foggy morning mind now hazed over by the lure of sex.

"I never would have, you would have rejected me outright."

Sivan opened his mouth, but found he had no reply for that.

"You would have," Black repeated against the curve of copper skin before him. "And it would have crushed me."

Sivan frowned. "You were too young. We both were."

"I know." Black smiled against him. "But I always thought-

what would have happened if the Uncharted never attacked the Spear? Would you have eventually accepted me as you do now?"

The former lord averted his gaze, unsure of the answer. He didn't want to admit he would have given in to temptation, but he'd seen Eliza's memory. Sivan knew if he had been around Nereus for another few years he would have been forced to acknowledge the boy's maturity and beauty.

"Maybe it's better the war happened. Then I would have never been able to do this..."

A hot tongue pressed against Sivan's entrance. The sensation was foreign, but it made Sivan startle in the same way as when Black was driving into his most sensitive parts. Black laved at the puckered skin like a man determined to melt gold with his tongue. In a sense, he did melt Sivan, as the man gripped his pillow and moaned into it wantonly.

As much as he hated to admit it, that dream had riled up Sivan. Having the real man in bed, physically touching him, was so much more intense, and it didn't take long for Black's tongue to be pushing into him while his cock leaked miserably against the bedsheets.

"Black, please-" Sivan begged, pushing his hips up higher to encourage the man to get on with it.

The pirate did relent, raising up to sit behind him and pulling Sivan up to kneel on the bed, leaning against his chest. There was a small flash of green magic as Black summoned sufficient lubricant, and two wet fingers were soon at Sivan's entrance. They slid into him easily, scissoring him wide with confidence. His shivering body opened gratefully to the pirate, Sivan's hips pushing back against him.

"My lord," Black's hot words came up against Sivan's ear. "You never answered me. Would you have accepted me once I had grown older?"

The former lord whimpered. Some vestiges of his pride as a moral nobleman prickled under his skin, but the man's fingers were assailing his prostate and Sivan could only focus on that searing pulse of pleasure.

"I-it wouldn't-ah! -have been proper-!"

Black chuckled lowly, crooking his fingers and working the bundle of nerves inside Sivan. "And what we're doing now is?"

The man's other hand came up to slide the white shirt up, exposing Sivan's chest for him to play with. He tweaked a nipple, pleased when this caused the slighter man to whine and bite his lower lip, hips jerking involuntarily.

"My lord, indulge me- Please consider this seriously. What would you have done if—in this fantasy scenario where there was no war and I was allowed to continue being your attendant—if I had snuck into bed with you one morning?"

Black's fingers dove again at his prostate, preventing Sivan from actually answering when a moan ripped through him.

"What if I had woken you up by working you open like this? You were always a heavy sleeper." Black's fingers pulled out of Sivan, leaving him feeling empty. Then a hot and heavy slick cock was pressed up against his entrance. It pushed into his prepared hole, tight but willing. "And then, if you hadn't already kicked me out of bed, I would have fucked you so hard you'd be unable to hide it from any of the nobles you loved to entertain."

His cock slid deeper in with every word until Black was fully sheathed inside of him. Sivan knew he should have probably objected to this profane fantasy of the pirate's, but the cock in his ass and Black's hot hands at his chest were forcing sensibility to abandon him.

Then, despite what his words promised, Black fucked Sivan slow and deep. He kissed the back of his neck, nipping at copper skin to place new bruises over the older ones. The slick smack of

their bodies joining over and over again filled the curtained-off bed.

“B-black-!” Sivan moaned. Much to his horror, the man behind him pulled out entirely, depriving him of the cock that was making him feel so good.

The pirate still held him close, stopping Sivan from touching himself. He made a small scolding noise in his ear. “My lord, that’s not my real name. You know what it is. You used to call me by it all the time.”

If Sivan had any strength in his arms he would have smacked the man. Now he wanted him to call him by his real name? He’d been yelled at for trying to do so just a few weeks ago!

“Come now, my lord. If you can say my name I’ll keep fucking you.”

Sivan whined, his desperate lust battling with the propriety that still bound him. He had no problem turning into a common whore for a pirate. There was something dark and exciting about that, and it was easy enough to revert back to his old self after he was spent. But acting the same way around his former attendant, especially one who refused to stop behaving like his attendant, was a taboo he was nervous about confronting.

“My lord...I’m waiting,” the man behind him crooned. His cock rubbed up against his rim, teasing Sivan with the promise of more.

Sivan could have pushed him off the bed. He could have truly yelled at him and it would have stopped then and there, likely resulting in the pirate sobbing for his lord to forgive him. But he wanted this so badly. Every part of him ached to be filled again, his mind was weak with that need.

“.....N...N-Nereus.”

Nereus grinned, pure joy and wicked delight reflecting in the gleam of his eyes. “Very good, my lord.” Then he pushed back

into Sivan with a desperate fervor.

Sivan didn't know what was wrong with himself. He had experienced tentacles and siren cock, but for some reason this was the most aroused he had ever been with this man. Perhaps it was the idea of the illicit affair that stirred his desires so. Or perhaps Sivan simply enjoyed having Black be a little cruel to him.

One of Nereus's hands slid up to Sivan's throat. His fingers smoothed along the delicate curve of his neck, fingernails scraping lightly against copper skin as he found his grip. The attendant was careful with Sivan, never hasty, never gave him more than he could handle. The press of the the man's fingers around his throat as he fucked into him from behind thrilled Sivan. His voice rose higher with every thrust, but the sounds coming out of him were stifled by the hand constricting his breath.

"You're being so very obedient for me this morning, my lord. Could it be you exposed yourself to me on purpose?" Nereus's words were hot and sinful behind him. They tugged on a phantom nerve that connected Sivan's ear to his cock.

