



Blackwater

Book Two: The Corseque of Estes
By Lucid

Blackwater recap

Lord Sivan Montgomery has been kidnapped by the notorious Captain Black of the pirate ship, Blackwater. He was seemingly taken for his ability to translate a map in the lost siren language, sirenath, but the pirate captain has ulterior motives when it comes to Sivan.

Sivan's father, Earl Tristan Montgomery, sends a fleet of Royal Navy ships to save Sivan, an indulgent act when their country of Grenaldia is on the tail end of losing a nine year war with the Uncharted King Jhaeros. But the rescue plan is thwarted when Black transforms into his siren form, in the process helping Sivan to remember that Black is none other than his long lost attendant, Nereus.

Black is very different now from the Nereus of the past. He's moody and has a temper, and when his siren emotions run sour the weather fouls and can be bad enough to bring on a hurricane.

Chased by the Royal Navy and King Jhaeros, the Blackwater crew mutinies against their captain, and Black and Sivan are forced to find shelter in Calloway Cay, home of the dreaded sea witch. Sivan is surprised to learn that the sea witch Calloway is Eliza, who used to be the chef for the Montgomery estate. Unlike Black, she is not pleased to see Sivan and sells both of them out to the Royal Navy.

Black is nearly executed by Earl Montgomery, but he is saved by Sivan, who is disowned by his father by doing so. The two of them are miraculously rescued by the Blackwater, steered by Black's first mate Hayes, who is cursed to forever be on the ship.

The sexual tension between Black and Sivan breaks, and they begin sleeping together. With sunny skies overhead, Sivan finishes translating the map and they set off into Uncharted

waters towards their true goal: to find the tomb of the first siren king and reclaim the Corseque of Estes, the only weapon that can kill a siren. They hope to kill King Jhaeros with it and finally end the war that has ravaged Grenaldia.

After they sail through dangerous waters, they're disappointed to find the tomb has already been robbed of the bounty of treasure that was promised to be inside. However, the Corseque of Estes is still there. Black takes the weapon just as King Jhaeros appears. He attempts to kill the king with it, but it does nothing. Jhaeros takes the weapon and shatters it into nothing.

The siren king reveals to Sivan that Black and Jhaeros are brothers. But Black and Sivan are no match for the much more powerful king, and in order to save Black from torture and possibly death, Sivan offers himself up to Jhaeros. Sivan can translate sirenath, and Jhaeros surely has a need for such a rare talent.

To Black's dismay, his brother accepts, and captures Sivan just like Black once did in Varis.

We start Book Two with Sivan in a cell in the Uncharted kingdom and Black nowhere to be seen except for in Sivan's dreams.

Chapter 1

The Spear

The rain pelting the clear glass of his windows did not unsettle Sivan as he knew it should. Storms never rattled Sivan as a child, but he instinctively knew he should dread them somehow.

He'd been laying in bed for what seemed like hours, trying to fit his consciousness over the room around him. The high ceilings and carved wood molding told Sivan he was in his sleeping quarters on the Spear. It must have been early on in the young lord's stay there, since he had accidentally lit some papers on fire one night while obsessively memorizing foreign vocabulary. The fire had burned out of control, and the carved molding had to be replaced.

It had been Belatoran vocabulary, Sivan knew that for certain.

A nearly imperceptible squeak alerted him to his door being opened. The young lord didn't react, merely shifted his gaze to

watch a green eye peeking at him from the tiny gap of the door.

There was no movement for a moment, but then a mighty bolt of lightning split through the sky followed almost instantly by a wicked crack of thunder.

The person behind the door jumped. The door he clung to shook.

Sivan waited for the ringing in his ears to fade after the thunder and called out to his attendant, "Nereus, come here."

The shaking door stilled, and it took several long seconds before the boy stepped into the room. "Forgive me, my lord," Nereus squeaked, his voice cracking.

"Nonsense, you don't need to apologize," Sivan chided. He lifted the covers and gestured towards the boy. "Come here."

Nereus closed the door too loudly and padded quickly over to Sivan. He dove into bed with the same gusto he dove into the sea with. As always, he kept a respectable sliver of space between them. This wasn't the first time Sivan's attendant sought him out during a stormy night. In the scant year since Nereus had saved him from a watery grave, he'd found endless excuses to stick himself as close to his lord as possible.

Sivan didn't mind; he appreciated the company.

Tonight was different, however. The other times, Sivan had a suspicion Nereus's fear of storms was exaggerated so he could sleep in a softer bed, but now the boy was trembling with genuine fear. As Nereus tried to make himself comfortable, another bolt of lightning lit up the sky, illuminating the dark room.

Sivan saw a bandage wrapped around the boy's hand, blood seeping through the gauze.

"You're injured!" Sivan exclaimed.

Nereus glanced down at his hand. "Oh, it's nothing. Um, kitchen accident."

Sivan frowned at him, disapproving of Eliza's method of throwing his attendant into whatever chore she saw fit, even if there were floating knives involved. The boy must have had the luck of the gods since this was the first time Sivan had actually seen him with any type of wound.

Another crack of thunder rattled through the sky and into the manor. It was so loud the glass panes of the windows shook violently. Nereus seized in fear once more, clenching his injured hand, causing more blood to soak through the bandage. Sivan knew he had to be careful here. His attendant seemed like he'd grown comfortable at the Montgomery estate, but it had not been long enough since he'd been on the streets, and Sivan could still see the nervous edge in the boy's green eyes.

"My second eldest sister is afraid of storms," Sivan said quietly, between the crashes of thunder. "Our mother used to tell us a story to calm her down. Would you like to hear it?"

Nereus turned onto his side to look at him and nodded.

"My mother's family was quite traditional. They still paid homage to the old gods, to the countless unseen deities of the sea."

"You mean the leviathans?" Nereus asked simply.

Sivan blinked several times. "Ah, so you know this one."

He shook his head, looking away. "No, I just know of the old gods."

Sivan hummed and continued his story. "Well, some say that storms are caused when one of the leviathans wakes up from their slumber. They will rise up above the surface to battle each other. The thunder is their mighty blows, the lightning their magic." He gestured dramatically at the ceiling, trying to mimic the way his mother used to tell.

To his surprise, Nereus was not awed by his story. He was frowning at the sheets like they had disappointed him.

“You don’t believe it?” Sivan asked.

Usually Nereus would say whatever to please Sivan, to the point of flat out lying. But he shook his head solemnly, the brightness of his eyes faded. “No. The old gods don’t exist. It’s just a fantasy.”

Sivan wasn’t sure what had gotten his attendant in this dour mood, but he didn’t let the boy dwell on it. “Oh, maybe so. But my story worked anyways, didn’t it?”

“What?”

“It got you to stop thinking about how scary the storm is, even if for a moment.”

Nereus’s eyes widened a fraction, light returning to them. “You’re right, my lord.” Then, breaking the script of the memory, he hugged Sivan, clinging close to him like a shore to the sea. It felt so natural, as if this intimacy had happened a hundred times before. So Sivan let himself brush his fingers gently through the boy’s inky black hair.

He’d missed this dearly, he thought.

“I’ll always protect you. As long as I’m by your side we will stand against the storm together,” Sivan promised.

Nereus hugged him tighter, and as he did he started to change. Bones cracked and skin grew mottled and ghastly. He drew up his head, looking at Sivan with eyes dark as pitch and full of shock. “My lord-?” he rasped, his voice much deeper. His face grew gaunt, the younger Nereus morphing horrifically into the shadowed cast of his siren future.

This future had chosen a new name: Captain Black of the Blackwater.

Fear gripped at Sivan, dragging him out of the tender memory he’d fallen into. Black slipped out of his grasp, and though the pirate called out to Sivan, his beloved lord could no longer hear him.

Sivan woke to a now familiar ceiling. White glass arches were woven in and out of slate rock before climbing down to form the pillars of his prison. He'd found it beautiful in the beginning, but after weeks into his capture, Sivan had grown to resent even the pillars themselves.

The sound of the airlock to his room was what had woken him. He couldn't tell who was coming into his prison from here, yet he still glanced at the wide window which looked upon the atrium of the Uncharted king's castle.

To call Sivan's cage a prison felt wrong at first glance. It was just as opulent as the finest manor a Grenaldian lord could afford. His bed was carved into the slate which made up the base of the ceiling and floor. A soft mattress was nestled into the ornate intertwined details. He was given his own bathroom, not nearly as gaudy as the gold tub in Black's manor on Lissandry, but still just as fine as the rest of the room. Various furniture rose up from the slate floor in much the same fashion as the bed. He was even given a wardrobe filled with clothes that mysteriously fit him perfectly.

Sivan rose from the bed, grimacing for a moment as his bare feet touched the ice cold slate floor. He was grateful his so-called prison was a far cry from the wet and miserable existence he'd expected when he arrived, but it was always so cold. He padded over to the window, trying to swallow down his anxieties as the sounds of the airlock draining reminded him he would not be alone soon.

The prison looked out upon the underwater castle Sivan had seen in his mind so long ago. White spires of glass formed the structure, giving the illusion the castle was made of ice. It was beautiful in some regard, but the sight always filled Sivan

with dread. His room was luxurious, the view spectacular, but the deep ocean surrounding him created the most perfect cage to imprison him within. He didn't even know if the room was guarded since escape meant a quick, sinking death at the bottom of the ocean.

The airlock clicked, indicating the water had drained enough to allow the door to be opened. Sivan did not turn around as it swung open, but watched through the reflection in the glass.

A dark-skinned siren woman with white hair and an emerald tail entered the room, followed by a self-propelled silver cart filled with serving platters of prepared food.

His heart sank at the sight of the cart. That meant the king wanted to have breakfast with him.

"Is he in a good mood today?" Sivan asked without turning around.

The siren woman had started setting out the table, but paused at the question. She did not respond, and gave no indication one way or the other on the matter.

"Still not talking to me, hm..." Sivan sighed, giving up. The siren woman frequently came into Sivan's room to bring him meals or some sirenath document to translate. He'd learn long ago that she was not interested in engaging in conversation with him. Perhaps she had been forbidden to.

A small, fluttering warmth pulsed against Sivan's chest. He instinctively pressed a hand to Black's pneumarium resting in his breast pocket. The siren king was true to his word, if nothing else. He had let Sivan keep the pneumarium and in fact had not harassed him at all over the matter.

Yet these meals together were a persistent harassment Sivan could have done without.

The siren woman finished setting the table, and Sivan took his usual seat at one end. The trays of food were covered with

silver domes, still slick and shiny from the sea outside. Sivan knew the meal beneath would be perfectly dry. Not a drop of seawater ever dared infiltrate the king's meals. He wondered about that. Since Jaheros and Black were brothers, that would mean the siren king would be only half siren. Surely Uncharted were accustomed to diets which held up under the water. Yet here Jhaeros was, going through great lengths to eat like the humans he so loathed.

Perhaps he was more human than Sivan gave him credit for.

The sound of the airlock draining turned his stomach to ice. Whatever appetite Sivan had when he woke up was now frozen in his gut. King Jhaeros entered the cell, his form a pervasive slash in Sivan's vision. The sight of the king still disquieted him. His wet hair was a curtain of black, partially tied back by a silver crown of fine, silver bones and blue jewels. His skin was pale as the purest parchment, untouched by sun down here beneath the surface. Yet the feature that haunted Sivan the most were his eyes, a brilliant cerulean which cut brightly through even the deep blues of the ocean.

"Good morning, *msaevi*."

It had been weeks. Sivan should have gotten over the Uncharted term. Yet it still forced an icy shiver down his spine, unpleasant and gripping.

Sivan bowed his head, but couldn't help himself. "I'm not your bride," he muttered.

In an instant Jhaeros was at his side, white siren tail whipping hard against the slate floor. He gripped Sivan's chin roughly, forcing him to look up.

"You'll be whatever I want, human," the king spat, his breath angry and hot above Sivan.

Had this been a few weeks ago, Sivan would have wretched himself away, had some kind of counter attack. But he'd learned

from experience that Jhaeros was a thousand times stronger than him and a thousand times more vengeful. His ribs still ached from those mistakes.

Instead, he lowered his eyes, swallowed his revulsion, and muttered “yes, my liege.”

For an instant the king looked disappointed, having been deprived of the opportunity to put Sivan in his place. He scoffed and turned away, white tail angrily smacking the floor. Jhaeros sat down at the other end of the table, his posture elegant despite his siren body not quite fitting in the chair.

The king ate, and Sivan followed suit. The meal was finely made, but it tasted like sand to Sivan. He longed for Black’s meals, crafted with all the love in the world.

If he lingered on that thought for too long, Sivan would crumble.

“My little brother has been sighted in Uncharted territory,” Jhaeros interrupted the silence with. His tone was flat, giving no hint of how he felt about the matter.

Sivan frowned at the table. The white surface was flecked with an iridescent green similar to the shimmering flecks in Black’s eyes.

He prayed this was not true. His sacrifice would have been for nothing if the pirate died in a suicidal rescue mission. He could not bear the weight of the man’s death. He would not.

“Let me send a letter to him,” Sivan suggested quietly. “Perhaps I can convince him to stay away-“

“A letter?” Jhaeros laughed. “How quaint. I think you know how unnecessary something like that is.”

Sivan remained silent, confused by the phrasing.

“I’m well aware my brother created a bond with you.”

Flashes of intimate moments flitted across Sivan’s mind. Ones where he could feel Black’s desire, strong and potent, like

it was invading his mind.

Sivan flushed, for his propriety hadn't wavered since his capture. Whether or not they were on the same side of the war, Jhaeros and Black were brothers by blood, and this sort of thing wouldn't be readily shared between them.

His quiet turn to red-hued cheeks did not go unnoticed by the king. Yet rather than reveling in his prisoner's embarrassment, Jhaeros looked mildly surprised, followed by disgust and his cheeks turning a similar hue. He turned away, ears just as red. Evidently the siren had not considered the nature of this so-called bond and was not keen to confront it with his brother's lover.

"That mark. On your arm." His right hand gestured vaguely at Sivan, prompting the human to reflexively touch the black handprint around his own right wrist.

Of course. This was the bond Jhaeros was talking about. Not the strange slick-fueled transfer that happened during sex.

"I know you're still in contact with him. Find out his exact location."

"What?" Sivan tried to parse Jhaeros's words, tried to make sense of the demand.

"Don't play dumb with me, Montgomery." Whatever cruel amusement the king had entered the room with was gone. Now his face was a mask of sheer hate. "Nereus is in my territory. Find out where."

The use of Black's real name snapped Sivan back to the reality at hand. He would bend to Jhaeros threats if it meant nothing more than stomping over his own pride, but he wouldn't budge if it involved causing more harm to Black.

"Even if I knew how to track him down, I would not tell you," Sivan snapped. Jhaeros snarled at his response. "I gave myself to you in order to keep him safe. Do what you will to me,

but leave Nereus alone.”

The king sniffed, angry and haughty. “He is in my territory. If you do not tell me where he is, someone will find him and bring him to me. And I can’t confirm if they will bring him in one piece.”

Sivan had no answer to that. Nothing he could say would sway Jhaeros, and nothing could be said to Sivan that would keep him from protecting Black. Instead, he held his ground, staring back with resolve in his golden eyes.

It took a long moment, but Jhaeros shook his head, not giving up, but changing tactics. “If you had been this stubborn ten years ago, maybe my brother wouldn’t have been abandoned on that island.”

Sivan flinched at that. He always would.

“How did you live with yourself, knowing you’d left him to die?” Jhaeros cocked his head slightly, his gaze keen and cruel. “Or maybe you didn’t care. He was just a servant, after all.”

The king said the word ‘servant’ like it was a hot coal. He was quick to get it out and grimaced like it left a burn in his throat.

“I cared,” Sivan said quietly, and Jhaeros clicked his tongue in disbelief. It didn’t matter if he believed Sivan or not. It only mattered that Black knew. That Nereus knew. So he continued as if he were speaking to his former servant. “I compartmentalize. I had to push my own worries and concerns to the back of my mind in order to function during the war.” A pause, Sivan looked directly at the king. “I have you to thank for that, don’t I?”

Jhaeros’s eyes curved upward as he grinned sharp teeth glinting. “Indeed.” He crossed his arms over one another on the table, leaning in to peer at his prisoner. “How odd you humans are. Compartmentalizing.” The siren said the word like it was

another language. “Being able to lock bad memories away... sirens can’t do that.”

“What?” Sivan thought of Black, how he’d thrown a tantrum that night in Varis, but then he had shown remarkable restraint and courtesy after, even when Sivan still did not recognize him. Black was half human, but so was Jhaeros, after all.

“Our emotions are much more pure. It’s not in our nature to lock our minds up like that. Happiness is sublime ecstasy; sadness is the worst, most persistent malaise.” Blue eyes pinned Sivan in place. “And heartbreak...heartbreak is a piercing slash through our soul.”

Sivan wanted to cover his ears. He didn’t want to know this about Black. He didn’t want to know that the pain he’d caused his most beloved person was far more ruinous than he first thought. He pictured Black in the hold of the Blackwater, embracing the darkness while the sky turned angry with storm.

Jhaeros was still grinning, pleased as his words worked their way through Sivan’s mind. The Grenaldian man had experienced little discomfort since his capture. He’d learn the siren before him did not rely on physical abuse, despite all his threats and disdainful glares. The ‘bride’ habit was even a mere light jab; just something to casually prickle under Sivan’s skin, a callback to when he had defeated him in combat, and that he could do it again. But Jhaeros was starting to find the real cracks in Sivan’s psyche. He wouldn’t be able to compartmentalize this away when he had nothing to distract him in his cell.

Sivan almost would have preferred physical torture over this.

A warmth fluttered in his pocket, and out of habit Sivan touched the shape of Black’s pneumarium hidden there. It was a reassuring presence during his imprisonment. A reminder Black was still out there, somewhere.

“You know what that really is, don’t you?” Jhaeros asked,

assessing Sivan from across the table.

“A pneumarium. You explained it.” His voice was quiet, he cursed himself for being so weak.

“Yes, yes. It’s the safeguard my foolish brother was insane enough to carve out of himself.” The siren shook his head, pitying his brother’s actions. “If done correctly they’re supposed to be safe, out at sea. Protected by the vastness of the ocean and imperceivable to any who come across them.”

Sivan remembered watching from a distance as Black bottled up the light and sent it off into the sea. “...are you saying Black didn’t do this one correctly?”

“They can be intercepted. Through witchcraft or...well, perhaps it has to do with the reason he made it.”

Sivan should have let it drop there. But Jhaeros was so good at getting him on his hook. “As a safeguard?”

Blue eyes looked up, sharp and assessing. “As a way to compartmentalize. Creating a pneumarium dulls a siren’s senses, their emotions. Those who have suffered bitter heartbreak have been known to create them just to lessen the burden of that pain.”

Jhaeros didn’t need to say what that implied. Black had carved out a piece of his soul just to deal with the nine years of betrayal.

That hurt Sivan far more than any physical pain could have.

“I suspect the pneumarium came to you willingly. After all, you’re the reason my brother carved out a piece of his soul. Would it not then feel the urge to return to the lord who abandoned him so easily?”

Sivan could not answer. The glass vial fluttered warm inside his pocket, reassuring him once more even though he felt he no longer deserved it.

Jhaeros huffed, dissatisfied that his jabs had not elicited more

of a physical reaction out of Sivan. In the end, the king would not be satisfied until he'd broken this human's very spirit.

"As pathetic as his actions are, I suppose it's better that Nereus still recognizes his siren half. He's spent too damn long on dry land." Jhaeros's words were quiet and clipped, but Sivan did not miss them.

"And what of your human half?"

It was a guess. He wasn't even sure Jhaeros was half siren like his brother. But it had to be true, judging from the icy blue glare the half siren shot him.

"You could have crushed Grenaldia sooner if you had just transformed and invaded our shores." Sivan rushed out the words before Jhaeros could react. The king's mouth curved down into a snarl; one not quite as sharp as his brother's.

"It'll be a cold day in the Crimson Sea when I let myself turn back into one of you beasts." Sivan expected him to blow up, but the king just sighed, the blue light in his eyes going dull. "I forsook my humanity long ago."

Chapter 2

The Spear

Once, Sivan used to dread sleep. It brought him terrible visions of the war, of his battalion dying before him, of being at the mercy of the siren king's unquestionable power.

Now, Sivan longed for sleep. The blissful embrace of unconsciousness was now accompanied by visions of his beloved.

"Would you care for more tea, my lord?"

Sivan opened his eyes at the sweet sound of Black's deep voice. Before him stood the pirate, dressed in his usual Blackwater-issued deep grays. A silver platter was delicately held up with one hand, a crystal pitcher of iced tea balanced effortlessly on top. It seemed a little odd; a pirate captain offering him tea as if he were a perfectly trained servant. The man's green eyes sparkled as he smiled at Sivan. It blinded him with his beauty, a far warmer and more welcome beauty than his brother's, the main character of Sivan's old nightmares.

"Put that down, Black. Come here," he replied and gestured

at the man to sit next to him on the chaise.

“Gladly.”

They were in the shaded courtyard he once used to relax in back on the Spear. The trellis arching over them was full and lush with greenery. Yet, through the small gaps in the vines, Sivan could tell that the Montgomery manor was not there.

Instead there was an ocean, still and blue. They were on an island of their own. A mere slice of the memories they shared.

A pleasant breeze caught the silver curtain of Sivan’s overgrown hair as Black sat next to him. He hadn’t thought to have it cut since he’d left Varis, so it was beginning to spill past his shoulders now, especially after months of-

“Your hair has grown quite long, my lord,” Black noted, as if reading his thoughts. His hand reached out to touch the silver locks, and at once Sivan leaned into the touch. His palm was warm and solid, a rock Sivan could cling to.

“Should I cut it?” He asked, his voice unintentionally wavering.

If Black noticed his tremor, he did not call it out, for which Sivan was grateful. He wanted to stay in this dream, in this fantasy, for as long as possible.

“If you wish to, I can find some shears and do it for you. Although...” Black’s fingers sifted through Sivan’s hair, so gentle he barely felt a snag, even though he knew it was badly in need of a brushing. “Although, I rather like it. It suits you.”

Sivan pursed his lips at him. “You’re flattering me.”

“Justly so,” Black laughed—a melodic sound that drew Sivan closer to him.

The pirate turned and pulled Sivan to his side. The movement felt as natural as breathing, as if they were bound together by gravity. Sivan let the man maneuver his body so they could lay on the chaise together. Black almost immediately

started playing with his hair, his fingernails occasionally grazing across his nape in a way that made Sivan's toes curl.

"Ah, that feels good." Sivan practically purred the words, so content he was in the man's arms.

He could hear Black's magnetic laughter once again, but felt it more deeply where his head was pillowed against his chest.

"You're usually the one playing with my hair," Black stated, amused.

"And the beads in your hair remind you of my eyes."

"The only gold I need."

Sivan would have lightly scolded the pirate for using such a shameless line, but he was currently too blissful to bother with it.

Besides, this was a dream, and he wanted to stay ignorantly happy for as long as he could.

Black's fingers withdrew from his silver locks and pulled Sivan just a fraction closer. "I miss you so dearly, my lord. How can I find my way back to you when you are out of my reach?"

Sivan's heart sank.

He'd been so lost in the comfort of this dream, he'd forgotten the guilt he thought he'd locked away. Sivan was good at doing that, at locking things away and never reexamining them until he was forced to confront them. Never before had his mind served up its own version of that. He'd had nightmares before, sure, but those were more like memories, cycling on repeat. This particular fear presented to him as a lovely, rose-tinted dream. Yet it only took a handful of words for said dream to turn into a manifestation of the hurt he'd surely wrought upon his dearest person.

Tears spilled onto Black's chest, staining the gray tunic a dark, wet color. "I'm sorry," Sivan choked out, surprised at how broken he sounded already.

Black sit up abruptly, carefully bringing Sivan up with him.

“My lord-?” He attempted to get the former lord to look up, but Sivan was past that now. “My lord, please don’t cry. No matter how far away you are, I will find you. I promise—”

But Sivan was gone. The bright sunshine filtering through the trellis turned into murky shadows. Dark shapes danced around the edges of his vision, pulling him away from the honeyed touch of the one he loved.

The one he’d abandoned. Again.

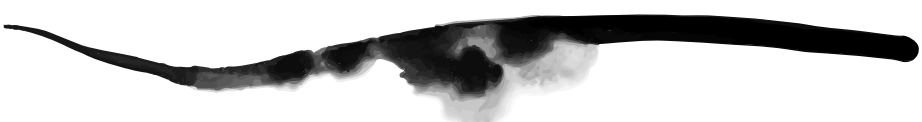
Sivan wasn’t sure how long he sat there in the dark. He couldn’t tell if he’d awoken from this dream or not, for he refused to open his eyes.

He didn’t deserve to.

