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 accomodate 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 intrest 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 do to 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.