He shook his head out of habit, his unsullied youthful self would have never intentionally seduced anyone, let alone his attendant.

"No? Don't-" His cock drove in, sliding deep and forceful into Sivan's willing body. "Don't lie to me. You wanted me to defile you like this."

Sivan didn't know what it was about the man's wicked words, but the more profane they got, the more powerful their hold over his desires were.

So, he nodded, whining a broken affirmation.

That dark chuckle that both thrilled and unnerved Sivan danced against his neck. "Very good, you admit it." Nereus shifted his hips in a way that drove the tip of his cock directly into Sivan's prostate. The Grenaldian man sobbed, the pleasure too

much and too intense for him to handle.

Nereus's other hand came around to toy with Sivan's cock. Just the slightest brush of his fingers made the lord desperate to thrust his hips forward, to get another spark of that blinding pleasure that came from his touch. The hand around his throat squeezed lightly, silently reprimanding him for trying to seek his own pleasure.

Slowly, only after Sivan had melted back into being pliantly fucked into, did Nereus touch him. His hand squeezed the lord's cock, allowing the precum gathered at the tip to pool and drip off his fingers. Sivan whined, wanting so desperately to fuck into the hot hand that held him, but knowing he was not allowed.

"You're enjoying this so much, just look at you. Do you like getting fucked by your attendant, my lord?"

Sivan was so far gone he did not even have the sense left to be ashamed by the question. He just nodded and reached a hand back to claw at Nereus's shoulder.

The dark chuckle was back, but it was so warm and full of affection Sivan did not feel unnerved by it. "You're so filthy, my lord. Do you want me to make you filthier? I can come inside, fill you up. Then you can keep it inside all day, walking around full of my cum."

It was unfair, really. Nereus only pumped his hand as he spoke these sinful words, and timed it just right with the thrusts of his cock assailing Sivan's prostate. It forced Sivan to associate the notion of being in public with his attendant's seed inside him with white hot pleasure.

"Y-yes!" He whined, this fantasy melting his brain into nothing.

"No one will know you're full of me, but I will." Nereus felt him tremble at that, and shifted his hand to squeeze at the base of his cock, preventing Sivan from climaxing. "Then, if you manage

to keep it inside you all day, I'll fuck you again on the training grounds."

Sivan couldn't tell if it was the strange mental connection they'd made that first night together, but this fantasy Nereus was painting for him was too vivid. He could practically imagine the taller boy pushing him to the ground, sword at his throat, as he worked his fingers inside to feel that morning's seed seep out. Then he'd praise his lord for being so obedient, for concealing the evidence of their coupling with a straight face. The face Sivan had on now, mixed up in passion, was meant only for him.

No one else.

Nereus's thrusts became more fevered, more desperate to seek his climax. Sivan's cock was still held back from releasing. He wanted to come so badly. The man was fucking directly into his prostate, targeting it with every thrust. It was making Sivan weak, this pleasure. It almost hurt with how intense it was and still being not allowed to come.

"My lord, my lord-" The man behind him was muttering into his neck like a prayer.

Sivan had no choice but to let Nereus control him. The hand around his cock prevented him from finding completion. The hand on his throat kept him in place. It drove Sivan wild. He was a lord, a man who had been expected to maintain the highest level of propriety and dignity. But here he was, letting himself be dominated by his attendant turned pirate.

"Nereus-!" Sivan gasped out as he came unbidden, in spite of the hand around his cock attempting to prevent just that. This forced his climax out slowly, and Sivan nearly wailed with the intensity of it. His cock released his seed in halting rivulets through Nereus's fingers, dripping down them and onto the bed.

Nereus continued to fuck him, drawing out Sivan's orgasm for as long as possible. His thrusts were growing erratic, desper-

ate as he called out Sivan's title against bruised copper skin.

Sensitive now as he was, Sivan was hurdling towards a second climax with how intensely Nereus was fucking him. His wanton groans of pleasure as he drove into Sivan were unhindered, almost animalistic.

"My lord-!" the younger man cried, husky and desperate next to Sivan's ear. Nereus's hand still around his cock was slippery with semen, so when he began pumping him again, it intensified the pleasure that made Sivan weak.

All he could do was reach a hand back and tug on the dark locks of hair. Sivan pulled the man's face closer so he could whisper in his ear.

"Come inside-! Th-that's an order—"

This ripped a desperate sound out of Nereus, a noise previously lost to his fantasies alone. "Y-yes, my lord!" He cried as he came, holding onto Sivan like he were his only lifeline in a terrible storm. His hips kept thrusting as he shot inside, his hand around Sivan's cock erratic, but it was more than enough to hitch Sivan over the edge into spilling his pleasure along with his lover.

Both of them lay there for a long few moments, too spent to even move.

"You are a treasure, my lord," Black broke the silence, kissing the the back of Sivan's neck.

He made a noise of displeasure. "And you're a menace, Black."

The pirate puffed out a chuckle against his skin. "Aw, no more 'Nereus?'"

Sivan was too embarrassed to even gratify that question with a response. If he truly wanted Sivan to call him by his first name, it was far too late. He knew Black was just insisting on it now to ruffle Sivan's feathers.

Slowly, Black pulled out, but paused right before the head of

his cock was freed from Sivan's hole. He thumbed at the entrance, collecting a bead of cum where they were joined. There was more inside, and it would spill out endlessly once he pulled the head out.

"Seems like a waste. Hm...what if I found a plug for you? Then we could try that—!"

Sivan twisted away, forcing Black to pull out and kicked the pirate out of his bed. Black landed with a thud on the cabin floor, and Sivan successfully drowned out his complaints by wrapping the comforter around his own head.