This was the true prison Sivan found himself in. Not the comfortable underwater cage or the shared meals Jhaeros liked to subject him to sometimes. His own mind built a far more miserable existence for Sivan than any enemy could ever compete with. On one end, he desperately sought out the bliss that came with the escape of a pleasant dream with Black or a memory with Nereus. On the other end, the dreams more often than not turned into a reminder of the failures Sivan held within himself.

A stronger man would let go of those failures and try to learn from them. But Sivan had convinced himself that he was doomed to repeat them, time and time again.

His only solace was that Black was still alive. Sivan would break as many promises as he needed to keep that man safe.



Sivan jolted when he heard the hiss of the airlock draining of water. He hadn’t been asleep, but was sitting in bed listlessly,

debating if feeling the bliss of dream Black's touch was worth the guilt it always morphed into.

It took several moments for the small adjoining room to drain fully. Sivan expected the white-haired siren or some other servant or guard since it was early, but instead Jhaeros slinked into the room alone. This was a rare occasion. The king rarely visited Sivan without some kind of ruse for sharing a meal. It made Sivan uneasy. The siren's inky black hair was pulled back into a severe crest that cascaded down his back, a few silver beads tied into the locks. Sivan cursed the man for looking so much like his pirate brother, especially when Jhaeros's face wasn't pinched in anger.

He couldn't stop himself from flinching when the king threw something on the bed. Jhaeros hadn't stooped so low to physically hit him without provocation. He preferred to find the things Sivan was truly terrified of and use them to inflict the deeper scars.

"Put that on," Jhaeros ordered.

Sivan looked at the strange necklace that was on his bed. Silver metal looped over itself and around blood red jewels. It was pretty, in a sense, but Sivan knew better than to think Jhaeros had decided to start dressing him up in jewelry. The necklace had some other purpose.

"What is it?" Sivan asked, although he picked up the necklace obediently.

"A dowry for my bride," Jhaeros sneered.

He'd switched from calling Sivan by the Uncharted word to its translation in the common tongue. It still disturbed Sivan just as much. When he didn't react, Jhaeros huffed. The king looked like explaining this was more of a chore than fighting a war for a decade. "You're coming with me. If you'd like to drown, fine."

Sivan still didn't quite understand, but he put the necklace on

anyways. He'd only heard one thing in the siren's words: he was finally leaving this cell. The silver metal was ice cold on his skin, forcing an involuntary shiver out of him.

"Come." Jhaeros turned back to the still open airlock and motioned for him to follow.

Sivan got out of bed, his feet slapping against the tile now wet from the siren's entrance. He went into the airlock after the king, being extremely careful to not step on the white tail that curled around the room. The airlock was much bigger than it looked from Sivan's vantage from inside his cell. He still tried to stand as far away from the siren as possible. Although there appeared to be little escape from his presence since Jhaeros's blue-tipped tail slapped irritably at the floor in front of Sivan's feet.

Then the door behind them snapped shut, and the airlock started filling with water. Sivan had just exchanged one fear for the other.

"I...I thought you said I wouldn't drown." Sivan tried to sound like he wasn't already panicking, but the higher pitch of his voice betrayed him.

"Did I?" Jhaeros said with a mocking lilt. His blue eyes gleamed brighter when he glanced at Sivan, obviously delighted by the sound of fear in the human.

Sivan tried not to react as the water rose quickly past his knees and then his waist. He desperately did not want to give Jhaeros that satisfaction. His breath came in faster, his body trying to inhale as much precious air before it was too late. Yet when the water met his neckline and subsequently the necklace Jhaeros had made him wear, a strange thing happened. First, the red gem shimmered and came to life, pulsating with magic. Then, the silver loops unfurled and rose over Sivan's head. They wrapped around in thin, delicate lines, covering his head with the

outline of a sphere. The gem flashed again, and the gaps between the delicate lines filled with a translucent silver. Slowly, the silver faded, and Sivan was left with a clear globe of breathable air.

The lines from the necklace still remained, although they were so thin now they did not interfere with Sivan's vision.

The water rose above his head, over the sphere, and made its way up to the ceiling of the airlock. Sivan was speechless. He'd seen Eliza's sea glass golems and had thought those were magnificent. Siren magic was on a whole other level. It was elegant, but so deadly.

Jhaeros had lost interest in him now that he was no longer frightened. Sivan touched the blood red gem at the base of the sphere and was awed when he realized it pulsed with light every time he took a breath.

With the airlock now completely filled, the door to the ocean opened, and a new fear gripped Sivan.

He might be able to breathe underwater now, but he couldn't imagine himself swimming all the way down here. Jhaeros slithered out of the airlock, his white tail unwinding behind him. There was no way Sivan would be able to keep up with him.

Lasting fear was not in the cards for Sivan today, as he then realized his feet were still firmly planted on the ground. The weight of the water hadn't lifted him up off the floor as it usually did in his cell. His hair fanned out around him in the weightless water, but this floor acted as a magnet for his weight. Sivan took a step forward and found that he could actually walk on this floor with relative ease. He still felt the pressure of being this far under the surface, but whatever power that bewitched the castle also kept him from floating away. He watched as the white-haired siren who had come into Sivan's cell swam effortlessly to the walkway and landed firmly on the path. She then slid towards them, her movements as natural as if she were on land.

“The Undying Sea is ready, my liege.” The woman bowed to Jhaeros gracefully. It was the first time Sivan had heard her speak. Her voice was even and, surprisingly, gentle.

Jhaeros waved at her to step aside and brushed past her. “Very good, that will be all.”

She bowed again, and for one brief moment she met eyes with Sivan. She looked like she was going to say something to him but stopped herself, turning away. Sivan lingered behind the king as he watched the siren woman push off the pathway with a flick of her green tail and resume swimming.

“What do you know of the Undying Sea?” Jhaeros asked.

Sivan took a moment to catch up before answering. “I know it was the home of the old gods.” His knowledge of the old gods was limited to the sparse few pages dedicated to them in the Royal Library.

“Indeed,” Jhaeros chuckled. “The old gods lived in a perfect world, free of death, free of suffering. It was called the Undying Sea. But then, land was created, and the life that grew on it was cursed, doomed to die.”

They approached a great stone door carved with lines of intricate text. Once close enough, Sivan recognized the text as sirenath. His grasp on the language was not great enough to instantly translate it. He still needed a lexicon to decipher the archaic texts Jhaeros brought to him.

But one word stood out amongst the rest.

‘Leviathan.’

Jhaeros opened the doors with a surge of red magic. They creaked heavily against the weight of the ocean.

“This palace was once the home of the old gods. They used this prison to cage their own deviants.”

The king stepped inside, the terrible white light inside the room glaring around his silhouette.

“It still works just as well as it used to.”

Sivan’s eyes adjusted to the harsh light of the huge chamber. A long walkway traced the center, allowing for spectators to see the captives below. Along each side of the walkway were massive cells, filled with great beasts similar to the one Sivan had seen in Eliza’s memory. The rattle of chains melded with the guttural cries of the leviathans held inside, creating a terrible cacophony that made Sivan’s gut churn.

They ranged in colors, in shape, in size. Some closely resembled the white salamander Eliza had seen, others had snouts like dogs and teeth like sharks. Some had no faces at all. Yet they all exuded a pressure of immeasurable power, which bore down on Sivan, even from his position above.

Chains kept the leviathans bound to the floor. Sivan could tell they had been held prisoner like that for a long time by the many deep scars around the cuffs.

“What have you done, Jhaeros?” Sivan’s voice was weak, too horrified by what he was seeing. “These are divine beings.”

The king sneered at him. “There’s nothing divine about them.” He shot a hand out at the nearest cell and struck a leviathan with a bolt of red magic. It roared in pain and shrunk back further into its cell. “They’re as simple as any other beast, and they can be tamed.”

“Tamed?”

Jhaeros grinned, baring his sharp teeth. He signaled with his hand, and the leviathan he had struck came limping back to the front of the cell. It had the head of a drake, horns and teeth pitch black against a milky blue. Its body was more serpentine than a drake’s, the length of it unfurling into tattered fins. Jhaeros reached out his hand, and the leviathan slowly tapped the tip of its snout against it.

The king had these gods *trained*.

Jhaeros stroked the leviathan's nose, his touch careless against the backdrop of sharpened teeth. "I've been saving them for Varis, you know. I think your father has earned it. Unfortunately..."

He slapped the creature's snout away, and it quickly slinked back into the corner.

"These things die shortly after walking on land."

Jhaeros turned to Sivan, expression placid.

"Truthfully, I don't care about the little reckless invasion that started this war. I don't even really care about your shore-hogging Grenaldia."

Rage simmered to the surface of Sivan's throat. "Then why the hell is this war happening?"

"I'm going to make a better world."

That sentence barely registered in Sivan's mind. It was so preposterous he couldn't form a coherent thought around it.

"You look at me like I'm mad. Maybe I am, to a human. For humans, death is a certainty. Suffering is a certainty. Human nature makes sure of that." He waved his hand, and a plane of red light formed in front of them. A wistful expression crossed the king's face. "I have seen a vision of what could be, and it is beautiful."

The red plane quickly evolved into a portrait of Jhaeros's so-called beautiful vision. Sivan first recognized Varis, the familiar skyline instantly giving it away, even though the city lay completely underwater. In the foreground, the fishermen of the docks greeted Uncharted like old friends. The creatures who had once been their enemies now brought them nets filled with bountiful harvests.

The ashen visage Sivan had seen the last time he was on the Varis docks was gone. In its stead was the the Varis of old, the capital he knew from his childhood. Yet it was more, with

Uncharted and humans living in peace.

“Life on our world was not meant for land. It never was,” Jhaeros continued, somber now. “The old gods failed to stop it and thus doomed us to mortality. Death walks hand in hand with humans, who obsess over the ownership of land to the point of war.” The vision changed once again, Varis reverting back to the grim wartime shadow Sivan had last seen it as. “They pick fights over sand and dirt, ignorant that in doing so they are embracing death.”

Sian pulled his attention away from the red vision. It seemed idyllic, but it was nothing more than a fantasy Jhaeros was trying to sell him.

“What are you getting at?”

The king turned to him, blue eyes glimmering unnaturally bright. “I’m going to raze the land back into the sea.”

“What?” Sivan sucked in a breath, the sinking feeling in his gut solidifying into genuine dread.

Jhaeros gestured at the leviathans once more. As he did, a line of leviathans appeared on the horizon in the red vision. “Legend has it that these leviathans are decedents of the old gods. They retain some of that divine power. I will use them to pull the blood-soaked land of this world into the ocean. To purify it.”

The leviathans in the vision descended upon Varis. Terrible beams of power crackled from the maws of the divine beasts and ripped into the land like a sharpened blade through flesh. Sivan had no problem seeing the result: Grenaldia would be leveled into the ocean, and then the rest of the world would not be far after.

“Once I have turned the world back into the Undying Sea, the only life left will be immortal, as nature intended.”

Sivan felt sick. The bridge they were on was sturdy, but

Sivan felt like it was buckling beneath them. "This is insanity," he said quietly.

Jhaeros laughed, humorless and biting. "Only a mortal would think so! I don't care if the world views me as mad. The end justifies the means."

Sivan knew there was no use attempt in trying to persuade the siren king out of this idea. The way he spoke about it was so certain. He had no chance in cracking the man's resolution. Yet there had to be a reason Jhaeros was taking the time to tell him this. There was something missing in this plan of his.

"Why are you telling me this? Surely you have better things to do than demoralize me further."

Blue eyes turned down upon him. "Indeed, I do."

Sivan paused, looking again over the many leviathans imprisoned below. "You said they can't walk on land without dying."

"I did say that." Jhaeros turned away from him, his shoulders stiff.

Something clicked in Sivan's mind.

"You need the Corseque of Estes, don't you?"

The king's pause affirmed Sivan's guess. "The sirenath translations you've provided us with have revealed some crucial information. The Corseque is the key to fully controlling the leviathans. If I have that, I can command them onto land without it poisoning them."

Sivan shook his head. "Well, if you forgot, you destroyed the corseque."

Jhaeros turned around to face him, his expression serious. "I want you to help bring my brother over to my side."

Sivan blinked, struck by the unexpected request. "What?"

The siren waved his hands with a flourish, and a shaft of red light appeared. It morphed into the corseque Jhaeros had

destroyed.

“The corseque you found in Estes’ tomb was a fake. A very good fake, at that. One only a very powerful witch could have made.”

“You think Eliza knows where the real corseque is?” Sivan hazarded. “We did not part with her on good terms.”

“It appears that is always how their goodbyes’ go,” Jhaeros chuckled. “Nereus has been spotted with the sea witch recently. It appears they have reconciled in your absence.”

Sivan closed his eyes for a moment. He was uneasy at hearing this, but at the same time was relieved Black still had someone by his side. “Even if they do know where the weapon is, they will not hand it over so easily.”

“No, they will not.” Jhaeros spun the magic replica lazily. “But if I offer *you* in exchange for the corseque, I have no doubt my brother would happily fetch it for me.”

Sivan’s heart both sank and warmed at the same time, because he knew this was true.

“But the problem remains that the corseque is the only weapon that can truly kill a siren. There is little stopping my brother from using it to kill me and take you anyways. Killing me was your initial purpose for finding it anyways, was it not?”

Sivan didn’t answer. Black might play nice if it meant rescuing him, but there was no way Sivan himself would allow such an exchange to take place. He would not be part of an exchange that would end the world.

Jhaeros sighed, and the red corseque dissipated. “Besides, even if a trade were to work out, it would still leave him in danger once I set loose the leviathans. I’ve given you little reason to believe that I love my brother, but he is still my blood and I would prefer if he lived.” Jhaeros opened his arms wide, as if to welcome Sivan. “Clearly, the only answer is to bring my brother

over to my side. I always meant for him to join me, but he is rather stubborn over his love of humans.”

A pale hand gripped Sivan’s chin, forcing him to look up into those terrible blue eyes. “What do you say? Help me bring my brother over to our side, and I will ensure the two of you can be together in my new kingdom.”

An image was pushed into his mind. Black dressed in the same cold regalia his brother wore, proudly standing in his siren form against the backdrop of the same palace Sivan called prison. Yet Sivan was next to Black, somehow breathing and seeming just as natural in the water as the siren next to him. They were happy despite knowing the rest of the mortal world had been razed to the sea.

Another fantasy.

Sivan jerked back, shaking the vision out of his head.

“Never,” he spat. “I will never help you bring Nereus to your side. I am not so selfish.”

For a moment the siren king seemed genuinely surprised. But the shocked look on his face only lingered for a second before a cruel laugh echoed throughout the prison.

“Oh, the irony of men never fails to amuse me. Tell me, do you even care at all for my brother?”

Sivan refused to dignify that question with an answer. Why else was he here other than to protect Black—to protect Nereus?

Jhaeros hummed dismissively. “No, of course not. This is the second time you’ve abandoned Nereus. Naturally, you would deny my brother his only salvation now.”

Something snapped in Sivan. He had learned to be diplomatic with the Uncharted king. There was little purpose in antagonizing Jhaeros when Sivan was surrounded by his followers at all times.

“You speak as if I am the only one who has abandoned

Nereus. Before I took him in he'd been living as a stray amongst the street urchins. Starving, beaten, filthy."

Jhaeros actually shrank back slightly at Sivan's words.

"He clearly didn't belong there. He hadn't grown up with the local urchins, so they ostracized him. Nereus had already been abandoned when I found him. No doubt abandoned by *you*."

The king slapped him across the face, sending Sivan staggering backwards. He wiped blood off his lip and looked up at Jhaeros. Sivan had seen the siren angry before. But this...this was different. The man looked like he was a feral dog, backed into a corner.

It was the same desperate look Nereus had when he was an orphan, begging for fruit on the street.

Jhaeros turned away, his shoulders tense. He shouted something in Uncharted, and pair of guards entered the prison to take Sivan away. He went willingly, not bothering to put up a fight with the guards who grabbed his arms just a little too tight.

Before leaving, Sivan took one last glance back at the siren king.

He remained frozen, alone.

Chapter 3

Uncharted captial

Sivan fell into his small bed the moment he was returned to his cell. He lay there for what seemed like hours. Sleep meant a promise to see Black, to escape the reality of his situation. But what he had learned about Jhaeros's plan with the leviathans was too fresh in his mind. Anxiety crawled over his skin, keeping him too on edge to fall asleep.

If only he could send word to Black. This terrible secret was too much for him to bear while imprisoned. Sivan could do nothing with this information, so it followed him into his dreams as his worrying became repetitive enough to fade into unconsciousness.

He was on the Blackwater now, a place he too once called prison. But he now welcomed its ebony wood and sails of shade. The ship's deck was empty now except for Sivan. That alone was surreal, for the image of the Blackwater in his mind was always bustling with her crew.

There at least should have been Hayes, who could never leave the ship. Yet the Blackwater steered itself, sure and mighty through the unbroken sea.

“What troubles you, my lord?” Black murmured in Sivan’s ear as he suddenly appeared behind him. “Your stern expressions should be reserved for our time in bed.”

Sivan slapped the pirate’s arm as it snaked around his waist, although his heart was not in it.

“You’re a beast,” he chided, but his voice broke. He spun around in Black’s arms and hugged him fiercely.

“My lord?” The pirate’s voice was worried. His arms automatically came up to hold Sivan in return. Calloused fingers ran through Sivan’s hair, fingernails scraping against his scalp lightly.

“I just miss you so dearly, Black,” Sivan croaked out against his chest. He couldn’t explain to this dream Black why he was being so emotional. He wouldn’t have understood. Yet it all slipped out without Sivan’s assent: “I feel worn thin. I’m trying to stay strong given my situation, but- but every day I have less will to spend. What if he breaks me?”

A tight squeeze came from Black in return. “He will not. You are the strongest man I know.”

Sivan puffed out a humorless laugh. He did not feel strong. He felt hopeless and adrift.

He pressed an ear closer to Black’s chest, searching for a heartbeat. It would be a fabricated sound in this dream of his, but Sivan did not care. During the scant few days they had been sleeping together, Sivan would lay his head on Black’s chest and listen to his heartbeat as he drifted off to sleep. It was a small flame of happiness, but it was a flame not soon put out.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

“I will not be part of a suicide mission to save one worthless lord.”

Sivan drew back, confused. For a moment he could have sworn he had heard Hayes's voice through Black's chest.

"What is wrong, my lord?" The pirate asked from above, but Sivan ignored him and pressed his ear to his chest once more.

"Quiet, he's finally fallen asleep."

It took Sivan a moment, but he recognized the voice as Eliza.

"Right, let's take this conversation outside."

Ba-dum.

The voices fell away after the sound of Black's cabin door closing.

Black slowly pushed him away from his chest. "My lord? I'm flattered you are enjoying my chest so much, but please don't look so serious about it."

Sivan blinked, an inkling suspicion growing into a real thread of possibility. Surely he could not be holding the real Black here, right? This all had to be some cruel trick of his heart. All this time he'd prayed for a direct line to the man he loved, and yet here he was, feeling just as real to Sivan as he would if they were skin to skin.

He remembered what Jhaeros had said about their bond. How he'd known Sivan was still in contact with Black through that bond. He remembered what the siren king had said about Black being sighted with the sea witch. It could all be Jhaeros toying with him, but the possibility of this really being Black would not leave Sivan's mind.

"Why did you join up with Eliza?"

The pirate gaped at him, green eyes wide. "H-how did you know about that?"

That was enough confirmation for Sivan to pour out everything. "Black, listen to me. Jhaeros has a leviathan fleet. He's shown it to me, I've seen it."

"Wh-wait— What?" Black was reeling, searching Sivan's

face for an answer.

“It’s me, Sivan. It’s really me. I’m not a figment of your dream. It’s some kind of bond you created between us. But it’s not important right now—” Sivan took Black’s face, making sure he heard every word. “Jhaeros is going to use the leviathans to raze the land back to the sea. He’s going to end the world. But— But he needs the Corseque of Estes to do it. The real one. Eliza knows where it is.”

The shock seemed to settle in with Black, and he started to actually take in the information.

“He’s going to try to use me to get you to fetch the corseque for him. Do not do it.”

“He wants a trade?” Black asked, gears turning.

Sivan held his face tighter. “Do not give it to him. It’s not worth it.”

“You are worth it, my lord.” Green eyes were serious, delving into Sivan’s fragile heart.

“Please, Black,” Sivan begged. “I would not be able to live with myself if I knew I was part of this. Keep it away from him.”

The flicker in the pirate’s eyes, the one that told Sivan he would trade the world away to get back to him, did not abate. Black had to see what Jhaeros had shown him. It was the only way he would understand the gravity of the threat.

Sivan pushed both hands away from his face and brought one back up to touch lightly at his temple, at the spot Eliza had used to show him her memories. He did not know if he could do this, having no magic himself, but he could feel the bond between them now that he realized it existed. Something told him it would work.

“Let me show you what he will do with the Corseque. You won’t wish to trade me for it once you see it.”

Black’s fingers twitched a fraction, like he considered

pushing Sivan's hand away. He no doubt wanted to turn away from the truth to keep the tiny flicker of hope alive. The hope that his lord would return to him whole.

Yet Sivan pressed Black's fingers to his temple firmer, insistent.

Black's expression caved, and he fell into Sivan's memories. He showed him the leviathans, the red scene of doom Jhaeros had showed him, the cruel words the pirate's brother used to describe his terrible plan.

Then, all of a sudden, Sivan was ripped out of his dream by a searing pain on his arm.

He gasped, the shock of being torn out of the connection with Black sending a gulping shiver through his body.

"Where is he? Where is my brother?!"

Jhaeros's voice was a strange and unexpected sound to Sivan. In his heart, he was still in the dream, still mentally linked with Black. Yet the frightful Uncharted king bore down above him, blue eyes gleaming.

"I know you've made a link with him. I could sense his magic all the way across the palace! Where is he?!" Jhaeros's words grew frantic, angry.

The king had a grip on Sivan's arm, right around the black handprint that remained there. His fingers were so tightly clenched, Sivan could feel his bones creaking. The man was too close.

Sivan tried to push Jhaeros away, his fingers landing against his temple.

Without meaning to, and with the help of Black, Sivan rushed into Jhaeros's mind. It was like falling down a whirlpool, spinning around and around into a dark void.

"I'm here, dear brother," Black's voice sounded from within

Sivan. "I'm surprised you've left your mind so open. Anyone could get in here."

Sivan could feel the king try to pull away, but he held close, everything going in slow motion while they madly dashed through his mind.

"Let's see what we can find, hm?" Black asked, and without waiting for an answer, forced the dark void to look deep into the past.

They were in a small but tidy cottage. The majority of the furniture was made out of driftwood and furs, and the sea lay still outside the window. At first glance, Sivan would have guessed this were a fisherman's home on one of the distant northern islands of Grenaldia.

The door to the cottage swung open, and a dark-haired boy around five or six years old stumbled in, great streams of tears running down his rosy face.

"Come here, my love. Tell me what happened," a woman's voice rang out from behind.

Sivan turned to avoid the little boy running into the woman's arms. Neither of them could see him. She was a fisherwoman of the north. Her chestnut hair was tied up in loose braids, her pale blue eyes sharp and keen. She was a working woman; Sivan recognized the bone tired set to her face. Yet she remained a beauty, although she was one made out of weathered steel.

"The fish didn't make it to market," the boy wailed. "Taelish Fairweather stole them from me and dumped them back in the sea!"

The woman sighed. It was a sad noise, resigned and broken. "It is okay, Jhae. You did your best."

The boy looked up at her, tears still flowing from brilliant blue eyes. He very much resembled his mother, but his eyes were

far too vivid to not stand out in the muted tones of the northern sea.

Sivan's eyes widened as he realized this boy was a young Jhaeros.

"It's not okay! Can't father bring the fish back to us?" Jhaeros insisted through sobs.

Another cry rang out from a carved wooden crib. It was a strange sight in the simple cottage, since it was so ornately carved and finely made. It contrasted against the homemade nature of the rest of the furniture.

"Hush now, love. You've woken Nereus."

The woman gathered up a bundle of furs from the crib. Nestled amongst them was a baby with similar dark hair, no more than a few months old.

Sivan's heart ached as he watched the boys' mother soothe her baby. She looked like a strong woman, but in this moment Sivan could tell she was tired beyond her years.

"I'm sorry, Jhae. Your father has not answered my call in a very long time. We are on our own now," she explained, as gently as she could. There was pain in her words, a glimmer of resentment.

"I don't understand," Jhaeros blubbered quietly. "Where did he go?"

The woman did not have an answer for her son, but Sivan could imagine it easily enough: she had fallen in love with a siren, who had promised her happiness. Yet they were forced to live apart, on land and sea. They grew distant, the siren found new love elsewhere.

And she was left with two children with strange-colored eyes.