"Shameless pirate!" He berated, turning impossibly red under the covers. And even though he had the blanket covering his head, Sivan could still hear Black's amused laughter from the bedside.

The sound of the man's laugh always ruined him. More than any filthy thing the pirate could get him to indulge in. The sound slipped right between his ribs and threaded its way inside.

Sivan decided he would reserve the man's real name for intimate moments, when it was just the two of them, and he would allow for Nereus to stitch his name once more into his heart.

Chapter 29

Uncharted Waters

The Uncharted sea stood still before the Blackwater. Sivan had expected they would have to weather the torment of hurricane winds and waves that tested the mettle of their ship. However, very little had changed the moment they crossed over into Uncharted waters. If anything, they were calmer than they had been in Grenaldian territory.

It felt unsettling in its stillness. There was no wind, but the Blackwater felt in no danger of stalling.

Sivan glanced surreptitiously towards Black, who was barking orders at crew members to prepare for the worst. He could tell the pirate captain was thinking the same thing he was: were the calm seas due to sheer luck or to Black's good mood?

They had been working on Black's control over his emotions and their effect on the weather, but the results were fairly inconsistent.

"Black! Can't you summon a little rain here? These calm wa-

ters are making me nervous,” Hayes shouted from the wheel.

The pirate captain looked towards the sky with trepidation. Then he looked at Sivan, and made a beeline for him.

“My lord, please scold me,” he requested, utterly without shame.

The few crew members within earshot choked on the still air, and Sivan felt embarrassment color his face. He felt the very strong urge to push Black off the ship, but his transformation into a siren would only make the effect he had on the weather more uncontrollable.

“Black,” Sivan said slowly, taking huge internal gulps from his rapidly depleting well of patience. “You don’t need me to put you in a foul mood to control this. Just try what we practiced before.”

It had taken them a few weeks to reach the coordinates the map had given them. So, when Black wasn’t screwing his brains out, Sivan attempted to coach him in meditation.

“Don’t forget to focus on your breathing,” he had told Black a few days ago as they were sitting in bed one morning.

The pirate frowned, a crease forming in the center of his brow as he squeezed his eyes shut. “How am I supposed to focus on controlling the weather if I’m also focusing on breathing?”

Sivan took his large hands, thumbs smoothing over the calloused pads of his palms. “That’s precisely the point. You’re not supposed to focus on the control. The change in weather comes from your unprocessed emotions. You need to learn how to feel them without letting them take over you.”

A green eye sparkled as the man stole a peek at Sivan. Then he leaned in quickly to kiss him. “I don’t mind them taking over me,” Black purred against his lips.

Sivan pushed him back gently with a finger to his lips. “You don’t mind when they’re positive.” He gestured to the window,

where the blazing hot sun filtered in from outside. “When they’re negative you cause hurricanes, Black.”

Black huffed, but sat back, closing his eyes and attempting once more to meditate.

Back in the present on the deck of the ship, the pirate captain also had closed his eyes. His breathing slowed, a tense shadow of calm crossing over his face.

Sivan had been schooled in the practice of meditation since he was a child. It was where he’d honed his ability to keep his expression tranquil and noble even when faced with the most foul of situations.

Black could never reach the level of internal restraint Sivan had accomplished. His emotions were too intense, too free. Secretly, Sivan wished the siren would never reach the level of control he himself had, simply because he enjoyed seeing Black express himself openly.

The air shifted, a single cloud formed overhead, and a pleasant, cool breeze wrapped around the deck of the ship. The crew cheered, and Sivan squeezed Black’s hand as a confirmation of his success.

The captain looked entirely too pleased with himself, and he preened as a handful of fellow pirates slapped him on the back. Hayes rolled her eyes while adjusting the wheel to the change of wind, but no longer complained about the weather.

The newfound breeze at their backs propelled them even faster to their destination. And the Blackwater maintained its pace for some time.

But, the further they travelled into Uncharted Territory, the more that feeling of uneasiness stirred within Sivan. He tried to write it off as the persistent anxiety that haunted him from his time in the war, but this unease was relentless.

The gray haze manifested so slowly none of them noticed it

until it started impairing their vision.

“What is this?” Sivan muttered, frowning when he realized the horizon had been utterly obscured by fog.

No one responded to his conjecture, but Sivan knew Black must have heard him. He’d muttered far too many things under his breath while in the throes of passion, and the pirate had heard every single one of them, to Sivan’s dismay.

“Black?”

Still no response, and Sivan now saw the far away look in his green eyes. He tugged on Black’s overcoat, forcing the man to look in his direction. Upon seeing his precious lord, all the pirate captain did was frown slightly. There was little recognition in his gaze, and Sivan could tell something was wrong.

In the midst of Sivan making this realization, the haze had thickened tenfold, utterly obscuring his ability to even see across the deck of the ship. The calm sea broke into disturbed, trembling waves that hit the Blackwater with impatient grit.

Other crew members now called out in alarm.

“Oy! Wha’ wrong wit ya?!”

“Don’ look at me like tha-agh!”

“Captain! It’s the Quietus!”

The blood drained from Sivan’s face. He’d heard the occasional rumor from the rare Grenaldian sailor who’d somehow survived a mission to Uncharted waters, but he’d always thought they’d gone a little mad from their ordeal.

“Fuck!” Hayes’s stern voice clipped out into the fog. “This is some bad goddamn luck. Human crew! Stay sharp! The Quietus won’t affect you! Your Uncharted fellows are a lost cause for now.”

The truth of her words was evident in the glazed-over faces of the Uncharted around Sivan. The unease which had followed him over the surface of this territory now caught up with the rest

of the human crew. They all stepped back from the Uncharted crew members, leaving them where they collapsed, one by one.

Black somehow stood standing, but the sudden lurch of the ship as they hit a wave caused the remaining Uncharted crew to fall to the hard deck.

The human fraction of the crew struggled to keep up with Hayes's orders as she tried to keep the ship on course against the abrupt change of the sea. The Blackwater barreled through another wall of water, but the ship shuddered so much Sivan lost his footing and crashed into Black.

The pirate did not react at first, but once Sivan regained his bearing and Black got a good look at his face, he pushed the Grenaldian man back violently, a growl on his breath. The shock of it was crushing to Sivan. The pirate captain had been violent and unpredictable when they'd first reunited, but since Sivan had gotten to know him and learned of his true identity, he hadn't so much as felt a whisper of a threat from the undoubtedly dangerous man.

"Montgomery!" Hayes shouted over the growing din of Uncharted anger and confusion. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes! What is going on here, Hayes?!"

She grunted loudly as she kicked an affected Uncharted crew member in the chest, preventing them from taking over the wheel. "The *Quietus* will make them lose their minds! It'll be permanent if we don't get out of this fast!"

The dread in Sivan pierced him as he looked again at Black, growling at him, eyes vacant. The man he loved would soon be lost forever.

And, that was it.

Sivan was in love with him.

He'd known it in his heart for weeks, but this pressing danger finally made that fact crystal clear in his mind.

“What can I do?!”

“Get the captain! The only thing that can dispel the *Quietus* is a siren!”

Sivan nodded and turned back to Black. The man was focused on something Sivan could not see, a phantom terror brought on by the dreaded haze.

“Black, look at me.”

He did, but his expression did not soften as it usually did when they made eye contact. Sivan stepped forward, reaching out.

“You have to listen to me. You must focus on breaking this fog. If you don’t-“

His hand was slapped away, raw confusion and distrust on the siren’s face. “Who are you?” Black spat. “How dare you give me orders?!”

The pirate not recognizing him threw Sivan off. He wondered if this was what Black had felt like when Sivan had not recognized him in *Varis*. It hurt, and the guilt he’d been compartmentalizing resurfaced, ugly and sharp.

“Black, it’s me, Sivan.” Then, after a moment’s pause: “Lord Montgomery.”

The distrust darkened on Black’s face. “You’re not him. You’re an impostor.”

The *Quietus* thickened around them, cloying at Sivan’s senses even though it supposedly had no effect on his mind. Despite Black’s unforgiving expression, Sivan stepped into his space and held on fast to him. “Nereus,” he exhaled urgently in a way he knew would cut through the man’s defenses. Sure enough, Black’s hard expression broke, confusion mixing with disbelief. “It’s me, Nereus. Come back to me.”

For a moment Sivan thought he’d broken the *Quietus*’s effect on him. But the haze stubbornly grew thicker around them, and

the pirate captain shook Sivan off violently. He tried to hold on to the larger man, but a flash of green magic seared his hand.

Sivan's flesh burned where Black's magic had touched him. The dark handprint around his forearm burned worse. Pain lanced up his arm, but it was nothing compared to the hurt he saw in the pirate's eyes.

Black, who had remained standing even when all his fellow Uncharted had collapsed, dropped suddenly, knees landing heavy on the wet planks.

"Y-you can't be him," he nearly sobbed. "My lord left me here because he didn't want me. He wouldn't return for me after so long."

Sivan knew it was the effect of the Quietus that was making him say this. He'd read the legends, he knew how the Quietus preyed on the weakest memories and warped them in its victims' minds to get the most severe reaction from them.

He knew this, but it still carved into his heart like a hot knife.

The pain in his arm was growing worse, making the edges of Sivan's vision blurry with malice. He could not let himself pass out. There would be no bringing the man he loved back if the Quietus took him.

Heedless of the pain and the crackling green magic rolling off Black, Sivan knelt next to him, embracing him fully. The man thrashed, but Sivan held tight. He was unwilling to let him go.

"Nereus-!"

Black stopped thrashing for a moment, enough for Sivan to rush out his hushed promise.

"Nothing can forgive my abandonment of you. But what I promised you before remains true: I will never leave you again..."

The fog ensnared Sivan's breath, preventing him from speaking further. For the first time since the Quietus set in, Sivan

feared for his own life. He'd been so wrought with concern for Black's sanity he'd completely disregarded his own well-being.

After a long moment with his lungs burning and green magic snapping around him, Sivan was finally granted reprieve. The pain from Black's touch dissolved into warmth, instantly soothing his skin.

"My lord...?" the siren before him rasped out, raw dismay in his voice.

The green flashes of magic transformed into a widening dome around them, pushing out the *Quietus* with force. In another few seconds it had cleared the ship of the haze entirely, dissipating it with a finite snap of green light.

"My lord!" Black sobbed, crushing Sivan to his body tightly. "I hurt you. I do not deserve to live—"

Sivan sagged into his embrace. The pain and fog were gone, but the real relief he felt was from knowing he hadn't lost this man to the oblivion of the *Quietus*.

The tumultuous waters the haze brought with it abated after Black had broken the spell, but the ship still shuddered occasionally. Hayes's brow was slick with sweat, and her olive skin was ashen. The woman's connection with the *Blackwater* was stronger than anyone else's. Sivan suspected the reason she never left the ship was because she could not bear to let it leave her sight. The *Blackwater* certainly was no ordinary vessel. The ship could travel beneath the waves, and cannon fire rolled off it like raindrops. The ship was enchanted by magic, but Hayes may have been enchanted by the ship itself.

"Black," Sivan patted the man's face, bringing him back out of his self-pity. "I am okay, but please look at Hayes. She does not look well."

The pirate captain straightened at this and hastened to dry his tears. "You're right, my lord."