Half siren children were apparently quite similar to human children aside from their luminous eyes. But they looked different enough, and that was all that mattered to folk on a

small, isolated island.

The scene around Sivan all turned to water, glimmered for a moment, and changed before him.

A group of villagers were storming into the cottage. They were angry, shouting profanities at the small family.

“It’s because this whore copulated with the devil!”

“Aye, the gods are angry with us for letting her live amongst us. That’s why the crops failed!”

Their mother was standing proud in front of her boys, now a year or two older. She looked even more tired and beaten down than she had in the last vision, but nonetheless glared fiercely at the villagers who threatened her children.

“You’re all mad,” she declared. “The crops failed because of the blight.”

“Do not listen to her words! No doubt she’s picked up an odd bit of witchcraft from that demon. She will enchant you!”

Her words then fell on deaf ears. The villagers grew more irate and took hold of the woman, dragging her out the door.

“Leave mother alone!” the child Jhaeros cried. He ran forward and beat his tiny fists against the legs of a thin man. The man shook him off, disgust on his face.

The boy’s mother kicked one of her captors and broke free long enough to turn Jhaeros towards her. He focused on her, tears pooling in his large blue eyes.

“I need you to protect your brother, okay Jhae?”

“But—“

“Don’t let her speak!” The villagers cried and pulled the woman back outside by her hair. The door slammed shut firmly, leaving Jhaeros alone with his screaming brother near the ornate crib. He went over to Nereus and attempted to soothe him with gentle pats.

It was painful, watching them. Sivan wanted to help them in some way, but knew this was nothing more than a memory. The chance to help the boys had long since passed.

The door opened again, and a well-dressed woman appeared in the doorway. She might have been pretty if not for the garish way her makeup tried to make her look younger. Her hair was a deep silver, piled on top of her head into delicate curls. Her clothes were much finer than the homespun rags which the villagers wore. If Sivan had to guess, she was somehow related to the vast Grenaldian minor nobility. Assessing burgundy eyes peered down at the two boys.

“Poor dears, abandoned and alone.”

“Mother didn’t leave us,” Jhae spat, his guard immediately up around the new woman.

“No, of course not,” she crooned. “I am Lady Betaux. I live in the big house on top of the hill.” Betaux crouched down next to Jhaeros, perhaps trying to look less imposing to the small child. “I can look after you while your mother is away. Would you like to come live with me?”

To his credit, Jhaeros shook his head, looking away. He was right to not trust this woman. Sivan had heard rumors of the Betaux’s love for torturing their servants.

“Oh, come now. How are you going to protect your brother when the villagers return?”

This made the young Jhaeros snap his bright blue eyes back on her, his face full of worry.

“They will return. They don’t understand how special you two are. And people always fear what they don’t understand.”

Jhaeros frowned, uncertainty clouding his judgement.

“Come with me,” Betaux tried again. “I can feed you, clothe you. You can both have a bed as fine as this one.” She tapped the carved crib with a manicured finger.

Still, the boy looked hesitant. He should have grabbed Nereus and ran. Surely someone else on the island would pity them. Someone would have found them passage elsewhere, a different island, or perhaps the coast itself.

“Think of your little brother,” Betaux reminded.

What choice did he have?

Jhaeros took her hand and let her gather up Nereus from the crib.

The scene turned to water again, and the dingy cabin washed away to something not all that different. It was a servant’s quarters, just as small and tidy as the cottage was, but with far less warmth. A slightly older Jhaeros stepped into the room. He was around ten, but looked like all the world weighed on his shoulders.

The boy in the previous scene was pale, but his cheeks flushed red with anger when his mother had been taken away. This older Jhaeros was much paler, like all the color had been bled from his spirit. He looked tired and beaten down, bearing a striking resemblance to his mother despite his vivid blue eyes.

“Brother!” A five-year-old boy with dark hair ran up to Jhaeros, giving him a hug around his waist. The boy was small, but the force of the hug sent his older brother staggering backward a step.

“Nereus, did you not finish your dinner?” Jhaeros asked, looking over at the unfinished meal on the table.

Green eyes looked up at him. “I’m full, you can have the rest.”

“Nereus-“

“You need it more than me, Jhae!” The young Nereus dragged his brother to the table, pushing him to sit down. “She makes you work too hard! You always look sick!”

Jhaeros reluctantly sat down. “I don’t work any harder than you or the other servants. Thank you for thinking of me, though.”

Nereus did not look convinced, but was sated when his brother started finishing off the meal. Seeing them like this was a little heartbreaking. Sivan had not been able to picture the siren king Jhaeros and the pirate lord Black as brothers. They looked related based off appearances, but at present they were so at odds with each other that they might as well be strangers.

Now, Sivan could see that they had once cared for each other as siblings do. He dreaded the event which would cause the irreparable rift between them.

A knock caused both brothers to look at the door uneasily. Before Jhaeros could stand, Nereus rushed to the door and flung it open.

Lady Betaux stood in the doorway, her smile sharp.

“Good evening, dear.”

Nereus narrowed his eyes at the woman. “Jhae already did his work for the day.”

Betaux laughed, but the sound was a mocking tone. “Not even a ‘hello’ in return? Come, Jhae, you must teach your little brother better manners than that.”

Jhaeros quickly rushed over to the door and shooed Nereus to the side so he could bow respectfully. “My sincerest apologies, my lady. He does not know his place.”

“Indeed. That better not be a problem in the future,” Betaux said, her burgundy eyes conveying a warning to him.

“I will teach him better manners, I swear.” Jhaeros’s bow deepened, and from behind the door Nereus stuck his tongue out at the woman.

Betaux sniffed and turned around, pausing. “I need you to help with the wine tonight. Follow me.”

“Yes, my lady...” Jhaeros replied quietly, clear dread on his face.

Before he could follow her, Nereus tugged at his brother’s sleeve. “Don’t go, Jhae!” he hissed. “You’ve helped enough!”

Instead of reassuring words and placations, Jhaeros yanked his sleeve away with a snap. “Shut up, Nereus! Where do you think we would be without her? We’d be dead, just like mother. I’m doing this for *you*.”

Nereus shrank back at his brother’s words. He was stunned into silence, green eyes on the brink of tears. Sivan could tell from Jhaeros’s face that he immediately regretted the words. Yet, after a moment, he turned his back on Nereus and followed Betaux down the hall.

Sivan went after them, pulled along by the thread of Jhaeros’s memory. The stone hallway reverberated with the sharp clack of the woman’s heels.

“You better control that brat of yours. Otherwise he will be the one providing my wine.”

What little color was left in Jhaeros’s face drained. “Please, no— He doesn’t know any better. I-I’ll give you as much— as much *wine* as you need. Just leave Nereus alone.”

Betaux was distracted by her reflection in the window. She examined her face, pulling lightly with a finger at the fine wrinkles around her eyes.

“As much as I need...?”

The lady turned her eyes upon Jhaeros, her expression predatory.

The boy did not flinch, did not step back.

The vision turned to water once more. The clear night sky was covered wholly by a looming black thunderhead. Jhaeros was running, pulling Nereus along behind him. They had aged a

few more years— Jhaeros appearing to be fourteen or so, while Nereus must have been nine or ten.

Betaux's manor on the hill shrank to the background of the scene. Their feet clacked loudly on the wooden dock that snaked behind the noble's property. The wind was starting to pick up, although the storm had not reached them quite yet.

"Quickly, Nereus," Jhaeros panted as they ran. "They will notice we are missing soon."

The brothers made it to the end of the dock, where a mid-sized fishing vessel was tied. Sivan recognized the stout design of the ship as one of the many he had seen during his time on the Spear.

A thin man with dirty blonde curls stepped off the boat as they approached. "Yer late. Payment first, then we go before this storm gets us."

Jhaeros was trying to catch his breath, but nodded and reached into his coat pocket to pull out a heavy bag of coins to hand over. Servants were rarely paid well enough to live comfortably, let alone servants of the Betaux family. Sivan could only imagine how long it had taken him to save up that money.

The blonde man took a moment to inspect the bag for the amount he was due and gestured at the two boys. "Okay, which one of ya are we taking?"

"What?" Nereus inhaled, confusion and panic taking over his expression at the same time. "What is he talking about, Jhae? We're *both* going, right?"

Jhaeros placed a hand behind his brother's back, both reassuring him and offering him to the fisherman. "You're taking my brother."

The man shrugged and stepped back on the boat. Nereus grabbed onto Jhaeros's sleeve, green eyes pleading with him. "Jhae! I'm not leaving here without you! You promised we

would escape *together*.”

Jhaeros had grown much taller since the last scene Sivan witnessed. The older boy had to kneel down to meet his brother’s eye level.

“I’m sorry, Nereus. We didn’t have enough to get both of us smuggled out of here. Betaux has been getting greedier. You must escape this place before she drags you into her madness too.”

“But- But I can help! Maybe she won’t take so much from you then.”

Jhaeros’s smile was bittersweet. Somehow he’d managed to preserve Nereus’s innocence in whatever hell Betaux had them in. “No, there’s no limit to her need. She’d drain both of us dry if she had the chance.”

“Oi! Hurry up! The storm’s looming. We ain’t got time for fancy goodbyes,” the fisherman shouted at them over the wind.

Jhaeros took his brother’s face in his hands. “Do this for me, brother. *Please*. This man will look after you until I find my own way to escape. Then I will find you and we can live together again. I promise you this.”

Nereus hugged him tightly, sobbing into his shoulder. The fisherman shouted at them again to hurry it up, and Jhaeros gently pushed his brother away.

He watched the boat sail away with his little brother on board, a small, sad smile on his lips.

‘At least he will be safe from her now. I do not care what happens to me,’ were the thoughts Jhaeros had on that dock. Sivan could hear whispers of them on the wind.

As soon as the boat was far enough away from the dock, the the boy collapsed to his knees. A shiver wrecked through is frame, as if he were barely able to hold himself up. Looking at Jhaeros now, Sivan could see how weak he’d become since the

last scene. Running with his brother to the ship must have taken every last drop of energy he had left.

“There he is!” A voice shouted over the storm that had now begun to crack lightning across the sky. A group of Betaux’s guards ran down the dock, pointing at Jhaeros. They grabbed hold of him without a fight, but the small smile never left his lips.

The scene turned to water once more, but instead of changing directly to another scene, darkness engulfed everything around them.

It was pitch black, and it was cold. And Sivan got the feeling that it had been that way for a very long time.

“Come back to me,” a weak voice pleaded in the darkness. A sputtering flicker of red light bloomed in the room. It wasn’t very bright, but it illuminated its caster well enough for Sivan to recognize him.

It was Jhaeros, a little older now, but looking worse than he ever had. He was too thin, his cheeks gaunt and his eyes hollow. His once flowing black hair now fell in front of his face limply. It looked as if it was clotted with something, probably blood.

The red light was too dim to see anything other than Jhaeros’s face, but the sound of chains shifting suggested he was restrained somehow.

“Do not leave me again,” he muttered to the light. “You’re all I have left down here.”

Sivan’s stomach churned. How cruel could someone be to keep someone locked up like this for years? It was a wonder Jhaeros had not gone completely insane. As horrible as the present Uncharted king could be to Sivan, he was glad he was not subjected to the same conditions.

Somewhere above, a door creaked open.

With a terrified gasp, the red light was snuffed out.

The sound of footsteps grew louder, and the distant glow of torchlight grew brighter. Sivan could tell Jhaeros had shuffled backwards by the sound of dragging chains.

Soon, Betaux was at the entrance to the cell. Two of her guards were beside her, each carrying a torch. The noble was dressed down from the other times she'd appeared in the vision. A silk robe settled on her form elegantly, silver embroidery on the hem reflecting orange in the torchlight.

"How are we tonight?" she asked, mockingly.

Jhaeros did not answer. He tried to glare at the woman, but fear tempered the ferocity of his expression.

"Oh dear, did you finally forget how to speak?" Betaux clicked her tongue, annoyed. "Well, no matter. You don't need to speak to serve your purpose." She then unlocked the cell door, and it swung open with an ominous creak.

The guards stepped into the cell first, but Jhaeros did not shrink back until Betaux followed after them. The light from their torches fully illuminating the chamber. His feet were locked together and chained to a long, blood soaked chain. The boy himself was covered in smears of dried blood. His worn clothing was stained brown from countless sessions of bloodshed.

"I am quite excited about what I have prepared for you tonight. Hopefully we'll see some actual improvement this time," Betaux sang.

If Jhaeros was truly trying to put up a fight when the guards grabbed him, Sivan could not tell. His movements were so weak the guards did not struggle much to restrain him. They dragged his limp form outside the cell, following Betaux as she walked down the corridor.

Jhaeros must have blacked out, because the memory warped around Sivan again. Now they were in a lavish bathroom, far more ornate and ostentatious than the golden bath in Black's

manor. A huge marble bath took up the center of the room. It was large enough to fit at least twenty people, but only one person was in the tub now.

Betaux lounged in the bath, the only thing covering her naked form was the steam curling up from the clear water.

“Get him in,” she commanded, and the two guards shoved a now wet and naked Jhaeros into view. He’d clearly been cleaned of the grime from his imprisonment. His fair skin burned red where it had been scrubbed raw. He looked dazed, like his mind was a million leagues away.

The guards brought him to the large bath and led him into the water. Shackles had been screwed into the lip of the bath, and the second Jhaeros saw them he snapped back to reality, resisting the guards frantically.

“Oh, come on,” Betaux huffed, annoyed by the display. “You should be grateful to get a nice, hot bath. Not that you would know anything about being grateful.”

Jhaeros was forced into the bath, wrists locked in place. He writhed against the grip of the guards, water splashing in Betaux’s face. Yet rather than show her disgust, she smiled, like a vulture honing in on her weakened prey.

“Cut him.”

With the order, both guards drew daggers and sliced open Jhaeros’s wrists, over dozens and dozens of barely healed scars. The blades went deep. Too deep. Blood gushed into the water, the red flowing towards Betaux.

Jhaeros grimaced, tears in his eyes. He struggled against the restraints, but his movements only made the blood pour out faster. The guards stood up, and each of them took a slim oar from the wall. The oars dipped into the water and stirred, quickly turning the whole bath into deadly red hue.

Betaux sighed contentedly. She drew a circle in the red water

with her finger, humming a light tune. "This is seawater, you know. I don't know how many trips it took to fill up this bath."

Jhaeros stopped struggling. Sivan could not tell if it was from the blood loss or if he had simply given up.

"I thought you were going to keep me alive for longer," he said weakly. "You'll just keep getting older."

"Who says you're dying?" Betaux chuckled. She picked up a metal pitcher and filled it with the blood-tinted water to pour it over her neck. Her hands rubbed the blood into her skin, which was starting to show the fine wrinkles that came with age. "Your blood has lost its potency, I must admit." She picked up a hand mirror and examined her face, prodding at the crows feet beginning to touch the outside of her eyes. "What good are you if you can't stop me from aging?"

Jhaeros did not answer, his head swayed, the memory blurring for a moment.

"Even if I were to keep you alive in your current state, the effort it takes to squeeze out a few drops would not be worth it."

"A last hurrah, then," Jhaeros slurred, his skin now even more ashen.

"Perhaps," she hummed. "I've been doing research on your kind. Full blooded sirens have an incredible ability to heal, so if you weren't a halfbreed we wouldn't be having this problem. But what is really intriguing is how half sirens develop. They present as human for their early years. Some don't even know how special they are until the first shift."

"Shift?" Jhaeros looked at her with dread, his mind working over what she was suggesting and not liking it.

"An event must take place. Their life must truly be in danger. Only then will their siren blood take over and bring them back from the Crimson Sea."

Sivan noticed the blue speckles of scales forming on

Jhaeros's forearms first. The boy groaned, pain or nausea accompanied by a horrific, internal crack of bone.

Betaux leaned forward, delight on her face. "It's starting. Your siren blood will keep me young forever!"

The red water kept Sivan from seeing the transformation fully, but he could hear every crack of bone and gurgle of flesh. When Black transformed, it was so fast and clean. But Jhaeros now screamed and writhed, his eyes wide and aware of every agonizing change to his body. Perhaps the pain was due to this transformation being the first. Or perhaps it hurt every time, and Black had just figured out how to hide it.

Jhaeros took one last shuddering breath before going limp. If Sivan had known better, he would have assumed the boy had died.

"Did it work?" Betaux wondered, leaning forward eagerly.

The deep slashes on Jhaeros's wrists healed in an instant, the blood running clear off his skin now mottled with scales. Red water rippled and a slash of white fin cut through the surface for a moment.

"Incredible," the woman breathed. "Quickly, cut him again- I want that siren blood!" She motioned towards the guards, who dropped the oars and drew their daggers once more.

The surface of the water rippled, and another flash of white scales rose to reflect the dim light of the room. The movements were jerky, uncertain.

Jhaeros was testing out his new form.

"Tell me, Betaux...how much did your research reveal on siren magic? Surely you must have run into it, even as focused as you were on the restorative powers of my blood."

The guards knelt down on either side of Jhaeros, their daggers drawing closer.

Betaux frowned, her expression pinching the fine wrinkles

she hated so dearly. “Halfbreeds don’t have magic. At least, not naturally.”

Cerulean eyes burned bright beneath Jhaeros’s curtain of black hair. They were the eyes Sivan knew well. The eyes of the Uncharted king who started a war driven by his own mad hate for humankind.

“No? What do you know of my nature?”

Twin bolts of red magic burst out from Jhaeros’s hands and picked up the discarded oars. Before the guards could react, the oars speared each of them through the chest with such force they were pinned to the walls.

“You wretch!” Betaux shrieked. Fear gripped her, creasing the dreaded lines of age deep into her skin. She attempted to get out of the bath, but the water seemed to come to life, red tendrils of magic and blood yanking her back down.

Suddenly, Jhaeros was gone, disappeared under the red water. Betaux trembled in fear, her form sending ripples across the bath. She looked for the siren frantically, but the only signs of disturbance were made by her.

Two hands, deathly pale and mottled by blue scales, shot up from the surface and wrapped around Betaux’s neck. Jhaeros leaped out from the water, bearing his weight on top of her. The transformation into his full siren form had restored his strength and will. He was still thin and pale, but the red magic that now crackled around his form had renewed his vigor and fight. Jhaeros squeezed the air from Betaux. He watched the life drain from her eyes, and did not let go until her skin had gone cold.

Sivan expected the vision to turn to water once more, to flow into the next horrible memory. Yet nothing came, and he continued to watch a young siren Jhaeros shakily pull himself out of the pool of blood.

“Get out of my head, human wretch-“

Sivan first thought the pain was from his old scar. It'd haunted him so often since his battle with the siren king that it did not alarm him as much as it should have.

Yet it had been replaced by Black's handprint months ago now. It had not hurt like this since.

"That was our pain alone. Not to be shared with any human. Not ever."

Sivan was ripped out of the memory by his own screams. The pain from his arm was unbearable, far worse than it had ever been. He looked down in horror to find his arm being severed at the elbow by Jhaeros's golden blade. The siren king pulled at his arm furiously, tearing away the limb that bore his brother's mark.

The one that maintained the mental bond to Black, which Sivan had held on to so desperately.

Jhaeros's eyes were so blue. They glared at Sivan with the same deep hatred started by Betaux.

Chapter 4

The Spear

A final memory clung to Sivan, even after Jhaeros had cleaved off his arm and severed the psychic connection with Black.

It was a warm and sunny day on the Northern Spear. The market was bustling with sailors and merchants, the noise of their voices carried high on the ocean breeze. A fruit stand was perched between the docks and the market, a handsome black-haired youth its customer.

This was Nereus, thirteen now. He'd been in the service of the Montgomery estate for nearly a year now, the sword Sivan had gifted him strapped to his waist. He barely resembled the starved street urchin he'd once been. His cheeks were pink from sun and good health, his black hair tied neatly with a ribbon. Nereus took a large box of fruit from the merchant, reassuring the man he could carry it all the way back to the manor by himself.

All of this Jhaeros observed from under a dock, cerulean eyes blending in with the clear, blue water. He hadn't expected his brother to be looking so well taken care of after so long. The man he paid to smuggle Nereus away from Betaux was not the most trustworthy of sorts, but there were few options open to them on that spit of rock they used to call home. Jhaeros had made sure to get the man's word that he would look after his brother until his own escape, but it had been years since then.

Nereus walked near the dock, and Jhaeros swam along barnacle-laden posts to follow his brother.

'Nereus...!' he called out mentally, in the way he knew only another siren would hear.

The boy almost dropped his crate of fruit, freezing in place. He looked around and scanned the faces of merchants and sailors. Of course he would only look at the humans around him. As far as he knew, his older brother still had two legs.

Jhaeros flicked a fin in the water and sent droplets splashing towards the boy. "Over here!" he hissed, out loud.

Nereus cautiously approached the edge of the dock, peering over into the water. He set the box of fruit down and kneeled down to look under the posts.

"Jhae-?!"

A scaled hand rushed out from the water to cover his brother's mouth. "Shh! Don't draw any attention," Jhaeros rushed out. Nereus's green eyes went wide, but he did not attempt to push his brother away. "Follow me. There's a rock pool around the bend that is out of sight from the humans."

Then, without waiting for Nereus to respond, Jhaeros slipped under the water and sped away from the docks. It took the younger boy a second to shake the stunned look off his face, but he grabbed his box of fruit and ran along the coast after his siren brother.

Just as Jhaeros had said, a collection of irregular teal pools of seawater tumbled out from the shoreline. Taller rocks hid the docks and market from view, keeping the rock pool out of sight.

Jhaeros pulled himself out of the ocean, his white tail slipping in and out of the shallow pools as he settled on the rocks, the blue tips of his fins blending into the pools. His now long black hair spilled down his back, its wet sheen reflecting the bright sunlight. He no longer looked like the frail and broken youth whispering to himself in the dark of Betaux's dungeon. Unlocking his siren blood had healed his wounds and allowed him to regain his strength. Yet, the color had not fully returned to his face. It never would.

Nereus plopped down the box of fruit and bounded into the rock pool, heedless of his fine clothes getting wet. Heedless even of his brother being a siren. "Jhae! You escaped!"

As close as they had been before, Jhaeros was unprepared for the hug that Nereus gave him. He tried to return it, but the older boy had been without any real physical contact for so long that he'd forgotten how to. He patted his younger brother's arms as tenderly as he could manage.

"I'm so sorry it took me so long," Jhaeros muttered, his voice fragile.

Nereus sobbed into his brother's embrace. "I thought I'd never see you again... You have a tail!"

Jhaeros laughed, seeming surprised at the sound. "I do! I told you father was a siren, which means we are sirens too."

Nereus scrunched up his face. "But I don't have a tail."

"Not yet, but you will," Jhaeros said, his tone serious.

"What...?" Nereus seemed to hesitate, unsure of what to ask or if he should ask it. "...what happened to you? You seem different, besides the tail."

Jhaeros squeezed his eyes shut, closing off the memories.

He wouldn't further his brother's suffering by sharing his own. "It doesn't matter. I'm here now, I can take you away from this place."

The younger boy stiffened in his arms. He stepped back, green eyes troubled. Jhaeros frowned and reached a hand out, gently stopping Nereus by the arm.

"I can help you unlock your siren transformation. There's a whole world in Uncharted territory with people just like us."

"I can't," Nereus said firmly.

"What?" Jhaeros's hand tightened around his brother's arm a fraction. It was an unconscious reaction, but the panic in his throat was unmistakable.

"I-I'm working for the Montgomery estate. I can't leave my lord after all he's done for me..." Nereus's hand brushed the sword at his side.

"You let another human *enslave* you?" Jhaeros's voice was sharp, accusatory.

"It's not like that! He and Eliza took me in off the streets— He's not like Betaux." The boy was desperate to help his brother understand, but the siren's face contorted in disgust.

"That's what they want you to think." Jhaeros's hand squeezed, painful around his brother's arm. "Once he finds out what you are, what you can do for him-- He'll slice you open like they did to mother!"

"No!"

"Or like Betaux tried to do to me—"

Nereus jerked away from his brother and fell back onto the rocks. He hissed as he landed, finding a deep gauge on his palm where it was used to catch his fall.

Jhaeros's eye twitched at the sight of blood. He looked furious; it was the same expression he would wear for the rest of his life.

Nereus gathered himself up and stood to glare at his brother. “He’s not like the others. I want to stay here with him, Jhae.”

The older boy shook with anger, turning away in a tense jerking motion. His white tail bunched up over the rocks, like he was trying to become smaller.

Nereus pulled a white cloth from his pocket and wrapped it around his hand to staunch the blood. Later, Sivan would think it was from a kitchen accident.

Despite his brother’s tense form, Nereus approached him once again. “Stay here with me. I’m sure my lord could find something for you to do at the manor. Eliza says sirens know magic too, and you just have to turn back into—”

“*I’d rather die!*” Jhaeros was past the point of being reasoned with. “Humans are foul, greedy beings. We get to choose the life we live, Nereus. And I, for one, will *never* turn back into that wretched form I was born into. And- If you are going to choose them, you...you are no longer my brother.”

Nereus looked heartbroken, his face crushed by his brother’s words. A bolt of lightning cracked over the sky, which had grown dark and heavy with thunderheads over the course of their conversation. The younger boy looked up at the sky just as raindrops started falling on his face.

When he looked back at Jhaeros, the siren was gone.



Sivan woke from the memory in a haze. He felt just as tired as he had when he’d laid his head on his pillow the night before.

A twinge of pain lanced down the remainder of his right arm and spread into the phantom nerves where his forearm used to

be. He felt it with his left hand slowly, careful of the still healing nub.

It had been a few weeks since Jhaeros had cut off his arm, and Sivan had turned into a shell of his former self. The loss of a limb would have merely shaken him in any other circumstance. He'd been known as the Two-Headed Viper, his razor sharp sword skills honed to dual wielding. And even though he was ambidextrous, he still considered his right arm his dominant one. His sword fighting would have been impeded, but he would have adapted. And the writing Sivan would do with his left would be just a tad sloppier- not that he was still being asked to do Sirenath translations. Jhaeros had suddenly stopped finding his prisoner's skill useful after the incident.

The thing that had truly hacked into his spirit was the loss of his connection with Black. Before, his dreams were a chance to escape from reality, a moment of reprieve while he was imprisoned. Since the sever, his dreams had not been visited by Black even once. It was just that one shared memory, over and over.

Sivan was well and truly alone now.

The sound of the airlock alerted him that someone was coming in. Thankfully, Jhaeros had not visited him once since the incident. It was either the nurse or the white-haired siren who was still bringing him meals.

"Good morning, Mr. Montgomery! I've come to change your dressings."

So it was the nurse, Lusa. The chipper voice came from an Uncharted man dressed in all white. His skin was a light orange, dotted with occasional groupings of large scales in a darker orange color. Almost as a cruel joke to Sivan's lost limb, Lusa had four arms, two of which were human hands, offsetting the other two which ended in crustaceous claws. He was a caecean man,

a race of Uncharted whose iron claws were as tough as steel, as Sivan had learned from fighting them in the war.

The nurse noisily crossed the room, the hard soles of his feet clacking against the tile floor. “Up we go! It’s no good to remain in bed all day.”

Sivan groaned, but let Lusa sit him up in bed, squinting at him a little. The man was far too bright of a spirit to be featured in Sivan’s current malaise. Still, he let his bandages be changed without protest. The fine gauze came off his wound without pain now. At first, Sivan had to be sedated or held down by the white-haired siren woman during this process. It had been like a hot rake dragging across his nerves, lancing up his shoulder and into his mind.

The medicine they’d given him for pain hadn’t helped. Lusa had mumbled something about not being able to get human herbs. In the end, the Uncharted man had learned to discreetly apply numbing magic while undressing the bandages.

Jhaeros had forbidden any magic be used on his prisoner. He’d played it off as simply being cruel, but Sivan knew the king was terrified of reigniting the psychic bond between his prisoner and brother. Every time the faint spark of the nurse’s numbing magic caught on his skin, Sivan prayed that it would mend his link to Black.

But it never did, and Sivan’s dreams remained dark, save for the reoccurring memory of Nereus and Jhaeros on the Spear.

Sivan’s fingers traced the warm line of the glass vial in his breast pocket. It thrummed at his touch, the only comfort he had left in this cold place.

“It’s healing nicely, if that’s any consolation,” Lusa said as he examined the remains of Sivan’s right arm.

“It’s not.” Sivan’s reply was curt, but he knew the nurse meant well.

“Of course, sorry. I just mean it’s a good thing since if had gotten infected I would have no idea how to treat it! I mean I’d try, but Uncharted medicine is just no good at treating human illness. Although, I’ve heard some humans use Allessan leeches to clear out the blood, we have some of those in the kitchen —”
“Lusa.”

The orange man closed his mouth with a snap. “Oh, I’m rambling again, sorry.”

Sivan sighed in response and Lusa began wrapping his wound. There was only a moment of silence before the nurse started listing the ways Allessan leeches are used in Uncharted cooking and wasn’t it fascinating that humans only use them for bloodletting?

Sivan did not have the energy to make another attempt at getting the nurse to shut up. It was easier to let him go on about leeches, and if Sivan was honest he didn’t mind the chatter. It was a nice break from the dead silence of his cell.

Lusa finished dressing his wound. It had taken longer than usual, although Sivan attributed that to the leech lecture. The nurse clapped his hands together when he was done, his smile eager now.

“Okay. You’re really going to like what I brought today.” Lusa’s face lit up with excitement, his black eyes glittering like the night sky.

“I sincerely doubt it,” Sivan droned. This had been happening since the orange caecean man had become his nurse. He would bring in some *mysterious* object from the surface and make Sivan explain it to him.

Lusa reached into his bag and pulled out a corkscrew with the reverence of a man holding a precious jewel. He looked at Sivan with a bated expectation, his expression serious. Sivan took the corkscrew with a sigh.

“It’s a corkscrew.”

“Ohh! Fascinating, is it perhaps a- a token for courtship?”

“What? No, it’s- it’s used to open bottles. Like wine.” Sivan took the corkscrew by the handle and twisted it down, showing how it would be used.

“Right, right! Wine, the red water they keep in glass for consumption.” Lusa looked satisfied, like he’d made some great connection.

Sivan knew he should just hand the corkscrew back and let it rest, but a terrible thought occurred to him. “Well, it’s not just red water. It’s made from fermented fruit, usually grapes. It’s alcohol.” Lusa’s confused expression confirmed what Sivan suspected. “Wait, do you not have alcohol down here?”

“What is that?” Lusa’s eyes grew even wider, excited by the prospect of learning something new about humans.

“It’s uh, a type of drink...that makes you feel nice? Well, unless you drink too much, then you can get a headache or sick. You really don’t have anything like that?”

Lusa shook his head. “There’s not much point in bottling water. It’s all around us, anyways.”

“Right...well, that explains, a lot, I have to say.” Sivan rubbed his chin, giving the Uncharted man a pitying look. He handed the corkscrew back, and Lusa took it with even more reverence than before. It was charming, how fascinated the man was by anything human. Sivan suspected he volunteered as his nurse in order to do exactly this.

The airlock opened with a hiss, and the white-haired siren woman entered with Sivan’s breakfast on the self-propelled silver cart. She took one look at Lusa fawning over the corkscrew and frowned.

“There isn’t supposed to be more than one of us here at a time.”

It was the second time Sivan had heard her voice, and he was again surprised by how soft it was. The siren woman who had brought him his meals for the last few months seemed as cold and severe as Hayes, but the way she spoke was much gentler.

“You worry too much, Palis,” Lusa told her. “I don’t see any of the guards caring that much. Gods know how poorly they’re paid.”

She guided the cart to the table as usual, but continued to narrow her steel gray eyes at the nurse. “The king won’t like it.”

“The king doesn’t like *anything*. And what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Or us.” Lusa began tossing his corkscrew and medical supplies back into his bag. “I was done here anyways, so I’ll be off. The Duchess of Gyrm thinks she’s pregnant again and needs confirmation.” He turned to Sivan and continued, “I believe it’s her seventy-second child. Nine for each tentacle!”

When Lusa left through the airlock, the room felt like it went a few degrees colder. Sivan was in no place to fully enjoy such a lively personality, but he objectively appreciated the nurse’s presence, if for no reason other than it being a contrast to the cold slog his imprisonment had turned into.

He could see the sun’s rays, but not feel their warmth. Not when he was so far down beneath the surface.

The siren woman — Palis, now that Sivan knew her name, began setting out his breakfast as usual. Sivan left his bed to sit at the table, his body stiff from long hours in bed. He began picking at his meal, which was once again finely made, but lacked any real flavor that meant anything to Sivan. Even if Jhaeros had somehow found a cook as good as his brother, Sivan would still have found little interest in it. But he’d convinced himself to eat what was in front of him, regardless of the taste or his battered appetite. He had to survive. Even if the chances of his escape were slim, Sivan had to keep going. The smallest

part of him hoped Black would come save him, even though he'd taken this prison sentence in exchange for keeping the pirate safe. It was a selfish part of him, and Sivan hated it as much as he clung to it.

Strangely, Palis did not immediately leave after the meal was set out. Her gray eyes were narrowed on Sivan, and when he noticed, she quickly took the teapot from the table and poured tea into his glass. She had never done anything of the like, so it surprised Sivan even more when she leaned in as she was pouring and whispered something almost inaudible.

"Check under your bandages when it's safe."

The siren woman put the teapot back, and left into the airlock without another word.

Sivan tried to keep his expression neutral as he ate. He waited until Palis had left through the other side of the airlock, her and her cart safely gliding away.

He scratched his upper arm, fingers slipping into the freshly wrapped bandages. As Sivan pretended to itch, he felt a piece of paper tucked away beneath the gauze.

'...when it's safe,' Palis had whispered, quietly, for Sivan's ears alone.

He stopped scratching and casually resumed eating. The food still tasted bland, but Sivan found himself with the tiniest burst of appetite at the thought of secretly doing something under Jhaeros's watch. There were guards outside his cell at all times, but he wasn't sure how closely they were monitoring him.

The sun did not set at the bottom of the sea, but there was a shift in lighting around the castle when evening approached. Bright blues shifted to a soft amber green, casting the Uncharted world in an eerie glow. Palis came to bring him dinner, which she served in silence once again. As soon as it felt late enough for Sivan to dim the lights, he did and slipped into bed. It was a little

early, but no earlier than his malaise had sent him to bed before.

He took out the note, carefully unfolding it under the covers. The small warmth in Sivan's pocket fluttered as he unbuttoned it and took out the vial of light. It gave off just enough light to let Sivan read the letter:

I am sorry for not trying this earlier. Lusa wanted to make sure you were healed enough, and it has only been in the last few weeks that the security around you has started to show cracks.

We do not approve of what Jhaeros did to you, and we hope this does not make you think all sirens and Uncharted are like that. It sickens us to think the king has sullied our realm's dignity with something so base as torture.

So we want to help you escape.

Lusa and I will be coming with you, as it will be too obvious who helped you for us to remain here. All you have to do is pretend to be very ill when Lusa wakes you up in the morning. We will handle the rest.

-Palis and Lusa'

Sivan read the letter three times to make sure he wasn't going mad. Lusa had always been friendly with him, but he'd taken that as a token of his nature. Palis had barely acknowledged his existence until that day. Yet they were determined to risk their lives to help him escape?

The persistent voice in the back of his mind told Sivan that this was just another one of Jhaeros's tricks. Maybe the king had purposefully kept his distance these last few weeks in order to make this latest move in his psychological game.

But still, what if it were real? What if he could trust them?

Sivan had to take that chance.

Chapter 5

Varis

When Lusa shook Sivan's shoulder to wake him the next morning, he groaned in pain. Or, pretended to, as per the letter.

"Ohh, what's wrong with you now?!" Lusa sounded convincingly concerned and annoyed at the same time. He tugged on his patient's shoulder, and Sivan rolled off the bed with a heavy thud. The nurse left him to writhe on the ground and started pounding on the section of glass where Sivan knew he could see the guards.

One of them immediately entered the airlock and it began to drain. Lusa rushed back over to Sivan on the floor and whispered, "I'm going to put you in a sealed gurney, pretend to panic."

Sivan suspected he would not need to pretend. The thought of being constrained in an even smaller space than his cell made him queasy.

The guard entered the room, a fierce-looking silver spear

pointed at Sivan's prone form. "What did he do?" The Uncharted man had the nose and teeth of a shark, his gray skin spotted everywhere except the white of the large gills around his neck, now closed in the waterless cell.

"Nothing- he's sick, you oaf!" Lusa tipped the spear out of the way with one of his claws. The Uncharted guard glared at him, but the smaller orange man hurdled on, whether or not the guard liked it. "Stupid human biology is so fragile. He probably ruptured an internal organ—I'll need to do surgery to fix it. Help me load him onto this gurney."

With a small pop, the medical bag Lusa expanded into a surprisingly sturdy-looking gurney. Sivan continued to groan, clutching at his side to make Lusa's words believable.

Yet, the guard still glared at them. "You can do surgery here."

"I cannot!" Lusa sounded offended. "I don't have any of the tools I need here, and there's no time! It'd just be butchery if I did it here!"

"So? The king hasn't visited him in weeks. He's just thrown away another toy."

Sivan did not like the way the guard said that, as if Jhaeros's visits were little trysts and the two of them had been doing something far more explicit than merely having a meal together. He prayed that these rumors had stayed within the castle walls, and Black never heard a whisper of them.

"Are you sure?" Lusa countered. "The king is the one who sent me here to monitor his recovery. Maybe his majesty is simply waiting until the human recovers, which he will not be able to do if I can't *perform surgery* on him."

The guard seemed to waver, narrowing his eyes at Sivan, whimpering on the floor.

"Are you willing to take responsibility if he dies and the king is angry about it?"

That seemed to persuade the guard, as he bent down to pick Sivan up rather roughly and plopped him down on the gurney.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Lusa sounded pleased, and whatever response the guard had was muffled by the zip of a metal dome encasing Sivan on the gurney. He froze for a moment, but then remembered to panic. Sivan started banging on the lid of the gurney, shouting to be let out, and remembering to insert a pained howl or two in between.

“Serves him right,” the guard grumbled before the hiss of the airlock signaled the door opening. “Oh, it’s you. He won’t be eating today—whoa!”

The gurney lurched forward as Lusa quickly squeezed them into the airlock. The door shut behind them, cutting off the guard. Shortly after, Sivan was blinded with light as the top of the gurney zipped off him.

“Quickly, there’s not much time,” Palis said as a greeting. She was holding open the doors to the floating food trolley, beckoning for Sivan to climb inside. Water was quickly filling the airlock, so when Lusa hurried him off the gurney, his feet were instantly wet.

“Why can’t I stay in the gurney?” Sivan was a little apprehensive that he could fit in the smaller compartment his food usually arrived in.

“The gurney will automatically be shuttled to the med bay. You don’t want that, so into the trolley, come on!” Lusa barked at him.

Sivan did as he was told, and stopped asking questions. The water was rising faster now, and he did not want to drown before he’d even gotten out of his cell. Indeed, the trolley was cramped, but it remained airtight as the airlock filled completely. There was a necklace similar to the one Jhaeros had made him wear when he’d taken him to see the leviathans. The blood red jewel

at the center reminded Sivan it was a breathing device. A small piece of paper was affixed to the necklace. It read, in Palis's fine, slanting script: *'put this on.'*

The cart moved, and Sivan quickly put the necklace on. Either as a response to being out of the airlock, or as a response to the scant amount of air in the cart, the blood red jewel flickered to life and sealed Sivan's head with a bubble of air.

The cart paused, and Sivan could hear Lusa wheeling the gurney away, muffled by the weight of the sea around them. He could just barely make out the fabricated sounds of him panicking inside the dome of the gurney. The nurse must have used magic to sell the trick further. Palis waited a moment, sighed, then began leading the floating cart back the way she came. Sivan was a little relieved to know that the siren woman was as unsociable with other Uncharted as she was with him.

He waited as he was quite literally carted off to whatever the pair had planned for him, legs cramped in the tight space. Sivan had never wished for the open air of the Blackwater more, the only thing tying him down being Black's hand on his waist. This thought let him stay still until Palis opened the cart and water flooded in. She motioned for him to get out. They were in what appeared to be a storage room, cartons weighted down by bags of sand.

"Come here," Palis waved him over to a door slid partially open. Outside was a large hangar filled with strange-looking ships. They were fully enclosed, shaped like huge, finless whales. Thin gossamer pinions stuck to the side of the ships like dragonfly wings, vibrating slightly in the still water. "These are our vessels. I believe you humans call them "ships," but we do not breach the surface with these."

Sivan nodded, making a silent realization that these were how Jhaeros had transported his Uncharted legions. The Royal

Navy had assumed the Uncharted always swam to battle since they had never seen head nor tail of a ship on the horizon.

“Except for that one,” Palis said, pointing at a small black vessel, a yellow stripe painted down its middle. It was the only ship that had a stripe of such kind, the others painted solid hues of blue or green.

“That one is a dry vessel. The Caecean lord supplies Jhaeros with human food, since he can’t stomach the Uncharted fare the castle offers.” Lusa explained as he appeared from the other door to the storage space. He wore clothes that were far too large for him. Before Sivan could ask, the Uncharted man snapped his fingers, and with an orange flash he had transformed into a larger gray Uncharted woman with multiple ridges on her head which unfurled into horns. “I’ll be disguised as the captain of the ship. It’s supposed to depart today, so I’ll make a distraction and you can slip into the back loading dock.”

Without further explanation, Lusa strode out into the hangar. Palis motioned for Sivan to follow her, and they kept low to the ground while using the pallets of cartons scattered around the hangar for cover. As they approached the dry vessel, Sivan saw a pair of workers moving cartons of jewels and gold into the back. At the same time, Lusa, disguised as their captain, strode up to them. He barked at them in Uncharted, and they scrambled to get the last cartons inside the vessel. They hit the button to close the doors, and Palis cursed in Uncharted. “There’s no time, make a break for the doors while they’re distracted.”

Sivan ran as best he could underwater. The hangar’s floors had the same magic the rest of the castle did, so Sivan did not have to swim, but he certainly could not move very fast under the weight of the water around him.

Palis ended up pushing him the last bit of way, helping Sivan slip inside the vessel just as the doors closed. He waited a few

moments, floating amongst the heavy cartons weighed to the bottom of the ship with gold. The dry vessel's floors did not have the same magic the castle had. Sivan floated helplessly, along with a few stray pieces of gold.

Eventually, the ship lurched forward, and Sivan had to brace himself against the side for support. He heard some type of huge door open, and the ship jerked even harder.

Several hissing noises signaled the water in the compartment beginning to drain, all at once. The force of it surprised Sivan; he had to hold onto a carton full of gold to keep himself from getting swept up in the current. Yet he could not stop the vial of light in his open pocket from slipping out. He'd forgotten to close it back up after he'd used the pneumarium to read the letter with. With a curse, he let go of the carton to grab it, but the force of the water was too great, and the light slipped out into the ocean along with a handful of gold coins.

He'd lost Black's pneumarium. Again.

The water drained quickly, and Sivan collapsed on the ground with the dregs of what was left, splashing against the cartons. He tore off the magic necklace and heaved large breaths of air, panic clashing with nausea as the vessel moved through the ocean.

Sivan had escaped the siren king's capture, but he'd lost part of Black too. The part that had been entrusted to him. The part that had clinked against the side of his boat and sought him out in the vastness of the ocean. The part that had warmed his breast pocket and kindled what little hope remained in Sivan's heart.

He spent the rest of the journey in a fog, his heart empty and cold without the familiar weight against his chest. Gold coin stragglers bumped against him with the sloshing of the water, but they were poor replicas for the vial of light which had once done the same.



A cool split of raw moonlight cracked open the seal on Sivan's three months of underwater imprisonment. The doors to the compartment slid open with a creak. Palis looked down at him, her green siren tail curved underneath her. Sivan had seen her like this every day, seen her in his cell, no water to swim in. Yet for some reason, seeing her now, a siren, bathed in moonlight, *on a ship*, stabbed him with the utmost longing for his own siren. His Black.

It punched a dry sob out of him, quiet and choked.

"I lost it," he rasped, as if she would know what he was talking about.

Palis was quiet for a long moment. She noticed where Sivan was clutching, not just his heart, but his breast pocket, where the small vial of light should have been. Sivan had never shown her the vial, but she knew the terms of Sivan's capture. "The pneumarium?"

Sivan nodded, golden eyes distant. "It slipped out, while the ship drained of water."

The siren woman hummed, nodding her acknowledgment. "Well, it should be safe then."

"What?"

Her steel eyes almost glowed a pale blue in the moonlight. "I have never made a pneumarium, but I know how to. Did you know that when sirens make one—when they shave off part of their soul and bottle it up—it's advised to set them out to sea."

Sivan held his breath, remembering how he'd watched Black do that very thing when he'd made his pneumarium. Looking back while knowing that the vial of light contained part of his

soul—it seemed insane that the man would cast away such a vulnerable part of himself into the great unknown of the ocean.

Palis gestured behind her, at the great expanse of moon-soaked water that yawned before them like a mirror of the night sky. “Sirens know best how vast and deep the ocean is. So much of it is entirely empty, or populated with nothing but unthinking seagrass. A pneumarium is tiny, clear, and almost impossible to find once it’s in the ocean.”

“But I found it.” The words fell out of Sivan’s mouth, not really comprehending what Palis was telling him.

“Indeed.” Her moonlit eyes glinted down at him, assessing him another time. “Very rarely, the fragment of soul will seek out the object of its desire. He is in love with you, yes?”

Sivan wasn’t sure anymore; he’d gone back on his word and abandoned Black when he needed him. But at the time, yes, he was sure the man had loved him. So Sivan nodded.

“Then it would make sense that it sought you out if you happened to be nearby. Regardless, pneumariums cast into the sea do not get found. It may seem mad to you, but sirens understand the colossus of the ocean and how easy it is to get lost in it. There is no safer place for it, so perhaps you should be thankful you lost it.”

With that, she turned and slithered away, leaving Sivan alone with the ocean.

It took some time for him to center himself. The soft rocking of the ship made him queasy, and the night air bit into him like a shark. Palis’s words had comforted him in some regard, knowing Black’s pneumarium was not in immediate danger. But he once again felt guilty for having failed Black, and it added just enough weight to his burden to unsteady him.

Sivan left the compartment and inhaled the sharp, cold breeze coming off the ocean. It helped snap him back to his

senses, giving him a clear enough mind to remember what had happened. He'd escaped. He was free of Jhaeros, of the stagnant air that filled his underwater cell, of the months of fear and isolation. The long stretch of ocean horizon was a welcome sight for once. To Sivan, it confirmed he was above the surface. He needed more than the night air on his face to tell that now. The perspective of it grounded him and pushed down the faint nausea that still came with being on a ship.

The compartment opened to a thin walkway guarded by a rail that had not been in there when Sivan entered. In fact, the entire vessel had changed.

The yellow stripe that divided the middle of the enclosed ship had split open; Sivan could see each half of the dome just under the surface of the water, hugging the ship like a lover. The walkway circled the perimeter of the ship, a few staircases leading up to a higher deck. Sivan followed the nearest one, and spotted Lusa sitting in front of a wheel, surrounded by numerous brightly colored levers.

The Uncharted man looked frustrated. He tugged on random levers while mumbling something about dry ships being needlessly complicated.

"You're going to break it," Palis said coolly, watching Lusa from the side.

"I'm not going to break it—oops!" Lusa tugged on a purple lever, and the whole ship shuddered for a moment.

When nothing else happened, he laughed sheepishly and folded his human hands behind his back, leaving both clawed hands on the wheel.

"I was just trying to get it to go faster. The sooner we get to the Bloated Isles, the better."

"Is that where you're taking me?" Sivan finally piped up.

Lusa looked delighted, almost surprised to see him. "Oh,

good, you survived!”

Sivan blinked. “Was there any chance I wouldn’t have?”

“Well, uh, I wasn’t entirely sure if I had actually drained the shipping compartment or not. These damn levers. Those breathing talismans only work within the castle borders, you know.”

Sivan chose not to analyze how close he had come to drowning. He was grateful enough to be out of that cell. “Well, thank you...for rescuing me. You didn’t have to risk your own safety like that, but I am forever in your debt.” He bowed deeply, fumbling for a moment as his missing arm was not there to complete the gesture.

“We did not do it for you,” Palis corrected. “We did it in protest of what Jhaeros was doing to you. Is it common for humans to treat other humans that way?”

Sivan balked for a moment. Besides the amputation, the physical treatment during his imprisonment had been relatively humane. Of course, Jhaeros’s psychological treatment had been another matter, but overall, Sivan knew he could have had it a lot worse. Then he remembered the memories Black had forced out of his brother. The way Jhaeros had been locked in darkness and bled for a woman’s insane quest for youth.

“Unfortunately, it is rather common. Sometimes it’s worse than that.”

Palis shook her head, disgust clear on her face. “I can’t comprehend why someone would do that to their own kind.”

“Is it better to not take prisoners? Just kill them instead?” The words fell out of Sivan’s mouth. He knew the Uncharted did not take prisoners, at least not ones that made it back to tell the tale.

“Sometimes death is better than that kind of existence,” a quiet voice spoke from behind the wheel.

Sivan was surprised to find that it had been from Lusa, and that a serious aura had gripped the usually upbeat man. Quiet filled the space between them. Palis pinned him with another icy glare.