Black composed himself and crossed the deck to face her. She glowered back at him, gripping the wheel of the ship tightly, wood handles cracking beneath her fists.

“Don’t even say it, Black.”

“Hayes, let me take over for now. Rest before—”

“No!” she snapped, with more ferocity than she should have been able to muster in this state. “I told you if we ever enter these godforsaken waters again I would not leave the helm. I will not, so don’t say it.”

Black looked at her for a long moment, the two of them remembering some understanding they’d come to long ago.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Hayes breathed, standing taller.

The captain nodded, and turned away from her. Sivan looked between the both of them, hands flexing with frustration. He huffed and followed Black across the deck.

“Black! This isn’t a good idea— You don’t understand what we’re going to sail through next. Hayes looks like she could collapse at any moment!”

Black stopped at the rail, placing a hand on the polished wood. “Hayes knows what we’re getting into. She’s the only one who can sail us through these waters, even if they take a toll on her.”

These stubborn pirates were going to be the death of Sivan. He glanced back at the woman at the helm, her sickly face fixed ahead on their destination. Her strength would have been admirable, had it not been the deciding factor of the whole crew’s safety.

“At least let me talk her through the safe passages I translated from the sirenath map,” Sivan pleaded quietly, so Hayes could not hear. “I think I can direct her through the worst of it.”

The man puffed out an endeared chuckle. “You may try, my

lord, but it would be rather pointless. Hayes will not listen.”

Sivan sighed when he realized Black was right.

“You know, the sailors who spin tales about me being a dreaded pirate lord do love to compare me to a hurricane. But I am a mere drizzly day compared to that woman. We could not be in better hands.”

His words were tested as they approached the islands. Or rather, as they approached the smattering of oddly-shaped, jagged rocks the coordinates had led them to. Unease floated through the ship as the crew realized what they were about to sail through. Something grazed the bottom of the ship, causing a grinding moan to rattle the Blackwater. Sivan looked over the side and saw the barest hint of a rock under the surface of the ship’s wake.

Yet Hayes did not even flinch as she steered the ship through the field of shallow waters and sharp rocks. She kept her firm grip on the wheel, her eyes fixed on the prize ahead.

As they approached the oddly shaped rocks, Sivan finally realized that they weren’t rocks at all.

“They’re ships...” Sivan gasped, horror plain in his golden eyes.

This was a graveyard of ancient ships. Some were just masts, rotting and broken. Others maintained the barest scraps of what once were magnificent sails.

“That they are. They’ve made quite a maze for us,” Black agreed, a frown on his face. He offered his arm to Sivan. “You may want to hold onto me, my lord.”

Sivan narrowed his eyes at the pirate suspiciously, but found himself gripping the well-muscled forearm when the Blackwater suddenly lurched again.

This time there was no grinding noise. Hayes was turning the wheel frantically, somehow getting the ship to turn at an impossi-

ble angle to avoid the decaying skeleton of a ship.

On she went like that, maneuvering the Blackwater with a speed and accuracy Sivan would have thought simply impossible. He observed the wreckages as they sailed past them. Some of them were unrecognizable as being from any one country. A few were of Uncharted make, even fewer were Grenaldian. Only the warships were left even remotely identifiable out of the Grenaldian wrecks.

“I see it!” Brand shouted, pointing out an island creeping out from the distant fog. The island wasn’t large. One could only pick it out of the wreckage of ships and rocks due to its unnatural white sheen and the ghostly aura it gave off.

“The tomb of Estes...” Black murmured, awe in his voice.

Sivan squeezed his arm. They’d found it at last.

Hayes laughed victoriously in a ragged huff. She turned the wheel viciously, her dark eyes gleaming. She’d set her eyes on the tomb, and steered the Blackwater into a direct course.

There were still rocks and broken ships between them and the white island, but that did not stop Hayes. She only paused to take the topmost prongs of the wheel in her hands and pull down, forcing the wheel to turn ninety degrees towards her. With the wheel parallel to the water, the ship gave another mighty lurch.

A few pirates rushed over to the rail, looking over.

“She’s got feet! The Blackwater’s walking!”

The rest of the crew crowded over to get a look. Sure enough, tentacle-like legs had grown from hull of the ship. It crawled over the rocks nimbly, allowing Hayes to commit to the straight line she’d made to the white island.

Sivan held fast to Black’s arm. The Blackwater’s movement over the debris shook the ship and its passengers in a way none were used to. Sivan was forced to use the pirate captain’s greater

weight to stop himself from flying halfway across the deck.

The larger man recognized his struggle and snaked his arm around Sivan's waist, pulling the former lord securely against him.

"Be careful, my lord," he purred in Sivan's ear.

"Quiet," Sivan bit back. He refused to indulge the man during such a time.

The Blackwater swiftly made it over the rocks and wreckage, landing with a splash in front of Estes' tomb. The crew settled with the ship, everyone regaining their footing one by one.

Other than Black, the only one who hadn't been completely bowled over by the experience was Hayes. She pushed in the prongs of the wheel and turned it back into its natural upright position. Her expression wasn't as wild as it had been while she was steering, but she seemed more than satisfied with the ship's unearthly performance.

"Where exactly did you two find the Blackwater?" Sivan asked Black.

"Hmm," Black hesitated, stealing a thoughtful glance at Hayes. "It's more like the ship found us."

The answer was cryptic, but Sivan knew there were more pressing matters at hand than discovering the story behind his words. "Well, I've never seen a ship quite like her."

"Thank the gods for that!" Black laughed. He kissed the top of Sivan's head before letting go of his waist. The crew had already started weighing anchor and preparing the dinghies. An excited murmur thrummed between the pirates. They had finally made it to the fabled island. The one that would make them rich beyond their wildest dreams and give Black and Sivan the means to end this war. Their motives were different, but they shared in the thrill of the moment.