“I understand the only contact you’ve had with Uncharted has been through the war until recently, but you must have concluded by now that the raving beasts you crossed swords with on the battlefield are far different from even those on that pirate ship, yes?” Her usually soft tone was clipped, her patience with Sivan having completely dried up.

“Of course,” Sivan nodded.

“I have a big family,” Lusa said, still facing the wheel. “Lots of siblings, even more cousins.” He paused, taking in a breath. “There was a draft when the war started. Anyone able to hold a weapon was called to service. My cousin, Lubin, was the only one who returned alive. He came back...different.”

“War changes the best of us,” Sivan tried to say delicately, but it only made Lusa turn around to continue, impassioned.

“No, not like that. Before he left, Lubin wouldn’t hurt a shrimp. You’ve seen the legions Jhaeros commands. Stark raving mad, thirsty for blood and carnage. Indiscriminate killing machines. Jhaeros does something to them. I’ve seen it—it’s why I enrolled in the royal medical academy, to see what he does. He shocks their brains with something from the leviathans. It changes the chemistry of their very beings.”

“You know, there hasn’t been war in Uncharted territory in centuries,” Palis pointed out, more-so to let Lusa regain himself. “Of course the odd squabble here or there, but all-out war has always been viewed as a fruitless effort that ends in only pointless bloodshed.”

“All of this,” Lusa pointed out at the ocean, as if it could encapsulate the terrible war that had been raging for nine years.

“All of this is Jhaeros’s fault. He’s been destroying more than human lives. And I want to stop him.”

“As do I,” Sivan said as he met Lusa’s gaze, finding it crackling with the same fire that drove himself at the beginning of the war. “And I know for certain that the only thing that will stop Jhaeros is his death.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?” Palis asked, her tone cold.

Sivan fell silent for a moment. Estes’s Tomb had failed them. It had all been for nothing. Yet he knew Black would not let something like this stop him. He knew the man would find another way.

He had his faith in Nereus, if nothing else.

“We have to find the real Corseque of Estes,” Sivan said.

“The real what?” Lusa scoffed. “I thought that was a myth.”

“It’s not. We found Estes’s Tomb,” Sivan frowned, remembering that awful day.

“You found the first siren king’s tomb?” Palis’s voice was urgent, unbelieving.

“Yes, we used a sirenath map I translated. It took us through The Quietus.”

Palis hissed, the thought of the baneful fog a threat even through words alone. “You sailed a ship through that?”

Sivan remembered the fantastical way Hayes had given the Blackwater feet to crawl over the treacherous rocks. And how the ship had surfaced just before Black’s execution on Lissandry. “The Blackwater is a special ship. But the corseque we found there was a fake.”

“And it can really kill Jhaeros?” Lusa asked, incredulous.

Palis narrowed her steel eyes at the deck. “The Corseque of Estes was given to the first siren king by the old god Narwyn. It was meant as revenge against his fellow gods who cursed his

beloved land dwellers with mortality. That weapon was forged with the sole purpose of killing their own offspring, the siren.”

Sivan remembered Jhaeros’s little tale from when he’d been shown the leviathans. *‘The old gods lived in a perfect world, free of death, free of suffering. It was called the Undying Sea. But then, land was created, and the life that grew on it was cursed, doomed to die.’*

“If you really found Estes’s Tomb, the consequence must be real.” Palis crossed her arms, having made up her mind that Sivan was probably telling the truth.

“Yes...but if you want to help me kill the king, we need to find the Blackwater. The people on that ship will know how to find it. I’m certain of it.”

“I’ll help in any way I can.” Lusa sounded doubtful, but the fire was still in his eyes.

Palis hummed in agreement. “Me as well.”

Sivan nodded, feeling hope once again.

Chapter 6

The Bloated Isles

They sailed south to the Bloated Isles. Lusa explained he had family who worked for the caecean lord, and they would hopefully set them up with another ship. The Uncharted dry ship they had stolen was too unique. It would draw too much attention. It was too easily tracked. Besides, the dry ship was scheduled to be returned for another delivery of Jhaeros's precious human food. They'd hate to see the king go hungry.

The Bloated Isles were aptly named. Distended globs of rock rose up from the sea in a half-hazard spray of varying sizes. Entrances had been carved into the sheer sides of the islands, which Lusa said were doors to the hollowed out homes the caeceans made inside the rock. Supposedly, they were very homey dwellings, just the right humidity for the caecean Uncharted. Even when the skies were dark with storm clouds like this, their homes would be perfectly cozy.

He'd stopped going on about his home when the fog thinned

enough to see the first fire.

First, it was a ship, empty besides the flames consuming the mast. Then, as the islands became more grouped together, the buildings and docks caught the flames as well. Sivan got his first glimpse of Lusa's fellow caeceans when he spotted a family tossing buckets of water onto their dock.

The Bloated Isles were under attack.

The distant din of battle reached Sivan's ears, eliciting a cold shiver of dread mixed with a twinge of excitement. It had been so long since he'd seen the sun or had any measure of stimuli outside of Lusa's visits to his cell. The clang of swords still brought on a certain measure of nausea and fear within Sivan, but his weary spirit was grateful to feel *something* real again.

"Do you think it's Jhaeros? Has he come after us already?" Sivan's remaining hand instinctively went to where his swords would have been, but found nothing there.

"There's no way his troops could have reached here before us," Lusa said in a rush as he steered around a wall of flaming rock. "Besides, he cannot simply attack the Bloated Isles without incurring the wrath of Lord Kaerius. All trade goes through these islands. It would ruin the kingdom."

"Then who is attacking?" Sivan scanned the gray smoke which clung to the water and rocks. A great fortress was outlined in the haze, carved rock and spires cutting an imposing silhouette.

And then, the familiar dark profile of a ship crept out from the flame and smoke.

It stole Sivan's breath away, and it took him a moment to shout the words, "It's the Blackwater!"

"Well, I'll be damned," Lusa breathed, eyes catching on the pirate ship at the center of the chaos.

Palis came closer to the rail, looking out at the Blackwater.

Sivan swore he saw a shiver run through her. “I’m not getting anywhere near that ship,” she hissed. “Lusa! Turn around!”

“What?!” Sivan followed her as she went to yank the wheel from the Uncharted man. “Why?! They can help us, we just have to get closer—”

“That *ship*—” Palis stabbed at the Blackwater with a finger, “is not what it seems. I value my life and want nothing to do with it.”

Sivan looked to Lusa for help, but the man just shrugged helplessly.

“Lusa, you said you have family here—don’t you want to make sure they’re safe?” Sivan began to reason with him, seeing a vulnerability in the man’s face.

“Well, of course, but—”

The ship lurched as Palis pushed Lusa out of the way and yanked the wheel violently, turning them away from the Blackwater.

“I will jump out and swim there if I have to,” Sivan warned.

“Go ahead,” the siren woman sneered, all softness from her voice gone. “Can you even swim with one arm?”

Sivan still couldn’t swim with both arms, but he grit his teeth and stayed silent.

“Palis, head to the southern side. There are receiving docks we may be able to slip in through.” Lusa’s words were calm, guiding. He knew the woman would not listen to panicked pleas.

She took a long moment to glare at the Uncharted man, but did as he suggested. Her shoulders were still tense, but she began to visibly relax the further they got away from the pirate ship.

“Why are you afraid of the Blackwater?” Sivan asked, not trying to be confrontational, but unable to keep the frustration out of his voice. “It’s just a ship.”

Palis bared her sharp teeth in a humorless laugh. “And I am just a fish. No, that so-called ship has a fierce magic surrounding

it. I don't know what it is, but I know I want nothing to do with it."

Sivan remembered the impossible feats he'd seen the Blackwater do. Withstand cannon fire, travel underwater, even sprout feet and walk across land. He knew the Blackwater was powered by some type of magic. He also knew Hayes was forever chained to the ship. Yet he could not fathom being afraid of it in the same way Palis had been. The siren woman had been brave enough to betray her king, but getting close to a mere pirate ship had her turning tail.

Another loud blast echoed from within the fortress. Sivan swore he caught a sliver of green light through the billowing smoke.

It was the same shade as Black's magic, and his heart ached to see him.

If the Blackwater was here, it would serve to reason that Black was not on the ship but within the caecean lord's walls. Even if he were to make it to the Blackwater, all he'd likely find there would be Hayes.

He had to get inside and find Black.

The receiving dock was left unattended. All guards had probably been called to deal with the pirates, so the dry ship made port without anyone noticing.

Sivan stepped off the ship cautiously. The dock may have appeared safe, but that did not mean danger lurked just out of view.

"Do you have a sword?" Sivan asked Lusa, partially for himself, partially for the unarmed Uncharted man.

"Why would I need that?" Lusa was completely sincere, and Sivan realized this man probably had no combat experience.

Palis roughly handed them both short swords. They were not particularly nice swords, but they would do the trick in the bind

they found themselves in. Lusa held his sword upright, perfectly perpendicular to the ground. Sivan suspected he had never held a sword in his life.

“Perhaps you should stay here...” he tried to suggest delicately.

Lusa’s expression turned sour, and he switched to holding the sword with both hands, like he was afraid Sivan would try to take it from him.

“Don’t try to talk him out of it. He’s going to get in the way regardless, so you will just have to deal with it,” Palis said as she tested the tension in her bow.

“I will not!” Lusa pouted. “I want to find my cousin. He’s part of the guard.”

“Lubin, was it?”

The Uncharted man nodded, gripping his sword tighter.

“You saved me from imprisonment, the least I can do is help you find him.” Sivan patted him on the shoulder. Lusa met his eyes in gratitude.

As they crept through the receiving dock, they passed barrels and cartons full of gold, silver, finery of all kinds. The only time Sivan had seen this much raw treasure had been on the Blackwater. “This Uncharted lord is certainly well paid, isn’t he?”

Lusa huffed out a bitter laugh. “Oh, Lord Kaerius always make sure he’s paid well. He loves his gold and will do anything for it. Even if it’s unsavory. I have a suspicion any ill story you’d heard about Uncharted before the war had our venerable caecean lord at the center.”

“He hoards gold like a gull with shells,” Palis spat, winding around the vessels filled with gold. She peered down the hallway leading away from the receiving dock and found it empty. “I will scout ahead,” she announced, barely looking back at them before

slinking down the hall at a rapid speed.

The chill of the floor hit Sivan once they left the wooden planks of the dock. No one thought to bring him shoes during their escape, so his bare feet had to deal with the cold granite of the fortress. In no way was Sivan truly dressed for battle. He still wore the silken slacks and shirt he'd been used to while imprisoned. He looked more ready for bed than for a fight with an Uncharted lord.

Still, Sivan's heart quickened at the metallic clang of swords distantly ringing through the halls. Ever since his first fight with Jhaeros, the sound of battle had made him as nauseous as the sea did, but now he was just grateful to feel anything other than the daily malaise of confinement.

And somewhere in the caecean fortress he would find Black. The thought of that hastened his pace, pulled him further along, past Lusa.

"Hold on!" Lusa called as Sivan dashed ahead. Yet Sivan did not slow down. He could not. He was so close to Black. His blood pulsed, as if it could sense the man nearby.

Sivan barreled into a long room, lined with rows of spears tipped with serrated seaglass. One of them flew at Sivan, barely missing his nose. A caecean guard with wild eyes had thrown it, and he now rushed at Sivan with a sharp hiss.

The caecean man lunged, pincers the size of Sivan's head aiming for his throat. Sivan ducked, the pincers snipping off a few strands of silver hair. His attacker crashed into a row of spears, the lot of them clattering to the ground and a few nicking his purple-gray skin in the process. Yet the man did not slow down for even a moment. Blood poured from his cuts, but he still rounded on Sivan with vicious speed.

"Lubin!"

Lusa was at the door to the armory, shock apparent on his

face. But his enraged cousin barely even looked at him before clashing with Sivan's shortsword. Lubin's pincers snapped at the metal, crunching the blade into jagged shards. He had another set of arms like Lusa had, and he used his free human hands to grab more seaglass spears from the walls. Sivan attempted to do the same with his right hand, but came back with nothing, forgetting he was now missing it.

All Sivan could do was dodge the spears and pincers as they jabbed at him. He used the remains of his sword to parry what blows he couldn't dodge, but the caecean man was relentless. His black eyes bulged from their sockets, boring into Sivan's nerves. Drool clung to the man's lip, making his sharp fangs glimmer with threat. He seemed feral, like the only thing he knew how to do was to kill.

This was the type of Uncharted Sivan had grown familiar with on the front lines of the war. He'd assumed, wrongly, that they were all bloodthirsty and mad with hate. Now he knew the hearts of Uncharted varied as much as his fellow humans. Most were kind, some were misguided. Very few were naturally this focused on bloodshed. Whatever Jhaeros did to make them like this was a crime worse than the war he started.

A flash of orange saved Sivan from a pincher through the gut. Lusa had jumped on his cousin, attempting to wrestle him into submission.

"Lubin, stop! This is Sivan, he is my patient! You do not get to kill him!"

But Lusa's words fell on deaf ears. Lubin barely slowed down despite his cousin weighing him down. "Silver hair," Lubin hissed, "kill them all!" His eyes were still set on Sivan, his Grenaldian hair a spark to the Uncharted man's rage. He shook off Lusa and rounded on Sivan once more.

A familiar battle cry rang out as an older Grenaldian pirate

tackled Lubin with all his might.

“Brand!” Sivan cried, instantly recognizing the man. Brand knocked back Lusa’s cousin so hard he flew into the wall of spears. Lubin’s head collided with a rack, a resounding crack reverberating through the armory. The caecean man collapsed to the floor amid spears, unconscious.

Brand panted, looking at Sivan with pure shock on his eyes. “Great gods above, wha’ are ye doin’ ‘ere?”

Sivan huffed out an exhausted laugh, delighted to see the man, but at a complete loss where to start explaining. It ended up not mattering, since Brand spotted Lusa and immediately pointed his sword at him.

“Na’ ta worry, me lord, I be protectin’ ye in Black’s stead,” Brand announced. Neither Sivan nor Lusa had time to say anything before the old Grenaldian pirate swung his sword at him. The sword struck Lusa in the shoulder, but the caecean man barely flinched as the weapon bounced off him with an odd ‘clunk.’

He grinned at Brand with not quite as many fangs as Lubin, but just as sharp. “I’m afraid your human-forged sword won’t do much against me. We caeceans have natural armor, making us particularly hard to injure,” Lusa said, almost preening. “I’m guessing you’ve already experienced that, based off the number of dents in your sword.”

Sivan sighed in relief, realizing his nurse was not hurt. It’d been so long since he’d faced caeceans in battle, he’d forgotten how brutal they were to fight against. He had one or two scars thanks to Lusa’s tough-skinned kin.

“Brand, please-“ Sivan stepped out in front of Lusa, putting himself between the pirate’s sword and his nurse. “This is Lusa, he helped me escape from Jhaeros.”

Brand looked between the two of them before deciding either

that Lusa was no threat, or that it would be useless to fight him and dent his sword further. He lowered his sword and hugged Sivan tightly, much to the younger man's surprise.

"Oh, it do be good to see ye. I cannae tell yeh how mighty glad tha captain will be ta see ye." Brand's words were honest and vibrated in his chest. Sivan was taken back by the sudden affection, but realized it was probably partly due to the relief Brand felt that his captain's mood might improve and thus the weather.

Sivan patted the older man's back before stepping back and asked, "Why is the Blackwater here, Brand?"

"We be tryin' ta save ya from tha' siren king. Tha captain 'eard Jhaeros received food from a dry ship an' reckoned we could sneak into tha castle tha way."

Lusa barked out a laugh. "That's a good idea, isn't it?"

"That's how they smuggled me out of the castle," Sivan explained with a grin.

Brand laughed, but his expression quickly turned more serious. "Aye, tha's wha' we were thinkin' as well, but our infiltration of these accursed islands went a tad sour."

A loud explosion rang out through the halls, shaking the whole fortress.

Sivan had to brace himself on a wall of spears. "A tad?"

"Aye, migh' be more than a tad," Brand said a little sheepishly. "Best find tha captain an' retreat. No point in fightin' fer those dry ships now tha' yer 'ere."

"I'm staying here to look after Lubin," Lusa announced, kneeling down next to his unconscious cousin.

"Okay," Sivan nodded and grabbed a seaglass spear and took off with Brand down the hallway.

The halls continued to be a monolith of granite, although the further they got into the fortress, the more intricate details

started to appear in the stone. They ran until they reached a triple fork. Brand and Sivan looked at each other, hoping the other would know which way to go.

“I was sent ta find tha’ docks, I ‘ave no idea where tha’ crew be fightin’.”

Sivan exhaled heavily, trying to catch his breath. “Damn.”

Brand gave him a cheeky look. “Out o’ shape, me lord?”

“Oh, shut up,” Sivan waved him off. “It’s not like I had the opportunity to fight in my cell.”

Brand’s expression fell, and that’s when Sivan realized the other Grenaldian man had noticed his missing arm. Sivan had waved him off with it, or at least had tried to with his phantom limb.

“Ah, yes...” Sivan trailed off, going quiet. He had already experienced abject dismissal when he’d returned from the war injured. This was an even more obvious disability.

“Well, let’s take this ‘ere path,” Brand pointed towards the center hallway. “Battle sounds loudest down ‘ere. Black will be ‘appy ta see ya, might even turn tha tide of it.”

Sivan smiled, grateful Brand did not dwell on his arm. But they did not get very far down their chosen path before Palis turned out from a corner in front of them. She was covered in the black blood of the Uncharted.

“Palis!” Sivan called, waving her down.

She took one look at Brand next to him and notched an arrow at him with her bow. “Who’s this?”

Sivan kept waving his arms, trying to get her to settle down. “Don’t shoot! This is a friend. From the Blackwater.”

“Another pirate?” she hissed, her glare obvious, but lowered her bow. “Your *friends* are very foolish for taking on caeceans without proper weapons.”

“We were nae lookin’ fer a battle necessarily...” Brand tried

to explain, but Palis merely turned back the way she came.

“Follow me if you want to save your captain. He’s fighting Lord Kaerius and losing.”

Sivan started running without another thought. Black was in danger, and he had to find him. That’s all he needed to know to push past the burn in his chest.

Palis stopped them when they reached a balcony. A few dead caeceans lay on the floor, the siren woman’s arrows run through their heads. She slithered behind a large pillar and motioned for Sivan and Brand to look over the edge of the railing.

Black was below, covered in his own blood. He grasped at his gut, holding back a gush of blood as his body struggled to heal. His blade made of pitch was in his other hand, gripped loosely, as if he realized that it was not useful in this fight.

Sivan’s breath punched out of him at the sight of the man. He wanted to jump over the rail, wanted to run to his side and hold him tight and protect him from harm. Palis held him back with a firm grip.

“Don’t,” she hissed, “Kaerius will kill you in an instant. It’s a wonder that pirate has lasted this long.”

“Well, well, I expected more from the *mighty* pirate lord of the Blackwater,” a booming voice cut through the great hall. Sivan then took in the rest of the room, realizing just what Black was facing. This Lord Kaerius was a huge beast, more closely resembling a massive crab than the caeceans he ruled over. Pincers the size of carriages, with human arms of varying sizes running up and down under his shell. His face was similar to a caecean with black eyes and dusting of scales, but the top half of his face was shoved through the top of his shell like it’d been forced there by the gods.

Kaerius was perched atop a pile of gold and jewels, his crustaceous clawed feet repeatedly slipping and relying on his

longer human arms to keep him upright on the hoard. In fact, the entire hall was covered in treasure, far outweighing any trove he'd seen on the Blackwater, Lissandry, or even in the halls of Grenaldian royalty.

A flash of purple magic directed Sivan's attention towards Eliza, who was fending off caecean guards at the entrance to the room. Her magic was certainly doing more than Brand's sword, but she was barely keeping them at bay by herself. Only Eliza and Black remained standing, the other pirates they had come with lay at their feet, most of them dead, a few still choking on their own blood.

"I truly thought your fame gave you more credit, but I guess I shouldn't have expected much from humans. You're all weak. Soft as butter," Kaerius continued to taunt, even as Black picked himself up and thrust his sword at him once more. The caecean lord stopped the sword with one of his massive pincers.

"Good thing you can afford to say such rich things, although it's not much coming from a lowborn crab," Black taunted back, and Sivan wanted to hit him for how stupid he was for mocking someone who was clearly beating him. "You know, the other Uncharted lords say you're just Jhaeros's delivery boy."

The giant crab lord bellowed wetly, and snapped Black's sword out of his hands. The pirate did not let go of his sword in time and was snatched up by the other pincer. He squeezed, and a terrible cracking sound came from Black's chest.

Sivan gasped and was no longer able to just stand there and do nothing. He motioned at Palis's bow, notched but pointed at the ground. "Palis! Shoot him! Shoot Kaerius!"

Her hand twitched, but she did not aim her bow like Sivan wanted. "No. I will help you take down Jhaeros, but I will not kill Lord Kaerius. That responsibility is not in my nature."

"What?!" Sivan snapped. Responsibility? What about all the

Uncharted guards she had just shot down? Black was going to die, and Sivan was helpless to stop it.

“Maybe I’ll fillet you and feed you to your brother,” Kaerius purred as he continued cracking Black’s ribs. Green magic tried sparking from his hands, but petered out before coalescing into anything useful. Sivan couldn’t take it. He couldn’t watch Black suffer like this. Had he been in a reasonable mind he would have remembered that sirens were impossible to kill, but Black’s cries of pain were all Sivan could register.

So he took his seaglass spear and ran closer to Kaerius.

Sivan leapt over the railing, right over the caecean lord’s head, spear pointed down, right into the top of his bulging face.

Kaerius looked up just as Sivan’s spear drove right between his eyes. With a squelch, the seaglass buried itself right into the lord’s brain.

He bellowed in agony, immediately dropping Black. Sivan was so relieved he did not notice the giant pincer swinging up towards him.

The pincer that still held Black’s sword.

The sword pierced Sivan’s chest and split his heart in two.

A rattling breath punched out of him, and he instantly lost control of his body. Sivan went limp and tumbled off the now dead caecean lord. The gold of the great hall glittered quickly past his vision as his world went dark.

He heard one last agonized howl.

“My lord!!”

Chapter 7

The Devil's Whip

The sound of a heart beating should not have been unique. It was an organ pumping blood, same as any other.

But to Sivan, the faint rhythm he heard while deep in the abyss could only have been made by one heart.

"...just let him die."

"Either help me with this or I'm doing it myself!"

He could hear moments through the rhythm, shrouded and distant. It was like when he'd heard Eliza while listening to Black's heart in his dream.

"You're a fool, you know that?"

"I learned by example."

"Tsk. Except you did it for nothing."

"No, I did it for love."

"Oh, love, is it? Will you still be able to say that when it devours you from within?"

"I know the cost."

These conversations made no sense to Sivan. But he recognized Black's voice, especially in the quiet moments when it was just the pirate alone.

"You came back to me. I should have trusted you."

"No one will take you from me again."

The heartbeat lulled Sivan deeper into the dark. Memories that were not his own played on repeat. Some, he recognized. Like the time he'd gifted Nereus his first sword. Or the first storm that brought Nereus to his room for shelter. Some were less fond memories. Young Nereus following his brother, spying on Betaux drinking his blood. Running away from the man who Jhaeros had paid to smuggle him off the island. The streets were better than the awful way the lecherous man used to watch him.

There was one memory that stood out to Sivan.

The creation of the pirate lord.



Much has been told about the legend of Captain Black, demon pirate lord of the Blackwater. They say he's a kraken, or he controls one as a pet. They say he's a sea witch, or he sold his soul to one in exchange for dark powers.

The reality is that he is a man of indomitable stubbornness and little else.

In the early years of the war, the Uncharted attempted to take prisoners. At no point in their history had the people of the sea taken prisoners, but their new king insisted on it. He told them to take these prisoners to an island just outside the Devil's Whip. A prison was built, and the prisoners were put to work.

"Well, I can undeniably say that didn't work," Nereus said, his tone light despite straining against the iron stockades they

were locked in. He was older here, nineteen or twenty, but not yet hardened from years of being a pirate.

“Is tha’ right, matey?” Brand grumbled in the stockade next to him.

Nereus laughed apologetically. “Oh, I’m sorry, Brand. I wouldn’t have dragged you into that rebellion had I known it would end up like this.”

“Water under tha bridge. Worth it ta have a shot at gettin’ out of ‘ere. I told me daughter I’d get back ta ‘er, but that be lookin’ less likely day after day.”

“Mm, you give up too easily. These Uncharted guards still don’t know what they’re doing,” Nereus gestured vaguely at the Uncharted soldiers standing watch over them. The nearby sound of gears churning kept them from overhearing their stockaded prisoners. Nereus could just barely see the huge machine spitting out tar onto a rocky field. As the tar oozed out, prisoners began dragging rakes through the shallow black sludge.

“Wha’ makes ya say tha’?” Brand asked, snapping Nereus’s attention back to their conversation.

He grinned, toothy canines glinting. “It’s the way they beat us. They don’t know where to hit without causing total incapacitation.”

“Uh huh. How would I know, yer tha one who won’t keep his damn mouth shut an’ gets beaten for it.”

Nereus snickered, wishing he could slap the older man on the shoulder. “It’s no fun without a little provocation, Brand.”

One of the prisoners shouted, drawing their attention from the stockade. She’d found something, and was desperately trying to show it to the overseer.

“How much do you want to bet it’s just another rock?”

“We don’ ‘ave anythin’ ta bet, kid.”

The overseer, a rail thin Uncharted woman with a ruff full

of spines, came over and did in fact see that it was just another rock. She grabbed her whip from her side and began whipping the prisoner without restraint.

The two men in the stockade winced at the sight. It was a common occurrence, but this prisoner must have been new and she screeched in agony until it was over.

“What do you think they’re trying to find in these pits?” Nereus asked, not really expecting an answer.

“Probably not them rocks,” Brand answered anyways.

The younger man’s pale green eyes raked over the bubbling pit of tar. The island was full of them, but there was one giant one at the center. Everything reeked of rotten eggs, and the heat of the sun made the the whole prison smell like rot and death.

“I bet it’s treasure,” he mused.

“All o’ this fer an odd bit o’ gold? May tha Crimson Sea take ‘em,” Brand spat.

“Crimson Sea?” Nereus asked.

“The place all bilge rats go when they die. Scoundrels, thieves, murderers. A sea o’ boilin’ red water tha strips th’ flesh off yer bones fer all eternity.” Brand said this with a dark light in his eyes, as if he were remembering all those who he’d cursed to wind up in the Crimson Sea for putting him in this place.

“I bet they know exactly wha’ be in tha’ pit.”

“Oh?” Nereus was curious to find Brand had an opinion on this. He hadn’t known him for long, but he found Brand was a good but simple man.

“Nothin’. They just wan’ us ta suffer.”

“Ah, you might have a point there, my friend,” Nereus agreed bitterly. “Hey, when we do get out of here, what say you and I take a little back after so much has been taken from us?”

Brand squinted at him from the corner of his eye. The angle was too sharp for him to really see Nereus with their stockades

being right next to each other. “Whaddya takin’ abou’?”

“Well, you were taken prisoner when the Uncharted took over your island. That’s your home, Brand. They took that from you. And me...” Nereus drifted off, the image his beloved lord being yanked out of his grasp still just as vivid as it was the day the Spear was attacked. “Well, they took someone very precious from me.”

“So yer sayin’ we take back our homes?”

“Hm, maybe one day. I’m thinking something a little more practical at first. I want a ship. And I want food. And maybe treasure.”

“Treasure?” Brand laughed, seeing the younger man as a little childish.

Nereus pouted. “And why can’t I have treasure? Here they are, using humans as work horses to dredge tar pits for gods know what. I say we take them for all they have.”

“So we be resortin’ ta theft?”

Nereus rolled the word around in his mouth before letting it spill out.

“Piracy.”

“Hmm,” Brand hummed, not turning down the idea.

“Just a little,” Nereus started, but quickly changed his mind. “Or maybe a lot. Take it from anyone, anywhere, whoever decides to keep it all for themselves. These greedy nobles, Uncharted and human alike, who hoard their wealth and grain to watch their people starve as a war ravages land and sea. Take it all.”

“Take it all,” Brand repeated. “But, Nereus, we be only two men. How can we do all tha’ when we ‘ave no ship to start with?”

“For now,” Nereus said, cooling down, “but who knows what the future holds?”

A canary, bright and yellow against the smog of the tar

island's sky, chirped its arrival and flitted down onto Nereus's finger.

"Another message from yer mysterious accomplice?" Brand asked, noticing the canary. It was a wonder the bird was not noticed by the guards nearby. It was the only wildlife on the island and stuck out horribly against the backdrop of tar pits and stockades.

"You only think Hayes is mysterious because she's kept on the other side of the island. That might as well be an entire world away for us." Nereus held out his thumb and index finger for the bird to place a rolled piece of paper into. It took some doing to get the note unfurled with one hand, but he managed to do it without dropping it.

It read: *You break me out and I'll get you that ship.*

Nereus grinned, delight spreading across his features. Enough fucking around. It was time to brute force their way out of here.

"Hey!" he shouted towards the guards. The loud machine had stopped spitting tar out when the prisoner had called for the overseer, so they had no problem hearing him now. "Do all Uncharted chain up their prisoners like this or are you just cowards?"

They turned around with a snap, their glares pointed on Nereus.

"Wha' are ya doin'?" Brand hissed.

"Just trust me," Nereus reassured him beneath his breath. Then, louder, back at the guards: "I'm surprised you took prisoners at all, isn't it shameful for Uncharted to engage in such human practices?"

One of the guards stomped over and whacked Nereus's jaw with the blunt end of his spear.

He laughed, and spit out the blood that had spilled into his

mouth when a fang caught the inside of his cheek. “Ah, I see. You weren’t strong enough to remain on the battlefield. No point in sending someone so weak to the frontlines. You’d only embarrass the good king’s name.”

The guard snarled and barked at the other to release Nereus from the stockade. They beat him, cracking his ribs and bloodying his face. Nereus did not fight back. He could have, but they would have just shoved him back in the stockade. First, he needed to get the overseer’s attention.

She announced her arrival with the crack of her whip. It struck Nereus on the back. Pain seared across his skin, causing him to collapse onto the rocky ground.

“Get him up,” she snapped at the guards, who roughly took Nereus’s arms to stand him on his knees. “I heard what you said, worm. You think we’re weak? Who’s the prisoner here? I would have rather died than be captured.”

“Maybe I want to be here. Maybe I let myself be captured so I could see your pretty face,” Nereus crooned mockingly despite the blood pouring from his lips.

The overseer snarled at him and kicked him in the face again. “I’ve had enough of you constantly causing trouble around here.” She pointed at the largest tar pit. “Throw him in there.”

“No-!” Brand’s cry was ignored as they started dragging Nereus away.

To be thrown in the tar pit was a death sentence. The sludge sucked you in, seemingly sucking all the air around you at the same time. The toxic fumes would end your life before you even fully made it under the surface. It was the most suffocating death one could imagine.

Nereus was paraded through the throng of prisoners sifting through the shallow tar. Some of them had participated in the rebellion he’d tried to start and were pulling extra shifts out here

because of it. Their leader was to be made into an example for the others to learn from. "From now on, any of you who act out like this cur will meet the same fate," the overseer cried out to the prisoners as they waded through them.

He was hauled up onto a ledge that overlooked the massive tar pit. It bubbled ominously beneath him, threatening him with a noxious and sticky death.

"Wait, wait," Nereus dug his feet into the ground, rocks tumbling off the ledge and into the pit. The guards did actually stop, though their grip on him remained tight. The prisoner's mouth curled into a bloodied grin. "I'm not dressed for a swim."

The overseer scoffed and motioned her hand to throw him in. And the guards did, tossing Nereus off the ledge with some force.

Other unfortunate prisoners who had been sentenced to the pit had flailed and screamed when they'd been tossed, but not Nereus. He twisted his body into a dive, arms coming up above his head to split as deep into the tar as possible.

Nereus did not hear their reaction, nor did he care. The tar was thick, but the force from his dive sank him deep enough into the pit that he could feel the less dense layer with his arms. He pushed through the sludge, swimming, praying to the gods that it would give way to the seawater he'd been told was below.

Eventually the tar became thin enough for Nereus to free himself from the viscous surface. His arms turned first, black scales dappling his arms and sliding him faster to the water. Then he felt the snap and pop of his legs as they fused together into a siren's tail. This was only the second time he'd transformed into a siren. The first was on the *Spear* a few years ago, and he'd avoided seawater ever since. It still hurt like hell, but it allowed him to inhale great gulps of seawater just as if he was breathing air.

Below the tar was a pocket of seawater. His *'mysterious accomplice'* had promised him as such, but he hadn't been entirely convinced until just now.

Nereus began swimming further down. It took him a few moments of flailing his tail wildly about before he got the hang of swimming with it. He felt powerful down here, limitless as the sea despite the tar enveloping this patch of it. The tar completely blocked out the sun, and even his enhanced siren vision did not let him see much.

With that thought, a string of luminescent green spots lit up out of the corner of his eye. Nereus turned to look at his own glowing tail. It lit up the pocket of seawater like any good oil lamp would do on the surface.

The light reflected against something metal below.

Upon noticing it, Nereus swam closer, and realized a great iron cell door was embedded into the ocean floor. The bars were as wide as his shoulders. Nereus could have swam between them freely if he had wished. Whatever was behind it had to have been massive. He approached the iron bars, laying one hand on them for a moment before he pulled back, hissing as it burned his fingertips. They were forged with iron kelp, the only thing that could hold back the strength of sirens, among other...more ancient things.

Something huge shifted behind the bars, startling Nereus. He brought his luminous tail closer to the cell door, and the light revealed pitch black scales, rows and rows of sharp teeth, and four golden eyes staring directly at the siren.

It was a leviathan.

It watched him carefully, eyes severe and judging him. Nereus did not know how the leviathan saw him. A savior? Its next meal? Or maybe he was so insignificant that the only reason it noticed him at all was because of the lights on his tail.

But then the caged, god-like being shuddered, shaking off centuries of sand and settlement. Golden lights appeared all over her skin, replicating the pattern on the siren's tail.

Nereus grinned, teeth sharper than they had been before.

He was going to let this thing out.

He collected magic in his hand, just as Eliza had taught him. It was so easy to do in this form, the magic just poured out of him as easy as a bathroom tap. He forced the ball of green magic forward, into the cell door. The iron bars absorbed his magic, but they couldn't withstand the sheer magnitude of it. Cracks of green light split through the iron bars, causing them to groan.

Nereus barely had time to swim out of the way before the leviathan burst through the compromised cell door. It bellowed as it escaped, quickly swimming up through the layer of sludge. The leviathan was even larger out of its cell, the length too great to understand while cramped up in that cage.

Finally the leviathan escaped, leaving a massive hole in the tar's surface. Dim light filtered down from above, the first trace of sun this pocket of ocean had seen in millennia.

Nereus followed the leviathan out, taking much longer to clear the distance than his freed fellow prisoner had. The force of the her escape pushed the majority of the tar out of the pit, allowing Nereus to swim to the surface close to the shore. Still, he struggled to clear the thick tar completely.

He heard the screams of the Uncharted guards when his head breeched the surface. Nereus wiped his eyes of tar and opened them, seeing the fire and destruction he'd unleashed. The leviathan was still dripping in tar, drowning whoever came close in it. It breathed golden flames over the prison, burning down the structure with ease. Somehow it knew to not harm the prisoners, only aiming for those armed with weapons.

Nereus's tar-slick face broke out into a smile, white fangs

contrasting against the sludge.

He emerged from the tar pit, dripping in black.

Chapter 8

The Bloating Isles

Once again, Sivan woke to an unfamiliar ceiling.

He was not at all concerned with said ceiling, however, for the throbbing in his chest was so great he immediately began writhing in pain. It made his vision turn dark, and he only vaguely registered the granite-carved room around him.

“Easy now, lay back down,” a woman’s familiar voice told him. Purple magic flashed before her hand pushed it into his chest. The pain subsided almost instantly.

Sivan gasped for air, squeezing his eyes shut as he recalibrated himself. His chest still ached, but he could feel his heart beating strong. Blood pulsed in his ears as his heart rate evened out.

Except that shouldn’t be right at all. The last thing he remembered was killing Kaerius and being stabbed in the heart himself.

“Am I dead?” He asked, panting.

“No, the Crimson Sea hasn’t taken you yet.”

Sivan opened his eyes and looked down at himself. He was still whole, except for his missing arm. But a red gash peeked out from under the bandages wrapped around his chest. He clutched at them, panicked and disoriented, but his movements were now woozy and slow.

“Just lie back down,” the woman tried to soothe him, but her tone was short. Sivan squinted, he couldn’t make her out; he didn’t have his glasses. He didn’t need to. He knew who she was.

Eliza took his hand and placed his glasses in them.

“Here.”

Sivan took them and placed them on his face. The world snapped back into clarity, and he saw Eliza scowling down at his chest. She prodded at his bloody bandages.

“These need to be redone,” she said, more to herself than to Sivan.

He didn’t know what to say. The last time he’d spoken to her was when she had betrayed both of them to the Grenaldian Royal Navy. Black almost died, yet here she was, like nothing had happened.

Eliza didn’t give him the opportunity to say anything at all, for she turned around wordlessly to pick out supplies from a granite cabinet carved into the wall. Her crystal leg clacked against the hard floor. Sivan was in some sort of medical room, although there were a fair number of rather gruesome looking steel devices he’d never seen before. He suspected they had something to do with how tough caecean skin was. He was in a bed framed by black granite. It was not particularly comfortable, but that may have had something to do with whatever was underneath those bandages wrapped around his chest.

Sivan tested all his fingers and toes and found them all working, save for his missing right arm. He automatically looked

to where it should have been, and found Black sleeping at his bedside.

His heart clenched again, sending an intense pain through his nerves.

Now that he saw Black close up, he realized how tired he looked. He was thinner, his hair a tangled mess of black strands and gold beads. He looked older, so much older, even though it had only been a few months since Sivan had last seen him. His facial hair had grown out, dark and thick and clearly had been trimmed halfheartedly with a knife or maybe even a sword at some point.

“Black...” Sivan breathed, reaching out with his phantom arm. He wanted to brush his hair back, feel his skin, know he was alive and real in front of him. But he was in too much pain to turn his body enough and get his left arm over.

Black was so close, yet still just outside his reach.

Eliza returned holding a large pair of scissors. Sivan’s first instinct was to shrink away, but once again the pain kept him from getting far. She began snipping his bandages off from the bottom.

“I don’t understand,” Sivan’s voice came out cracked, “I should be dead.”

“Yes, you should,” Eliza agreed. “You were fatally injured when you killed Lord Kaerius. He used Black’s sword to split your heart in two.”

She finished cutting off the bandages and pushed them away to reveal a large Y-incision on Sivan’s chest. Stitches held his chest together, the incisions still fresh and stained with his own blood.

“You died,” Eliza continued, cold as ever. “But Nereus wouldn’t have that.”

“I can imagine.”

Eliza's icy steel blue eyes fixed on him, a curiosity in them Sivan didn't appreciate. "Do you know sirens can live without their heart inside them? It's unfair, truly. They're nearly immortal, and their power knows no limit." She placed a hand over her own heart before going on. "Humans who practice magic have a set amount of power within them. Magic for us is really just exchanging power for our life-force. Every spell, every charm, every sigil...humans have to trade something so precious as their own life just to use it."

"Which is why the dark arts are forbidden. The approved spells by the royal mages don't require much of a sacrifice to use," Sivan said carefully, knowing he was only minimally versed on the topic.

"And what use are parlor tricks in a war?" Eliza snapped back. "But *sirens*...their life-force regenerates, and they have access to an endless pool of power for that reason. The so-called *dark arts*' are as natural to them as breathing. For those with the talent to master magic, this is the largest valley of inequality. We are limited by our humanity."

Sivan suddenly remembered the half dead siren he'd seen in Eliza's office on Calloway Cay.

There had been a great big hole where its heart should have been.

"The dead siren in your office—"

Eliza smiled, teeth too white, canines a little too sharp for someone who should have been merely human. "Oh, I see you met my husband."

"*Husband?*"

"I told you I remarried, didn't I? Calloway was his name, a siren lord of little renown." She stole a glimpse at the sleeping siren next to Sivan. "I wonder if sirens have a secret weakness for humans. It was so easy to win his heart."

Sivan didn't like the way she said that. Like he had schemed to do the same with Black.

"I saw you in that vision of the Spear you showed me," Sivan began carefully. "You looked like you were on death's door."

"I was. The magic I used that night took the last ounce of power I had in me. Nereus used his magic to keep my body from rotting, but it was just a stopgap." Eliza peered at him, her usually dull blue eyes burning eerily bright. "I had one choice: find a siren's heart to implant in my own chest, or die."

"No," Sivan breathed, now realizing what the huge Y-incision in his chest was.

"Nereus helped me subdue my siren husband and helped with the procedure. But of course we had to find some way to restrain Calloway so he wouldn't take back the heart I had stolen from him. And he would not have stopped there."

Sivan hadn't noticed, but since he met Eliza again on Calloway Cay, she had only ever worn high-collared shirts. She wore one now, and unbuttoned the top few buttons to pull back the fabric and reveal a similar Y-incision. This one had long been healed over, just pink scars against her pale skin.

"He would not have stopped until he ripped the heart out of me." Eliza took a moment to appreciate the haunted expression on Sivan's face before she continued. "Now I can use magic as freely as a siren would. I suppose you could now too, if you had the skill for it."

Sivan was shaking his head, praying it wasn't true, but knowing it had to be. It was the only way he could have survived that sword to his chest.

"Why?" he whispered.

She paused, frowning at Black. "Do you think he gave me a choice? He had already cut his own ribs open before he bothered asking me for help. I think he would have done it himself if he

could have.”

Black shifted in his sleep, his shirt falling open at the collar. It revealed a similar cut, and though it had already healed over, it remained jagged and uneven, like it had been made by Black himself.

“Trust me, this was not my preferred outcome. It leaves him vulnerable. If someone tries to kill you again, it will kill him as well.”

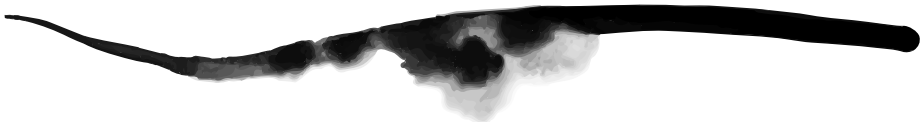
Rage bubbled up in Sivan at her words. “So *now* you care for him? It was not but a few months ago that you threw him to the wolves. You betrayed him by giving us to my father!”

Eliza fixed him with a stare, unfeeling and cold. “I did.”

If Sivan could have moved his arm he would have tried to slap her. Yet he was fixed to his cold granite bed, laid bare to her whims once again.

“Why?” Was all he could ask.

“Hm...it is easier if I show you,” she said, reaching out a hand to Sivan’s face. He flinched away instinctively, but her fingers found his temple despite his resistance.



Once again, Sivan was transported into Eliza’s memory. Except this time it felt more like he’d been blasted by a cannon into it. He stumbled into the vague seascape before him, the world going blurry.

When he regained his senses, the memory snapped back into clarity. He felt a little nauseous, but that could just as well be blamed on the fact that they were on a boat.

The boat wasn’t very big, naught more than a fisherman’s ship. Eliza stood at the tip of the forecastle deck, arms raised

wide as she cast a spell. Purple magic formed a bubble around the ship, keeping the fog of the *Quietus* at bay.

“Calloway, why can’t you just- I dunno, sea witch us to Estes’ tomb?” a familiar voice complained from the helm.

Sivan whipped around and laid eyes on a blue-skinned Uncharted woman. The tentacles that were usually wrapped around her arms were gripping the wheel along with one hand. The other hand was gripping a piece of paper so tight her knuckles turned as pale as the tentacles on her head.

It was Vivianne.

Sivan immediately recognized what he was seeing. Eliza had gone to Vivianne to get to Estes’ tomb before the *Blackwater* did. This was their journey there.

“The *Quietus*,” Eliza made a short gesture with her hands without breaking the spell, “is an ancient and powerful magic. I cannot break the fog. I can only protect us from it within a limited range. You don’t want to go mad, do you?”

The ship jerked harshly as Vivianne yanked the wheel to the right, just barely steering them away from a broken ship impaled on a huge rock. She swore something in Uncharted and glared at the piece of paper in her hand. Sivan got closer and realized it was the map he’d translated. Or, at least a copy of it. Vivianne must have made a copy of it for the brief period she’d been captain of the *Blackwater*.

“I’m goin’ mad already, trying to get us through this labyrinth.”

Eliza ignored her and focused again on repelling the *Quietus* back, but subtly pushed back the fog further so Vivianne could see. Of course this wasn’t the *Blackwater*, and they did not have Hayes’s bizarre ability to make the ship grow feet and dance across the rocks surrounding the tomb.

After a few more sharp turns and curses from Vivianne, the

Quietus parted to reveal the tomb of Estes. The snow-white beach, the crystal staircase, and the door to the tomb, still sealed. It had been broken when the Blackwater had found it, and Sivan suspected he was about to witness that happen firsthand.

Sure enough, Eliza cracked open the stone door to the tomb with a flash of purple light, and Vivianne bounded inside the tomb before the dust had even settled.

Another Uncharted curse rang out from inside, but this time it bubbled with glee. Sivan followed the sea witch into the tomb and found the treasure the Blackwater crew had so sorely missed. Estes' tomb had been lit by a cold light when Sivan had been there. Now the walls were bathed in a warm light reflected off the sheer mass of gold that lay within. There was so much of it. So much, Sivan doubted if it would have all fit inside the Blackwater's hold in one trip. He wondered how exactly the two women had been able to smuggle it out of Uncharted territory with one tiny ship.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Vivianne crooned to the piles gold and silver. The Uncharted woman looked like she had fallen in love, her black eyes going starry while reflecting the glittering hoard.

"Remember, half of this is mine," Eliza snapped at her as she strode past. Vivianne barely registered the words as she began rolling around in a pile of gold coins.

The sea witch made a beeline for the stone casket surrounded by dark water. Crystal shards of seaglass grew in front of her over the surface, forming a path for her to walk on. She approached the skeletal remains of Estes slowly, as if she expected some kind of trap. When none came, Eliza pulled out an iron dagger. She grimaced as she used it to pierce her chest, right into her heart.

Or, Sivan knew, into the heart of the siren she stole it from.

There was a channel carved into the dagger, and it began to

fill with blood once Eliza had reached the heart. Once it filled, she pulled it out and held it over the casket. All it took was a few drops of siren blood for the skeletal hand of the long dead siren king to shudder and release his corseque.

Eliza wiped the dagger off and tucked it away, groaning quietly in pain. She looked like some of the life had been sucked out of her, like doing that had cost her much more than any spell. She then pulled out a salve, hands shaking as she applied it to the wound on her chest. She muttered a spell in a language Sivan did not recognize. His best guess was that it was a form of the dark speech necromancers used. Such a language was not taught to even the highest echelon of scholar in Varis.

Color returned to Eliza's face slowly. The wound closed up, and she put away the salve to pluck the corseque out of the casket.

"Can that thing really kill sirens?" Vivianne asked from the shore. She was trying on different tiaras from a pile she had found.

"Supposedly. I'm not keen on finding out," Eliza snapped back.

"No? You don't want to kill the scary Uncharted king like the rest of the Blackwater crew?"

"See, the thing about this is-" Eliza swung the corseque through the air, testing its weight. "This weapon can kill any siren, not just the king. As strong as Nereus— your former captain, Black— As strong as he thinks he is, he is no match for the king, even with this. I've seen what Jhaeros can do. It would be so easy for him to snatch this weapon from Nereus and kill him instead."

She held the corseque with one hand while the other collected shards of sea glass with her magic. It began melding together, taking the same shape of the weapon bit by bit.

“I will not leave something like that up to chance,” Eliza bit out as the sea glass finished replicating the corseque. She lay it back in the casket, the skeletal hand of Estes grasping it once again.

So Jhaeros had been right. Eliza had taken the real corseque and put a replica in its place. She’d sold Black to the Royal Navy in order to keep him from getting to the weapon first. In order to protect him. Sivan could not make sense of her logic. She’d put him in just as much danger by handing him over for execution.

The memory shimmered and darkened, sending Sivan back to his own mind in a rush.



He opened his eyes and caught Eliza gazing at Black, still sleeping at his bedside.

“You may not believe me, but I do care for the boy,” she said softly.

Sivan huffed. “You’ve tried to kill him. Multiple times.”

“He’s a siren, none of it would have stuck. But the Corseque of Estes...that one would. I could not let it fall into the hands of someone who would use it against him. I had to get the the tomb first, so I needed something to preoccupy Nereus with.”

“*Preoccupy?* He was nearly *executed* after you turned him over to my father. I don’t care how hard sirens are to kill. A beheading would have ended it there.”

Eliza puffed out a laugh as she buttoned her shirt back up, covering the Y-shaped scar on her chest. “I’ve seen sirens get ripped into pieces and still somehow survive. He was never in any real danger.”

“You don’t know that,” Sivan bit out. He wished he wasn’t

so weak right then so he could berate her further. Just because Black was a siren didn't mean he should suffer so much.