Black helped Sivan into the first dinghy. A firm clack of boots

stopped in front of them, Hayes staring them down.

“Bring me back the corseque,” she said to Black alone.

“Aye-aye, you’ve brought me this far.” He saluted lazily at her.

It took Sivan a moment to realize she wasn’t coming with them. “Hayes, surely you’re coming with us. This place is a fortress. The Blackwater will be fine without you for awhile.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, amused, like that was the silliest thing he could have asked. “I don’t care about going in that tomb. I just want what’s in it.”

Black pressed a hand to Sivan’s back, encouraging him to sit down in the small boat. “Come, my lord, you won’t convince her.”

Sivan’s mouth slanted into a small frown, but followed the man into the dinghy. The boat lowered slowly into the water, and Brand along with a few other pirates grabbed oars to start rowing.

Sivan leaned in to ask Black quietly: “Does she ever leave the ship?”

Black smiled sadly at him. “No, she doesn’t.”

“...*can* she leave the ship?”

He didn’t respond, but ever so slightly shook his head, affirming that Sivan was right in his suspicions.

Whatever spell the Blackwater held over Hayes kept her bound to it. She was forever cursed to sail under its barracuda flag.

They approached the shore of the white island. Its sandy beach almost looked like snow against the dark ocean. An inlet directed them into the island, steering them towards a great crystal staircase. At the top of the stairs was the entrance to the tomb.

It was already broken open.

Chapter 30

The Tomb of Estes

Black stared at the broken entrance to the tomb for several long moments. He seemed as if he were in a daze, like he couldn't understand what he was seeing.

"Perhaps it was broken into long ago," Sivan suggested, although he felt the same dread he saw on the pirate's face.

Brand startled as Black turned on him, looming over the Grenaldian man. "Brand! Was Vivianne allowed into my cabin?!" Black's voice was so intense Sivan almost jumped forward to pull him away. But he made no move to attack the other pirate.

"A-aye, Captain! We 'ad no right ta stop her."

Black snarled out his frustration and turned away to storm the tomb.

"But I made sure tha' she did nah take th' map with her-!" Brand called out after him.

Sivan followed after, joining Black inside the tomb. The

walls were as white as the exterior of the island, giving the whole cavern an unearthly glow even in the dark. Huge pillars held up the ceiling, and carved into them were intricate lines of characters Sivan now recognized as sirenath. It was a beautiful, spotless example of a siren's resting place. And there wasn't a speck of gold in sight.

"What's the matter? Do you think Vivianne got here before us?" Sivan asked, the dread in his stomach now starting to make sense to him.

"If she was allowed into my cabin she could have seen the map. What's worse, she could have read your notes," Black clipped out, eyes darting around the tomb for any sign of treasure.

"But, there's no way she could have made sense of those, let alone finish my translation. Even if she could, we still have the map."

Black shook his head. "You underestimate her. She's far more intelligent than she lets on. She has a perfect memory. If Vivianne got a good look at either the map or your notes she could recreate them."

Finally their eyes adjusted to the darkness enough to allow them to see the full extent of the tomb. At the center lay a pool of dark water. What appeared to be a stone casket rose from the center of the water.

"Oh!" Brand breathed behind them. "We migh' be able ta portage th' dinghy-"

Impatient as ever, Black merely strode into the water. His pants ripped as his legs transformed into the winding siren tail. With just a few flicks of his tail, he reached the casket and opened it. The stone lid landed in the water with a heavy splash.

Black exhaled, relief visible in his shoulders as he saw what lay inside. King Estes's bones were held together by tattered

clothes and a millennia of dust. His skeletal hand gripped a long silver weapon: a deadly looking blade grew from mirrored curved spears, mounted on a staff carved with sirenath runes. Not quite a lance, not quite a trident.

“The Corseque of Estes,” Black breathed.

He picked up the weapon and yanked, pulling it free from the death grip of the siren king. It glittered terribly in the dim light of the cave, lighting the siren pirate with false sunlight.

“She did nah take th’ weapon?” Brand asked, dumbfounded.

“*For the treasure,*” Sivan whispered, remembering Vivianne’s words all the way back on Lissandry. “She only cared about the gold.”

“Aye...” Disappointment crossed over Brand’s face. “Th’ crew will nah be happy about th’ gold.”

Black rejoined them on the shore, grinning madly, brandishing the corseque above the water for them to observe. “Do not fear, Brand! After I kill Jhaeros, everyone on the Blackwater will be rewarded with all the gold their hearts desire.”

A clear and chilling voice cut through the darkness around them.

“What was that about killing me?”

All the breath in Sivan punched out when he heard that voice. It was the one that haunted his nightmares, the one that rang in his worst memories of drowning comrades and the red-stained sea.

Black turned around with a snap, holding the corseque up to defend against any attack. Yet none came, for Jhaeros was lounging lazily on the casket that contained the bones of the long dead siren king. His white tail draped over the edge and into the water, his iridescent scales casting glittering shimmers of light onto the surface. The siren king was far more beautiful than Sivan remembered. His nightmares must have befouled his memory,

because Jhaeros was just as artfully gorgeous as Black, with similar long hair as deep as the night. The two were strikingly similar, but Jhaeros's cerulean eyes were a cold contrast to the vibrant green that glared back at him now.

"Wh- when did he get 'ere?" Brand asked to no one in particular.

Jhaeros laughed joylessly, disdain apparent on his beautiful face. "Oh, please. You're in my realm. Did you really think I wouldn't notice the stench of humans?"