"Perhaps," she hummed while standing up. Her steel eyes glinted at him as she continued, "but I suspected you would do something stupid to save him from that fate. You were my insurance."

Sivan sighed, mentally exhausted trying to follow this woman's strange and brutal method of mothering. Still, this implied she trusted Sivan. At least enough to impart him with some responsibility over Nereus.

"You will not abandon him again," Eliza cut through his exasperation like a knife. "I don't care what the circumstances are. Your life is inexorably tied to his now."

Sivan felt Black shift next to him, the siren in question rousing from his sleep.

"I will not give you another chance," Eliza warned before turning to leave, the sound of her crystal leg clacking against the floor echoing through the room.

Sivan pushed down the weight of her warning to focus his attention on Black. Finally, finally, his green eyes opened slowly, still heavy with sleep. They were dark, almost as dark as when Sivan had first seen him emerge from the shadows in Varis.

"My lord?" His voice was deep, gravelly from sleep and strained with emotion. "I must still be dreaming."

"This is no dream," Sivan said, smiling. He reached his left arm across to touch Black's face. It hurt, even with the pain numbing magic Eliza had pushed into him. But he had to touch him. He had to feel that the pirate was real.

For a brief moment, he feared that this was all some elaborate trick Jhaeros had come up with to psychologically torture him. But when Black leaned forward into his hand, Sivan felt the familiar scratch of his facial hair.

This Black was real. Sivan finally had his pirate back.

Realization struck those verdant eyes with a spark, and tears immediately began to well and overflow onto Sivan's hand.

"My lord!" Black sobbed and surged forward to embrace him. Embrace was a generous term, since he was being so careful to not jostle Sivan too much with his injuries.

"Black-" Sivan caught on his name, as if even his voice didn't want to let him go. He wanted to tug the man on top of him fully. He wanted to feel the weight of him, the warmth. But there was no strength left in his arm, so he could only weakly clutch at his side. He felt the collar of his shirt grow wet with Black's tears. They were cold, but Sivan could not bring himself to care.

Then he was being kissed, on his lips, his cheeks, his nose, anywhere Black could find skin. A quiet laugh bubbled up from Sivan, the pure happiness he felt at having the man shower affections over him again was making him giddy. He hadn't felt like this in months, even in the dreams. Nothing could compare to the real thing.

"I am going to lock you away so you can never escape me again," Black murmured softly. His words implied such a dark threat, but the sheer tenderness in his tone tempered it.

"I'm not going anywhere." Sivan smiled, brushing their noses together before laying his head back on his pillow. "I don't think I could, even if I wanted to."

Black pulled back, a unreadable expression on his face. He lightly touched the edges of the Y-incision on Sivan's chest.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like someone stabbed me in the chest," Sivan answered with a laugh, wincing when it caused him pain. "This is going to be quite the recovery, isn't it?"

Black hummed, now somber. "I'll re-dress this," he said and turned away to grab fresh bandages.

“Black...Eliza told me what you did to save me. With your heart.”

The pirate stopped, his shoulders going stiff.

“...there wouldn't have been a use for it if you had died. I would have found that damned corseque only to to end my own life.”

“Black- You—” Sivan turned his words over in his mouth before continuing, “you mustn't think like that. I shouldn't be the only thing you live for in this world.”

The pirate snapped back around. His now dark eyes fixed on Sivan in a way that sent a thin, cold shiver down his nape. “Not all of us can believe someone was dead and get on with their life for nine years—”

As soon as the words left Black's mouth his face fell, eyes turning back to a watery green. Sivan could tell he regretted it instantly. They were glass-like words said in the heat of the moment, sharp and brittle.

Still, they cut Sivan deeply. He had not yet forgiven himself for those nine years.

Evidently, so hadn't Black.

The silence between them was thick and murky as the pirate mutely wrapped clean bandages around his chest. Black was holding Sivan up halfway off the bed as he did this, letting the injured man rest his weight against him.

“I didn't mean it,” Black whispered.

“I know,” Sivan returned, just as quiet.

He finished wrapping his chest, the Y-incision disappearing beneath white gauze. Sivan was gently laid back down, the pirate going so far as to even support his neck like a newborn babe.

“I just-” Black started, face downcast, no longer meeting Sivan's eyes. “It wasn't even a choice for me, giving you my heart. It has always been yours to begin with.”

Sivan felt his heart skip a beat, and he had no clue whether it was his own response or Black's. He supposed it didn't matter, the feelings were the same.

"Black-" Sivan started, voice strained with emotion. He stretched out the fingers of his left hand, gesturing for Black's own. The pirate took his hand in both of his own large ones, bringing it up to press a kiss against Sivan's knuckles. "My heart is yours as well. Even if it's been speared by a caecean lord."

Black smiled against his hand, beard tickling his fingers.

"I am sorry for going with Jhaeros, but-" Sivan started. "I suppose I possess the same kind of unreasonable love you have. It begs me to throw myself into danger if it means saving your life."

The pirate kissed his knuckles again before allowing Sivan to press his palm against his pale cheek. "I need to know..." He paused, tracing the outline of scar tissue above Sivan's missing arm. "Was he very cruel to you, my brother?"

Sivan considered lying, but the evidence of Jhaeros's cruelty lay right before them, right where Sivan's arm should have been. "He liked to toy with me emotionally, but I was treated very well physically until the day he sensed you in my dream. He left me alone after that."

Black's brows knit into a grimace of anger. "I was still connected to you when he did this. I felt it happen."

"Black..."

"He will pay," Black's eyes opened, staring dark and unseeing ahead of him.

Sivan's fingers tapped against the pirate's face, snapping his attention back on him. "I don't need him to pay. I just want the war to end."

Black nodded, although there was still a darkness in his eyes Sivan could not forget. The man stroked a finger along his

right shoulder, ending where his arm had been cut off. Sivan felt another skip of his heart and a pull of something hot snaked through his veins towards Black's fingers. "This, at least, I can help with." Shadowy tendrils emerged from Sivan's skin and wrapped themselves around the stump of his arm. They twisted and elongated, and he felt a twitch of that same hot thread connected to his heart. Sivan gasped quietly when the tendrils formed into a hand, shadowy and semi translucent. But he could instantly move it, the fingers obeying his will effortlessly.

Black took his hand and pressed it against the other side of his face. Sivan gasped again when he felt the same warmth his other hand felt. He could even feel the scratchiness of Black's beard as it scraped against his shadow palm lightly.

It was silly, that something as simple as regaining touch could break Sivan so easily. But still, tears started rolling down his cheeks. The weight of everything Sivan had gone through in the last few months had suddenly crashed into him. He sobbed, and Black held him. He was so warm, so real. Being able to feel the man's warmth was something Sivan had thought he'd lost forever.

But he'd found him again, and he wasn't going to let go this time.

No matter what.

Chapter 9

The Bloated Isles

Surprisingly, Sivan recovered in relative peace. He expected Black to come rushing in one day to cart him onto the Blackwater as they made their escape from the hoards of Jhaeros's army. But it never happened. He was still in the infirmary in the caecean lord's castle.

Although it was starting to feel more like a cell, with how Black was keeping him bedridden and his visitors limited. Other than Black, he'd only seen Eliza the one time and Brand had snuck in once. He assumed his fellow Grenaldian was not there by Black's consent since the old pirate seemed nervous the whole time.

"I had tae make sure ye were still alive," Brand had mumbled.

"Barely, but hasn't Black told you what happened?" Sivan watched him hesitate on his answer, considering his words.

"Not precisely...I listened in on tha sea witch tellin' Hayes abou' tha heart thing, but-"

“Wait, he didn’t tell Hayes himself?” Sivan balked, he thought Black would have at least told his second in command. It seemed like crucial information, that the captain was now operating without a heart.

Brand hesitated again. “He’s been...secretive abou’ this. I think he just wants ta protect ye.”

Sivan supposed there was logic in that. He weak right now, but that also made Black vulnerable with his heart in Sivan’s chest.

Brand had left quickly, leaving Sivan with a familiar sense of being caged. The company was much better this time, but he didn’t like what it implied.

The heavy door to the infirmary opened with a creak, and in walked Black pushing a cart draped in a fine white cloth. Silver platters with various steaming dishes clattered lightly on a silver tray.

“Good evening, my lord,” Black greeted him in his best attendant voice. The scraggly beard had been shaved, replaced with his near constant stubble.

Sivan exhaled through his nose, willing himself not to instinctively berate the man for slipping once again into this attendant role. “Black,” he returned, and struggled to sit upright. The pirate was at his side in an instant, helping him up and carefully arranging the pillows behind him for support.

“Thank you,” Sivan said.

“Of course, my lord.” Black smiled at him, eyes flickering with light.

At first, Sivan had allowed this pampering by Black because he did not have the heart to deny him after being parted for so long. But as the days went on, he found this was the only thing that brought that light to the man’s eyes. Sivan really *was* still in pain, but perhaps he exaggerated it a little in order to give the

pirate these small moments of joy from aiding him.

Black carefully placed the tray on the bed, balancing it on either side of the granite frame. The food smelled delicious, as always. And as always, Black had made too much.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to feed you?” Black asked at his side, voice hopeful.

Part of Sivan wanted to cave in to those pleading eyes, but he knew better. He’d let the pirate feed him the first few days, which had made him so happy, but caused Sivan immeasurable leagues of embarrassment.

“I am fine, Black. Let me at least do this myself. Otherwise I’ll never recover and you’ll be nothing more than my attendant.”

That shut him up. His sullen pout was overshadowed by the look of trying to figure out if he could live with that.

Sivan knew neither of them could.

He picked up a fork and ate a bite of the quiche. The crust was flaky and delicate, the flavors perfectly balanced despite the generous portion of...crab meat.

Besides the decadent portions, Black seemed to have a fixation on including crab in every meal. Sivan was growing a little sick of it, despite the fact that everything the pirate fed him was delicious. He wondered if Black was playing some strange game of culinary revenge on the caecean lord that speared Sivan.

The thought of caeceans reminded him yet again of the disappearance of his nurse. “Any word on Lusa and Palis?” He asked, watching Black’s expression carefully.

“I’m afraid we have not been able to locate them, my lord,” the pirate answered, his voice at least *sounding* genuine.

At first, Sivan had thought Lusa been busy taking care of his cousin, and Palis refused to get near the Blackwater, so it was possible she was avoiding anyone associated with it.

But...

The visit from Brand had kindled the unease Sivan was feeling around this whole situation. He was overjoyed to be reunited with the pirate, but something seemed off about him. Something Sivan could not figure out.

“That is a shame. We should really find them and give them a proper thank you. I would not be here without them.”

Black gave him a soft smile, placating but devoid of warmth. “We do not need them,” he said.

Sivan’s mouth hung open for a moment before he found his voice. “What are you saying, Black? Why haven’t I seen anyone from the Blackwater? Brand had to sneak in here —”

“You saw Brand?” Black’s expression darkened. “He should not have come in here.”

“Yes, I saw him!” Anger and fear rose in his throat in equal parts. “He is your *friend*, Black. He wanted to make sure I was even alive! What in the heavens is going on?”

Before Black could respond, the cart suddenly shook and clattered. The dessert dishes Black had left on there crashed to the floor, cream and berries spilling onto the floor.

An orange caecean claw snapped out of the fine white cloth covering the cart, and Lusa tumbled out gracelessly.

“You-!” Black hissed, and before Sivan could register what was happening, the pirate drew his sword and slashed at his poor nurse.

But instead of any cry of pain or the horrible wet noise of the black saber rending into flesh, a simple *‘tbunk’* ended the attack. Black’s sword had harmlessly bounced off the caecean man’s hard skin. The pirate look so surprised that it hadn’t worked that he was unprepared when one of Lusa’s claws grabbed his sword in a vice grip.

“Oh, you’ll have to try much harder than that if you want to kill me,” Lusa said before fiercely closing his claw on the sword,

causing it to snap in half.

Black looked furious, and threw his broken sword on the floor. The cacean man ignored him and pulled his medical bag out from under the cart.

“Who do you think you are?” Black seethed, green magic beginning to crackle around his fingers. At the same time, Sivan felt the same hot thread tugging on the siren heart inside his chest.

“I am his *nurse*,” Lusa snapped. “And you will not deny him medical attention any longer. So back off!”

The orange man slipped by the enraged siren and took his seat next to Sivan. Black raised his hand, magic gathering in his palm.

“Black, stop!” Sivan shouted sternly. The man’s face faltered, and for a brief moment he turned back into the pirate who cried whenever Sivan yelled at him. But after a moment, he turned away. Black picked up the pieces of his broken sword, and used the magic in his hands to fuse them back together before sheathing the blade.

Sivan let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

“Good evening, Mr. Montgomery,” Lusa said pleasantly. “I apologize for the lack of medical care in my absence. I was so *rudely* denied entry.”

“I’m so sorry, Lusa,” Sivan said to him before snapping his eyes back on the pirate. “Black, what have you been doing? I *told* you that Lusa can be trusted.”

Black crossed his arms over his chest, glaring down at the cacean nurse who was ignoring him as he sifted through his medical bag. “You don’t need more medical care. I’m taking care of you.”

Sivan pushed up his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose, groaning in frustration. “You aren’t a *nurse*, Black. And Lusa

saved my life. You should treat him with more respect.”

Black huffed, still glowering.

“What on earth is that?” Lusa asked, eyes fixed on the shadowy hand Sivan had used to push up his glasses.

“Oh, um. Siren magic, I guess?” He held the hand out for the nurse to inspect, but Lusa kept his own hands firmly on his medical bag.

“...I can’t examine your wound like that,” Lusa said after a long moment. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but kept it to himself for once.

“Ah, right-” Sivan looked toward Black pleadingly. He half expected the now surly man to throw a tantrum over this, but he snapped his fingers and the thread of hot magic running from Sivan’s shadow hand to his heart snapped. He gasped when it happened, not realizing that the hot vein of magic had been there at all.

Lusa glanced at him, the same look of holding something back crossing over his face. “Thank you,” the nurse said to Black, who stormed off to the other side of the infirmary to pout. He plopped down in a chair, glare sharp even from across the room. Lusa refocused on Sivan’s arm, peeling off the old bandages. Sivan hissed as pain flooded his senses. Whatever magic that had given him the shadowy arm had also dulled his sense of pain in the physical part of his arm.

“When was the last time these were changed?” Lusa asked, angry. “Your wound is inflamed.”

Sivan looked down and saw that the stump that the nurse had so carefully been taking of care during his imprisonment was now angry and red. The stitches that were so close to being taken out before were now biting into his skin. Lusa silently snipped out the stitches, and Sivan had to bite back a scream with each one he pulled out. “You’re lucky the wound didn’t reopen,” Lusa

mumbled as he worked.

After the stitches were taken out, Lusa cleansed his arm with a liquid that burned almost as much as the stitches had. But he then followed it up with a white cream that began to soothe the pain.

“I thought you said you didn’t know how to treat human infections,” Sivan said.

“It’s not infected, just irritated. But it very well could have gotten infected.” Lusa huffed out a breath, irritation in his voice as he chided them. “Why has this gone untreated? Just throwing siren magic over it to numb the pain isn’t going to make it better.”

Sivan hesitated, glancing at Black, who was glaring at the floor. “Um, there were more...pressing wounds.” His left hand subconsciously went to his chest; Lusa’s eyes followed him there.

“...Palis says Kaerius speared you through the heart,” Lusa started. “I assumed she was mistaken, since your pirate captain wouldn’t be guarding a corpse like a madman, right?”

Sivan wasn’t sure about that. Black wasn’t taking him being *injured* well, he could only imagine the madness that would have taken him over had he really died. He glanced towards Black again, who gave him nothing. Sivan wasn’t sure if he should be telling everyone about this, but he trusted Lusa, and the caecean nurse was stubborn enough to find out one way or another.

“Well, you’re both right, in a way,” Sivan said as he tugged down the buttons of his shirt to reveal the red scar of the Y-incision. It had healed over preternaturally fast, Black explained that it was because it was so close to his heart, and the siren organ would bleed out some of its powers here and there.

Lusa looked down at him with wide, frowning eyes. He darted his attention towards Black, who’s shirt was low cut enough to reveal the edges of the same red Y-incision.

“Ohh,” Lusa breathed, his eyes settling on the siren sharply.

“You *cut out your heart*.” He said it clipped syllables, each one more derisive than the next.

Black’s whole body seemed to seethe with barely contained outrage. “So? What do you know of it?” He asked darkly, daring the caecian man to actually answer.

Lusa smiled, tilting his head to the side. “Oh, I’ve been friends with a poorly tempered siren for years. I’m not afraid of one without a heart.” He said it as if Black were beneath him, as if this made him less of a siren.

The pirate just scowled at Lusa, glaring at him as if he’d been the one who had stabbed Sivan.

“Can you both please calm down? All this anger is bad for my recovery,” Sivan pleaded, exhaustion creeping into him through the tense air.

Lusa turned back to him, closing up his medical bag. As he did, he leaned in, speaking quietly, just to Sivan, although Black could surely hear him. “I am happy you survived, but you must be careful around him now. He exchanged more than his heart when he saved you.”

Sivan watched Lusa leave without another word. He had no idea what the nurse meant, but a pit of dread formed in his gut, right beneath the heart that Black had given him.

“Black, come here.” Sivan’s words were tight, commanding. It was the tone he’d been taught to use by his etiquette tutors, to address servants who had done something wrong. He hated that he used it, but he knew his former attendant would know to take it seriously.

Yet all that he got in response was a cold stare from stormy green eyes. It took a moment for Sivan to recover, for the chill that ran through him at having Black look at him like that was neither expected or pleasant. He suspected this was the Black that fueled the tall tales about the *dreaded demon pirate lord, Captain*

Black.'

"Nereus," Sivan tried again, softer.

This time, Black closed his eyes, sighing, and peeled himself off from the chair. He was at Sivan's bedside in a few strides, and, without saying anything, took hold of his right arm. Pale fingers brushed along the outer edges of Sivan's shoulder, down to the barrier of his inflamed stump. Skipping over the injury, Black conjured another shadowy right arm for him. Once again, He felt the hot strings of magic flicker alive from his chest. Sivan flexed the shadowy fingers a few times, allowing the reformed limb to adjust its response to his command.

Black began to pull away, but stopped when Sivan's shadowy hand grabbed his arm.

"Black," Sivan switched back to his pirate name, his tone softer. "What is going on? Have you been barring anyone from seeing me?"

There was a long pause from the pirate before he muttered, "am I not allowed to protect what is mine?"

"What?" Sivan gasped, not sure if he'd heard him right. The pirate's words from before echoed in his mind: *'I am going to lock you away so you can never escape me again.'*

"I mean-" Black turned towards him, placing a gentle hand on Sivan's shadowy one. "You are extremely vulnerable right now. I am merely being cautious."

Sivan could feel the warmth of the man's hand, reassuring and heavy on his own. It soothed him, made him realize this was the same Black he'd come to love, in spite of Lusa's words of warning.

"I understand. I am in no position to defend myself. But that is all the more reason to *rely* on our allies."

Black made a sour face. "The caecean nurse is not my ally."

"Then what of Brand? He had to sneak in here too," Sivan

shot back.

The pirate's sour face shifted into a pout. He knew Sivan was right. "...perhaps I have been a little overprotective."

That was all Sivan was getting out of the man for now. If he berated him further, Black would stop listening to him. He didn't want to push the topic of his own safety right after the pirate almost lost him for good.

Sivan picked up the fork and motioned for the pirate to take it. "I am a little tired after that. Perhaps you should feed me once more."

The embarrassment Sivan felt at being fed paled in comparison to the contentment he felt when Black's face lit up with a grin. He settled in next to Sivan's bed and started to feed him.

He knew Sivan was indulging him, yet the man's face was still soft with contentment. It calmed Sivan's own nerves, seeing Black like this.

Yet the dark in his eyes did not fully recede. Lusa's words echoed in his mind, leaving a lingering sense of dread.

'He exchanged more than his heart when he saved you.'

Chapter 10

The Bloated Isles

To Black's credit, he did relent and allow Sivan visitors after the incident with Lusa. Although it was never without Black as an observer, especially when the caecean nurse came to check Sivan's wounds. So there was little opportunity for Sivan to ask Lusa more about what he'd meant about Black.

But, Sivan was getting stronger. Much faster than he'd anticipated. He'd recently managed to get out of bed and walk around the infirmary, much to Black's dismay.

"What if you fall?!"

"What? Is the heart going to tumble out of my chest if I do?" Sivan had shot back with a laugh.

Black had made a noise like he thought that was a real possibility and scooped up an irate Sivan and put him back in bed.

Now, Sivan was alone in the infirmary. Black had left him to go make lunch, locking the door on his way out. Still no visitors

without his pirate protector.

But, that did not mean Sivan couldn't unlock it from the inside.

He carefully got out of bed, not wanting to actually fall and support Black's point. Sivan's body still ached at any large movement, but it had been two weeks since he'd woken up, and he was beginning to feel restless.

He slowly made it to the wardrobe he'd seen Black fill with clothes for him. It still primarily consisted of clothes Black had recovered from the Spear, but Sivan noticed several new garments in his size. He felt the fine woolen border to an unfamiliar jacket, the silver threads of embroidered waves flitting across his finger. Was it something Black had found here in the caecean lord's manor, or was it something he'd purchased for him during his absence?

Sivan swallowed the ache that welled up inside him at the second thought and took the jacket out of the wardrobe. He slipped it on and noted how it was a little large on his frame. At first, Sivan thought Black must have purchased the wrong size, but then he saw himself in the mirror. He was now a much thinner man than he remembered before his capture. Sivan had been fed properly during his underwater captivity, but he rarely felt the motivation to actually eat what he was served. He'd regained his appetite now that he had Black's cooking to contend with, but he had also nearly died. There was a tinge of pallor over his reflection in the mirror. Sivan could only guess what he had looked like two weeks prior.

He buttoned up the lower half of the jacket, and realized that it would have fit perfectly to his measurements pre capture. Which, of course Black would have memorized. Sivan flushed, remembering all the times the man had wrapped his hands around his waist while murmuring nonsense about how his

fingers could almost touch. It wasn't his fault the pirate's hands were so large.

Sivan slipped out of the infirmary and was greeted with another long granite hallway. Why was it that nobility seemed to revel in large stretches of nothing? They liked to take up space just for the sake of taking it up.

He wandered down the hallway, shivering a little at the chill of his bare feet on the cold granite floor. It was smooth as glass, polished to a sheen so perfect Sivan could see himself in it.

At the junction of another hallway, a caecean woman carrying bolts of fabric passed in front of Sivan.

"Oh, hello!" He greeted, trying to sound pleasant. Her black eyes widened substantially at the sight of him, and she almost dropped a bolt of purple velvet.

At that, she stepped back and bowed as deeply as she could over the fabric. She said something in Uncharted, then realizing her mistake, corrected to "may lorgh," in broken common tongue. And then she scurried off down the hallway.

"Well, that was weird." Sivan blinked a few times, cursing himself for never being able to master the Uncharted language. Yet she'd made an attempt to speak to him in the common tongue. She must have picked up the title from hearing Black use it over and over. Sivan felt bad for scaring her, and she'd been so polite call him by that even if it was no longer his title.

Still, she was the first sign of life he'd seen since leaving the infirmary, so he decided to see where she was headed, hoping to find someone who could direct him towards the Blackwater.

He followed the caecean woman to a more ornate hallway. There was a plush rug on the floor, and ornate carvings of wave-like filigree decorated the granite pillars that arched up into the high ceilings.

She joined a group of caeceans surrounded by more bolts

of fabric, open books of colors and swatches, vases, and marble statues of every variety. There were three more caeceans holding up their chosen fabric or statue and harassing one very flustered silver-haired pirate.

“Oi, like I keep tellin’ ye, I ain’t makin’ no fancy pants decisions. Ye’ll ‘ave te wait fer tha captain,” Brand said while attempting to back away.

The caeceans kept on him, one continuously asking him the same thing in Uncharted. One seemed to know common, and pressed into Brand, “He will not do. He has no sense for the visual harmony of the manor. We need to speak with the lord.”

“Well, I- uh- I can’t help ye tha--”

“Brand!” Sivan called, feeling sorry for the old man. If there was a caecean who spoke common, maybe he could help out.

Brand’s face went pale the moment he saw Sivan. When the caeceans saw him, they had the same wide eyes as the first woman he’d run into. Then they were on Sivan in an instant.

“My lord, what color scheme do you prefer for the great hall?” The caecean who knew common asked. He shoved a book full of colors into Sivan’s face for a moment before another caecean pushed him away.

“Bird or fish?” they asked, holding up statues of a bird and fish. They said something in Uncharted, and then repeated, “bird or fish?”