That laugh churned Sivan's stomach. Just the sound of it forced his whole body to go weak, and the familiar burn in his arm resurfaced. He had to look at it to confirm that the only mark on his skin now was that black handprint. Somehow, this phantom pain still haunted him when confronted with the source of it. Sivan staggered, catching onto Black's coat to steady himself.

Black flashed a glance over at Sivan, concern washing over his face before he refocused on the threat before them.

"I really must thank you for discovering Estes' tomb for me. I've been so unlucky in my attempts," Jhaeros yawned, seemingly bored by the whole situation.

"Your luck's about to get much worse, Jhaeros!" Black snarled before diving into the pool, his long black tail propelling him across the water to the casket. He rose the deadly corseque, aiming it at the siren king's heart. A flash of gold signaled Jhaeros drawing his sword. A loud clang of metal on metal echoed through the tomb. The king's sword locked with the corseque, preventing the wicked tip from piercing his chest.

Jhaeros looked up at the other siren with a wild intensity. "Come on, you'll have to do better than that. I've been so curious to find out if this weapon actually can kill one of us."

His words were tinged with a shrill bite that hinted towards

the siren king's unstable state. Black snarled at him and twisted the corseque away to try striking him again.

Again, Jhaeros blocked the weapon with his golden sword. Sivan gripped the hilts of his swords, instinctively wanting to back Black up. But no matter how firm his grip, fear prevented him from actually drawing the weapons. When faced with the ultimate antagonist of his nightmares, Sivan was useless.

Jhaeros let Black try to hit him several more times, but the Uncharted king was just too fast. Sivan felt shame roil in his gut as he realized that Black was far faster than he'd let on in their sparring. He'd let Sivan win.

And there was no way he would win against Jhaeros.

Sivan's hands slid from their grips on his sword hilts.

A flash of red fire crackled from Jhaeros's sword, hitting Black square on and throwing him against the wall of the tomb. There was a terrible crunching noise upon impact. The stone wall crumbled around where his body had collided. Dread took over Sivan as he saw the man he loved collapse lifeless onto the floor. Jhaeros was once again upon Black in a flash, red sparks of magic coming off him like water droplets. "Get up!" he shouted before slashing another wave of dark red fire at him. It hit the pirate in the chest, wrenching a terrible howl out of him. The smell of burning flesh curled through the tomb.

Black's chest was red with burns, his skin boiling painfully. Despite this, he managed to stand upright, using the corseque as leverage.

Jhaeros made a sound of disappointment. "You could have been so much, Nereus. I offered you everything, little brother."

Black spit out blood at the siren king. Sivan processed the words.

"Brother...?"

His question had been a whisper, but Jhaeros still heard it,

and turned his head to look at him. He puffed out a laugh upon seeing Sivan's shock.

"Oh, your precious lord doesn't even know? Yes, indeed, Nereus and I are bound by blood." Jhaeros seemed to delight in revealing this, and looked eagerly between Black and Sivan to see their reactions.

When Sivan thought about it, the connection made sense. Nereus had been an orphan, and he'd always been tight-lipped about his early days. The two even looked alike. Still, the revelation was jarring. Sivan looked at Black, his golden eyes wide with shock. The pirate was struggling to stay conscious, but his expression was nonetheless pinched in the shamed terror of being revealed.

"Let me guess, he told you he was fully human." Jhaeros leaned over to grab his brother by the hair and wrench him up as an example. "Simply under a...a spell or something."

Black spit in his face, forcing the older siren to drop him with an angry snarl. Then, with a speed he did not appear he could have summoned in that state, Black drove the corseque into Jhaeros's stomach.

The Uncharted king roared, scrambling away from his brother and trying to pull the weapon out. His white tail thrashed, splashing in and out of the pool of water.

"Th' captain did it!" Brand cheered, and Sivan felt a surge of hope at the thought of ending this once and for all.

But as Jhaeros's screams echoed through the chamber, they shifted into hollow laughter. The siren looked down at the corseque that he was impaled on. This was supposed to be the one weapon that could kill a siren. The only one.

"Little brother, you are so naive. The weapon is a myth. As if anything that could kill a siren can exist." He pulled the corseque out of his body, blood running off it in rivulets. "Nothing can

stop me from carrying out my divine purpose.”

Jhaeros then raised the weapon and turned it around on Black. He returned the blow, impaling his brother through the stomach. The king did it with so much force it blew the pirate captain back into the wall. The corseque entered the rock, pinning the weakened Black to the ground.

“Black!!” Sivan screamed, and finally freed his sabers from their psychological prison. He rushed at the Uncharted king, heedless of the siren’s proven invulnerability.

The only thought in his head was that he had to protect the one he loved at any cost.

Jhaeros barely granted him an icy look before raising his golden sword to knock the attack away. He did it so easily, looking like it required the same effort of swatting a fly. Sivan flew back, barely being saved from colliding with a pillar when Brand caught him. Black hissed at his brother, rage darkening his eyes.

“I’ll kill you, I swear it!”

Black was flashed a cruel smile, one far sharper than the pirate’s rage. “Oh, and how are you going to do that, little brother? Your fabled corseque failed you.” Jhaeros slithered in a half circle around Black, taking a moment to consider him. “And it’s not like I’m the one who’s been stupid enough to make a pneumarium.” Black’s eyes grew wide as his brother produced a small vial of light out of the air.

Sivan’s heart grew cold. It was that same bottle of light he’d lost during their escape from the Blackwater. “H-how did you get that?” He asked, a breathless whisper, but Jhaeros still heard him effortlessly.

The siren king looked back at him, then back at his brother. He assessed them slowly, redrawing the lines of what he knew in his mind. “He gave this to you?”

“Don’t worry about it, my lord. It’s nothing—gnh!” Red

flames licked down the corseque, burning Black's insides.

Sivan wavered, not sure if he should tell the truth or not. "It came to me in the ocean."

"It came to you..." Jhaeros processed this, and his face grew steadily into a mask of cruel amusement. "So the little lord doesn't even know what this is?"

The king laughed, holding up the vial, his grip tight around the glass. Sivan wasn't sure what the vial was to Black, but he knew he did not want it in Jhaeros's hands.

"This, Lord Montgomery, is a pneumarium. Wicked, ancient magic. Most sirens know to stay far away from it, but not my foolish brother."

Sivan looked to Black, who looked halfway between death and wanting to rush over and cover Sivan's ears.

"This contains a fraction of his soul. He carved it out himself and bottled it up. They're meant to be safeguards, assuring that even if a siren dies he can be reborn with a pneumarium to his corpse's lips." Jhaeros then turned to his brother, brandishing the small vial of light. "But it does not come without risk. I wonder what would happen if I crushed this precious bottle?" His hand tightened around the pneumarium, the glass cracking under the pressure. "It likely won't kill you, but I wonder what it's like to have part of your soul destroyed..."

Black howled in pain, his face turning a far worse pallor than when he'd been restrained by the iron kelp. Sivan's heart cried out, instinctively reacting to the death throes of his beloved.

"Wait!" Sivan shouted. His voice was far more broken than he had hoped it would sound. To his surprise, the siren king did in fact loosen his grip around the pneumarium, and Black's screams blessedly stopped. He turned and glared at Sivan, his eerily blue eyes bright with hate.

"Don't tell me what to do, human filth."

“I can translate sirenath for you. There must be countless Uncharted artifacts that remain a mystery to you.” Sivan offered more quietly. He did not miss the spark of interest in the Uncharted king’s eyes at the mention of the ancient tongue.

“You lie,” Jhaeros hissed. Then, turning back around, he brandished the breaking vial once again.

Sivan threw his sabers, the twin blades clattering on the tomb floor. “Take me instead!”

“My lord, no!” With how Black screamed, writhing against the corseque he was impaled on, one would have thought he had been cut open by his brother’s golden sword.

Jhaeros lowered his weapon, and looked at Sivan with cold interest.

“How else do you think we found this tomb? I translated the sirenath map to it.”

The Uncharted king swerved his way over to him, his long tail trailing like white smoke behind him. “What else?”

Sivan blinked, not understanding the question. “What?”

“What else do you want? Take you, yes, but what else? Spare my blood traitor of a brother?”

“My lord! Please don’t do this! You can’t trust him, he—“

Jhaeros sent another blast of red magic at Black, causing his brother to spit out a spray of blood upon impact. The king did not break eye contact with Sivan.

“I’m true to my word, Lord Montgomery- Oh, right, it’s not ‘lord’ anymore, is it? I heard about your little disownment.” Jhaeros then took his blade and sliced his palm open. Blood dripped from the cut, almost black in the dark tomb. “As a measure of faith we’ll enter into a blood pact. Name your terms.”

Sivan hesitated, uncertainty roiling in his gut right next to the dread of losing Black again. But he met the king’s icy gaze. “Give me the pneumarium. Let Nereus go. And the crew. Let the

Blackwater sail on unharmed.”

Black let out a weak protest, struggling to get the corseque free from the rock he was nailed to. Jhaeros offered Sivan his golden sword, signaling for him to return the gesture with his hand.

Before he could doubt his decision, Sivan reached out and ran his palm along the impossibly sharp edge. And before he could even wince at the pain, Jhaeros clasped their bloody hands together, Black’s pneumarium between their palms. “With this exchange of blood, the terms have been set,” the king announced. “You’re mine now, Montgomery.”

Sivan found himself locked in the Uncharted king’s cruel cerulean eyes. He could feel himself drowning in the depth of the hatred they bore.

Jhaeros adjusted his grip, letting Sivan have the vial of Black’s soul. The king tugged him by the wrist, away from Black. The siren’s sharp nails dug into his skin, marring the handprint Black had left on him. Jhaeros then lifted his sword and swung it counterclockwise. It cut a red line of magic through the air, as if carving time and space itself. The circle warbled and coalesced into a portal.

He didn’t even need to draw a summoning circle. The siren king was as powerful as Sivan had feared. That much was evident in his battle with Black.

“My lord...” Black croaked, his voice weak, but more heart-breaking was how betrayed he sounded. “You... you promised me you wouldn’t leave me again.”

Sivan inhaled sharply, tears immediately threatening to spill over. The desire he felt to run back to Black’s side was powerful. He wished to apologize, to throw his sacrifice to the wind just so they could die together.

But the thought of Black dying was more terrifying than any-

thing Jhaeros could do to him.

So, Sivan turned away, unable to look at the man he loved any longer without caving in. He cradled the pneumarium to his chest. "Will you please take the corseque out of him?"

Jhaeros narrowed his icy glare at him. "That wasn't in the terms."

A long, horrible moment passed. Then, Jhaeros turned and with a flick of his hand the corseque came out of Black's chest and returned to him. Black crumpled to the floor, unmoving.

"Just to make it perfectly clear, dear brother: when you recover, do not try to come after your precious lord. This is what I will do to him if you get anywhere near Uncharted waters again."

Then Jhaeros held up the corseque. Red fire crackled and sparked around the weapon. The groan of metal rang through the echoey tomb before the corseque melted into a bubbling puddle on the stone floor.

Unbelievably, Black was already crawling towards them. "My lord, please, you can't do this..." His voice was so weak Sivan could barely hear him.

But, he can.

He must.

In order to save Black from a fate worse than death, Sivan had to break his promise once more. So he turned his back on Black and let the Uncharted king escort him into dangerous waters.