The statues were also pushed out of the way by bolts of heavy fabrics wielded by the third caecean, who was the woman he’d run into. She said absolutely nothing, her knowledge of the common tongue strictly limited to the ‘may lorgh’ she’d used before.

Both the statue and fabric caeceans were then pushed aside for the first caecean to return with his book. “I’ve selected these palettes to accentuate your skin and hair, although now that I’m

seeing you closer and not covered in blood, I may have to adjust them.”

Sivan balked at the onslaught of caeceans and decisions he was presented with. “Wh-what? Why do you want my opinion?”

The color swatch caecean blinked at him in return, confusion clear on his face. “Surely my lord wants to pick the colors for his own throne room?”

“*What?*” Sivan’s tone was sharper this time.

Their attention was drawn to a light cackle approaching them from within the great hall they were evidently next to.

“Oh, no. I can’t watch this any longer,” Lusa laughed. He came over to Sivan and pushed him back a step, putting himself between his patient and the eager caeceans. A few back and forth lines of *Uncharted* had the trio sighing and putting down their options before they walked away.

Lusa turned on Sivan with an amused glint in his eye. “What was that about?” Sivan asked him.

“Oh, I just told them not to bother my patient until you’re fully recovered.” Lusa eyed him, peering at his chest to get a look at the scar poking out of his collar. “Although, I must say I’m pleasantly surprised to see you out and about already.”

“I was getting restless,” Sivan huffed. “But that’s not what I meant. Why were they so eager to get my opinion? And what was that about a throne room?”

Lusa’s brows raised in surprise the same time his eyes curved further up in amusement. “Ohh, no one’s told you yet. Or should I say our dear *pirate captain* hasn’t told you, since he’s been the one keeping you captive in the infirmary.”

Sivan ignored the nurse’s comment about Black and returned to his questioning, although a nagging dread was forming in his stomach. “What haven’t I been told, Lusa?”

“You know, as much as I’ve learned about humans, the

strangest thing to me has been how they pass on their positions of power through lineage. How do you know if the next in line will be strong enough to be a good ruler? They were just given the title, they didn't earn it."

"Lusa, get to the point," Sivan snapped at him.

The man grinned, sharp teeth glinting. "Uncharted positions of power are passed down through conquest. Sometimes it's merely symbolic, but more often than not, rulers are succeeded by the same person who killed them."

There it was. The dread manifested.

Sivan pinched his brow. "So, because I killed Lord Kaerius..."

Lusa nodded. "*You* are now the lord of the Bloated Isles..." He stepped back and gave a smooth and practiced bow to Sivan. "...my lord."

Sivan felt the hall spin around him. "Great heavens — I need to sit down." He felt Lusa's hand guide him to a chair.

It was an uncomfortable chair.

Sivan opened his eyes and saw his faithful nurse had led him to the very throne centered in the back of the room the three caeceans were trying to decorate. There were swaths of deep purple curtains and banners in the process of being taken down. Green, silver, and gold taking their place. The color caecean's presumed palette for Sivan.

"I'm going to be sick," Sivan grumbled.

"Oh, come on, you look plenty well," Lusa laughed. "Of course, I'll have to give you a proper exam before allowing you to take on all that paperwork."

"*Paperwork?*" Sivan hissed.

"Oodles, my lord. Unfortunately, this title you've come into is not one most Uncharted want. Kaerius was strong, but there were very few attempts on his life since the Bloated Isles is the

premier trading port for all of Uncharted territory. Which comes with a fair amount of work and very little prestige.”

Sivan glanced at the gilded arms of the throne he now sat upon. “This must be a profitable position to hold. No one wanted it?”

Lusa looked at him pityingly, his amused smirk dulling a bit. “Most Uncharted don’t value wealth the same way humans do. So, although the isles make a pretty penny for the lord as a port, none but Kaerius were willing to put up with the work.”

“Can I opt out?” Sivan groaned. He was trying to end a war, he didn’t need *more* responsibility.

“Absolutely not,” Lusa sing-songed.

“Great, great, great.” He was a lord again. Before, he had very little duty as the third child of the earl aside from marrying whoever was chosen for him. Of course, Sivan had been educated in the ways of lordship just as his sisters had been. So he had some idea of what was expected. Although, there was sure to be some great twist on the whole situation as was the Uncharted’s apparent custom.

“Hold on,” Sivan breathed, realizing something. “Does that mean I work for Jhaeros now? Is that why he hasn’t sent the hoards after us?”

Lusa nodded, pleased Sivan made the connection. As if he was a proud teacher. “Indeed. Jhaeros won’t dare make an attempt to capture or assassinate you as long as you sit on the Bloated Isles throne. Too much of the Uncharted economy relies on the port. It would be chaos for the realm if the port were out of operation. One of the most affected would be Jhaeros himself, since his entire precious human diet comes from here. Who else would deliver bread to the bottom of the ocean?”

Right, Lusa had said as much when they hijacked the dry ship. “Lusa,” Sivan started, narrowing his eyes at the sunny

caecean man, practically swimming in amusement. “Did you plan this? It’s *very* convenient that we chose the linchpin of the Uncharted empire the same night the Blackwater made their move.”

Lusa laughed, though his smile did not reach his eyes this time. “Oh, I am not clever enough to pull off something like that. I merely reasoned that if we were to find refuge, this would be the best place to do it. I certainly didn’t expect you to drive a seaglass spear into the reigning lord’s head.”

“*Indeed*,” Sivan muttered. He did in fact think Lusa was *plenty* clever enough to pull off exactly that. To the point that, maybe not Sivan, but *someone* killing Kaerius and inheriting his throne was what the entire escape plan had been counting on.

In the end, it didn’t matter. Sivan had regained his status as a noble. Albeit not of Grenaldian nobility, or even of the human kind. And he was not entirely pleased about it. He already had his hands full trying to recover and end this war. Now, he had the added responsibility of an Uncharted lord...not that Sivan fully understood what that was.

Sivan’s shadowy arm slipped when he tried to rest it on the arm of the throne. He fully took in the ornately carved seaglass seat for the first time, realizing just how large the throne was. Of course, it had to be big enough to fit the behemoth that was Kaerius.

“This throne is too big for me,” he mumbled absently to himself, still a little stunned by the whole situation.

“Not to fear, my lord,” an elderly caecean in glasses reassured him as he approached with yet another book of what Sivan feared was more color swatches. “You’ll grow into it.”

Sivan blinked at him, not comprehending. “Sorry? I’m pretty sure I’m done growing. Humans never get as large as Kaerius did.”

The elderly caecean frowned for a moment. “Caeceans don’t either...but the Bloated Isles throne bestows upon it great power. You will grow, just as all our other lords have.”

A nagging sense of horror toyed at Sivan. He looked at Lusa, who was suppressing a cackle. “But I won’t, because I’m human, right?”

Lusa swallowed his laughter enough to shrug with all four arms before leaning against a pillar to watch the scene with that damn amused grin.

“*I won’t because I’m human, right?*” Sivan asked his nurse again, his nagging horror growing.

“My lord, do you want the throne gilded in silver or gold?” The elderly caecean man continued, heedless of Sivan’s distress. He opened his book, which was apparently a ledger. “I must know how much to pull from the treasury so we may order it.”

“Sorry, what? What need would there be to *gild* the throne? It seems unnecessary, it’s fine as it is,” Sivan replied.

The old caecean frowned again, looking at Sivan for a long moment, as if no lord had ever said this to him before. “But what are we to do with the funds?”

“There’s a *throne gilding fund?*”

“Of course.”

“Then, I don’t know, use it to buy resources for the isles. Or, perhaps there’s a public project that needs some kind of boost,” Sivan said, trying to remember what on earth he ever did as a lord other than fight and be sold off for marriage.

“I will...ask,” the elderly caecean responded slowly, closing the ledger.

“Lusa mentioned there was paperwork, I’m assuming there’s an unattended stack of documents growing larger each day I’m in the infirmary. Where is it?”

The elderly caecean looked at him for another long moment,

presumably still figuring out if this new lord was all there in the head. “I should hope they’re in the infirmary. Your consort has been taking them to you to review, yes?”

Sivan felt his jaw click. “My *consort*?”

A dark figure carrying a large silver tray caught Sivan’s attention.

“Black!”

The man jumped, the contents of the tray jostling so much a bowl of soup tipped over, the fine porcelain bowl shattering on the floor with a crash. Black had taken to delivering all Sivan’s meals on trays instead of the traitorous dining cart that had helped Lusa sneak in. “M-my lord?” he asked, shock making his voice higher than usual.

“You’ve been keeping something from me, haven’t you?”

Sivan narrowed his eyes at him from atop his lordly throne.

Black’s eyes grew wider at the sight of Sivan on the throne, out of bed. It only took a second for his expression to grow serious, outrage evident on his face. “You should be in bed, my lord.” He set the tray down on a side table, nearly knocking over the vase on top of it, and stormed across the great hall.

Three caecean guards were suddenly in front of Sivan, pointing their serrated seaglass spears at the pirate. Black was taken off guard for a moment, but that did not stop him from practically growling at them. Green magic sparked around him. The guards, to their credit, did not flinch.

“Stop it, all of you!” Sivan shouted. The guards backed off immediately, taking their places next to Sivan. He hadn’t even noticed they were there before.

Black took longer to cool down. He was clearly considering if he could kill the guards without hitting Sivan. But the magic dissipated, and Black remained where he was in the center of the hall.

“Everyone out. I have to talk to my *consort*,” Sivan ordered, using his best commanding lord voice.

The room cleared out except for Black, who stepped up to the throne and bowed mockingly. “You sound like your father.”

Sivan’s jaw clicked again. “I *sound like* someone who has been lied to and kept borderline captive for two weeks! What in the heavens is going on, Black?”

The man stood straight and ignored his question. “I never lied to you. I was merely keeping the burdens of a lordship away from you so you wouldn’t be taxed further. And *captive* is a strong word. I was just ensuring you would not be bothered while you recovered.”

“Well, I’m bothered now,” Sivan huffed. He leaned over his lap and tried to rub out the oncoming headache from his temple with his thumbs. “I didn’t want to inherit my father’s estate when I actually *was* a lord. Yet here I am, caeceans and all.” A moment passed before Sivan heard Black’s boots clacking across the hall. Warm hands gently took his hands away from his face, and he was met with Black kneeling before him.

“This burden is not yours to bear alone. I will help you, just as I always have.” The man’s voice was liquid soft, pulling Sivan away from anger and frustration. Yet Black’s eyes were still cold, untouched by the tender tone.

“You do too much. Have you really been doing all my paperwork on top of caring for me?” Sivan murmured.

Black smiled and once again ignored the question. “It’s nothing I can’t handle. Now, please come back to bed, my lord. You should be resting.”

Sivan relented, letting the pirate help him from the throne. Black stooped, attempting to pick him up, but Sivan batted him away. “I can walk on my own. I’m sure I’ve already made a terrible first impression on my subjects.”

Black made a disapproving sound, but settled on giving Sivan his arm to take for support.

“Will you at least bring the paperwork to me in bed? I am growing mad while stuck there, at least it will give me something to do.”

The pirate made a quieter disapproving sound, but did not reject Sivan outright. “I shall if it will stop you from getting out of bed.”

“Isn’t that your job, *consort*?”

Black’s chuckle rumbled through his chest. Sivan could feel it through the bicep he had his shadowy hand hooked around.

Chapter 11

The Bloated Isles

Trading port.

That's what Lusa had called it.

But, after confronting the deluge of paperwork Black had finally agreed to bring him, Sivan no longer saw the Bloated Isles as a mere *'trading port.'* The sheer amount of goods that went through the spit of isles must have been enough to supply all of the Uncharted people several times over. Merchants came from all over the sea just to do business there. Sivan had asked for a map of Uncharted lands just so he could make sure they weren't making up point of origins.

For, despite the moniker, the Uncharted lands were in fact charted. Just, not by any human, and all of the maps were in the Uncharted language. Black had helped him translate them, and Sivan had redrawn a map with most of the major cities in the common tongue. It was likely the first of its kind, and Sivan was using it to resolve trading disputes.

He looked at the documents translated into broken common text. Of course the paperwork had been presented to him in their original Uncharted language, so Sivan had one of the overly helpful caecean accountants translate them for him. But, while her handle on the common language had been particularly great while speaking, it did not hold up to translation on paper.

"I'm going to have to learn Uncharted, aren't I?" Sivan groaned.

"I'm afraid so, my lord," Black said over the clamor of running water. He was preparing a bath for Sivan in the newly sized down bathtub. Sivan had convinced Black that he would be able to recover just as well in the lord's chambers he was now entitled to. But, said chambers had been built for someone Kaerius's size, and it had taken a combination of convincing his new caecean subjects that he would not in fact grow into the room, and a fair bit of magic from Black to make the room more human-sized.

The bath was still far too large. Steam rose up from a great circle of water set into the center of the floor, the tap water heated by Black's magic. But it was at least *smaller* than before, so it didn't take a literal day to fill. Yet it was still large enough for a siren to lounge in, should he be so inclined.

"But you are so good with languages, my lord," Black said, turning off the tap.

"Sure, but my gift starts and ends with human languages. I've tried learning Uncharted several times. The words just don't fit around my tongue right."

"That seems unlikely, you have quite the talented tongue," Black said with a smirk. "Ah, the bath is ready, my lord."

Sivan ignored the comment about his tongue and stood up from his desk, trying to mask the ache of pain that still haunted him. He walked over to the bath while attempting to undo the

many buttons of his shirt. The moment he was within Black's reach, the man was taking the shirt out of his hands and undoing the buttons for him.

"You don't have to," Sivan protested without any real heart to it.

"But I will anyways," Black said, as he always did. The man had taken to undressing Sivan like this, carefully undoing each button and tie one at a time. Sivan had found that his shirts had gotten more complicated recently. Sometimes it felt like they came with more buttons than stitches.

"I thought you would've picked up Uncharted while you were cracking sirenath," Black said as he worked his way down the first line of buttons.

"Oh, I have picked up a few phrases here and there. The language is complicated, but not insurmountable on paper. But..."

"But...?"

"But I like to learn to speak languages the same time I learn to write them. It helps solidify my grasp of the language as a whole."

"So you just have problems speaking it?"

Sivan hummed, rolling the issue around in his mind first. "Well, more or less. I never got very far with my self-taught lessons since I'd get so frustrated trying to pronounce the simplest of words."

"You know, you have a perfectly qualified teacher right here." Black pressed his hand to his own chest.

"You? Black, you're already working so much."

"And spending time with you would not be work. It'll be just like we're trying to decode the seal again."

Sivan smiled and leaned up on his toes to give the pirate a kiss. "I'd like that."

Black finished disassembling Sivan's shirt and carefully folded it on a table. Then there was a tug at his own shirt. He turned to find Sivan, naked, one foot in the bath. Steam curled up around his slim frame.

"Join me?" Sivan asked, his ears burning red. He blamed it on the heat of the water and not the fact he'd completely forgotten how to be forward with Black. The pirate had coaxed it out of him before with how audacious he always was in bed. Anything Sivan did was reserved by comparison. But Black hadn't touched him since they'd been reunited, and Sivan found himself hungering for an intimacy more intense than mere chaste kisses.

Black blinked a few times before the surprise on his face gave way to a grin. "Gladly, my lord."

The water was a little too warm, but Sivan sank into it nonetheless. He wanted to hide his embarrassment a little, even if the clear water did nothing to actually disguise him. Black undressed, taking much less time than he took with Sivan's shirt. Sivan covertly watched him from the bath, convincing himself the steam hid his wandering eyes.

When he'd woken up from his near death experience, Black had looked much thinner than when Sivan had left him in Estes' tomb. But after a few short weeks of Sivan making sure Black ate with him at least once or twice a day, the man was starting to look more like his old self. They both had needed to do some recovering.

Black entered the bath rather quickly, the water splashing up over the sides a little. His skin started to grow dark the moment his feet touched the surface, scales populating all over his legs and up his waist. When he had both legs under the water, the transformation truly began. His tail unfurled into the bath with a few sickening cracks of bone. Sivan winced sympathetically with

the sounds, but Black didn't seem to have any reaction at all. He remembered when Jhaeros had turned in the memory; it had looked so painful. But Black took it without so much as a frown.

Water splashed over the edge of the bath, flooding the grates built into the floor surrounding the rim. Black curled his tail around underwater, encircling Sivan with thousands of black opalescent scales.

He opened his arms to Sivan. "Come here."

Sivan did not need to be told twice, and gladly let Black take him into his arms and maneuver him against his chest. Strong arms encircled Sivan, keeping him close against the weight of the water. He let his head rest against the crook of Black's neck, his legs canted alongside the smooth curve of the siren's tail. It was intimate and perfect.

Silver hair clung to Black's chest, and the pirate plucked up a lock to twirl around a finger. "Your hair really has gotten longer," he murmured.

"I haven't had the opportunity to cut it," Sivan hummed.

"As I said before, it suits you."

"Oh," Sivan blinked, the memory of the dream coming back to him. "So those really were dreams we shared."

"Yes," Black nodded, rubbing his nose against Sivan's hairline. "The handprint I marked you with created a bond between us. And our...coupling made the link stronger."

Sivan remembered the sweet residual slick that came from Black's siren magic, and how he'd swallowed it countless times. Every time he had, there had been a flush of memories, of emotion, desire. Black would press into his mind like he would with his body. It made sense that it could manifest in dreams even when they were leagues apart.

"I was so sure my mind was just giving me a place to escape to. Had I known we were really together in those dreams,

perhaps we could have been reunited sooner.”

“Perhaps,” Black said with a frown. “I didn’t realize our bond had grown that strong. I didn’t realize it myself until I used it to reach into Jhaeros’s mind.” He traced his hand along the translucent shadow of Sivan’s enchanted arm. “Which I regret doing.”

Sivan brought his shadowy arm up to cup Black’s face. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Black smiled at him, but there was no real warmth to it. Nothing Sivan could say could sway that kind of guilt. He knew that all too well.

“When he cut off your arm, he also cut the bond. But that kind of thing isn’t so easily broken.” Black took Sivan’s hand from his face and held it in his own, rubbing his thumb into the palm in a distracting way. “My heart ticking away in your chest should have rekindled it to a degree.”

Sivan shivered, the motion of Black’s thumb on his shadowy palm was far more sensual than it had any right to be. He felt heat in his gut, pleasure unfurling from his chest. A sensation he had not even thought of in months.

“Shall we put it to the test?”

Black’s brow raised for a moment before a toothy grin took over his expression. “Oh, my lord, I am not sure if you have recovered enough to take that.”

“I feel fine,” Sivan said, too quickly.

Black hummed, swirling his thumb over Sivan’s palm again. “Nothing would make me happier, but I’m afraid I must stand firm. I do not want to hurt you.”

Sivan couldn’t help the pout that slipped onto his face.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Black laughed lightly. “I would not deny you of other pleasures, my lord.”

“You are enjoying the fact that my title has been reinstated

too much.”

“Immeasurably.”

Black let go of his palm to dip his hand under the water and squeeze the inner meat of Sivan’s thigh. Sivan gasped, his cock twitching.

“You’re teasing me,” Sivan groaned. He gasped when Black tugged at his hair to crane his neck back, nipping at the tender skin of his throat.

“I would never.” Black whispered, hot against his pulse.

Skillful fingers danced around the tender inside of Sivan’s thighs before gently taking the head of his hardening cock and rolling the pad of a thumb across the tip. Hot veins of pleasure took him, making Sivan shiver and moan. Black’s took his time working him to fullness, using only the pad of his thumb against his sensitive head. Sivan panicked a little at how quickly this was undoing him. He didn’t want this to end so soon. But it had been so, so long since he’d felt pleasure outside a dream. His time spent as Jhaeros’s captive had only been two months, but it yawned inside him into years of loneliness and grief. It lingered still, so Sivan craved moments like this; intimacy and need to stave off the bitter memories.

Perhaps Black sensed this, for he set a leisurely pace to his hand around Sivan’s cock. His strokes were slow, decadent. He savored Sivan with just his hand.

“Black-” Sivan groaned, his voice already a husky warble of need. His hands grasped at the pirate’s face, bringing him close to smash his mouth against his own. It took a moment for Black to respond, perhaps surprised by the lack of grace from his usually prim lord. But then, with a chuckle, he dove past Sivan’s waiting lips, sharp teeth biting down on his lower lip.

Black picked up the pace of his hand, and Sivan’s moan of protest was swallowed along with the pinpricks of blood drawn

from the siren's teeth. He could feel himself slipping into the steady slope of orgasm. Black's hand, his *teeth*- It all was sending him faster and faster down the hill.

The pirate's other hand gripped his waist, keeping him close. When Sivan tried bucking his hips into the delicious tightness of Black's hand, he was stopped, held in place. It only made him groan louder.

"Black-" he rasped, voice hitching halfway through his name. The man nipped at his neck in response, sharp pins of pleasure intensifying Sivan's need. He thought about stopping it all, begging the pirate to just fuck him over the edge of the bath. He wanted more, but it was also too much-

And then Sivan was coming into Black's hand. His orgasm was wrung out of him, sweet and desperate.

He clung to the siren as he came down from the high, his body tingly and weightless in the water. They kissed, Black's teeth less bitey to give Sivan's swollen lips relief.

"I can- I can return the favor," Sivan suggested, glancing down into the water.

Black paused for a moment. Sivan hoped he was considering whether or not to rescind his ban on more *strenuous* activities, but then the man said, "there is no need, I am not in the mood."

It took another moment for the words to make sense to Sivan. This had never happened; Black was *always* in the mood. Perhaps he was teasing him somehow, but there was not the usual glint in the pirate's eyes. Indeed, there was nothing in his eyes. They were cold and flat, and no matter how much Black affixed his mouth into a smile, no real light ever reached his eyes.

"Okay," Sivan said quietly. He now felt small and insignificant in the man's arms. Even when Black guided him to lay his head down on his broad chest, Sivan did not feel the content warmth he should have.

He grit his teeth, trying to keep the pin pricks of tears from manifesting on his face. It was embarrassing, but this was something he'd come to love about Black. The man always made him feel so *wanted*. Sivan could always see it in the light green sparks of his eyes. Brilliant, hot flashes of the sun that consumed Sivan's being with desire and need.

But that light was gone.

Something had changed. He wasn't sure what had happened, but the Black he had loved was now warped and bent. The pirate may be able to put on a decent act of his former self, but Sivan knew. He was keeping something from him, deep and dark and secret.

Or, at least he hoped Black was hiding some secret.

The alternative was too terrible—

That Black was not hiding anything at all and simply did not want him anymore.

Chapter 12

Another week went by, and there was still no sign that Jhaeros had even heard of Sivan's escape and subsequent takeover of the Bloated Isles. What Lusa had told him was true, of course; the trading port was too integral to the Uncharted economy for Jhaeros to siege outright, but Sivan expected *something* from the obsessive siren king.

Sivan had brought it up with Black, who had not been surprised at all.

"My brother has become deeply untrusting and bitter," Black had said with an equally bitter laugh. "We went diving into his unrestrained mind. I already knew much of what my brother had gone through, but seeing it through his own memories opened my own mind to how lost he's truly become. I pity him to some degree, don't you?"

Sivan nodded silently in agreement.

"Well, Jhae no doubt sensed that pity," Black continued. "It's

not a feeling he's been at the mercy of for many years. I doubt he's keen to experience it again. He left you alone after that night, didn't he?"

Sivan nodded once again.

"There you have it. I'm sure he's still plotting our demise, but he will do so from afar. At least until we force his hand."

"Force his hand?"

Black grinned, sharp teeth gleaming. "When we find the real Corseque of Estes."

This was, in fact, the topic during Sivan's first time back on the Blackwater. It had taken some convincing to get Black to agree to the reunion. He was set on keeping Sivan held as an invalid despite his remarkably swift recovery.

Despite the scowl on her face, Sivan was glad to see Hayes alive and well on the Blackwater. Her dark eyes followed him up the gangplank as he boarded.

"Well, well, the *lorð* has graced us with his presence," she said to him, her tone a mocking drawl as she pushed off the railing of the ship and bowed to him. "It is *lorð* again, right? Seems like you're fated to be one, no matter how hard you try."

"It's good to see you too, Hayes," Sivan responded politely, not taking her bait.

She half groaned, half growled at him before tugging her tricorne hat down so she could sulk more fiercely.

Sivan paused, looking around the ship. There were other crew mates about, cleaning the deck or carrying barrels, but they all gave Hayes a wide berth. In fact, all of them were trying very hard to not look at her whatsoever.

"Is something wrong?" Sivan asked her.

Hayes barked out a gruff laugh. "I'm just not pleased with the company on my ship tonight."

As if on queue, the uneven clank of a seaglass leg against

wood signaled Eliza's arrival on the Blackwater.

"Ahh, it is good to be back on my ship," the sea witch said, arms open wide as she stepped aboard.

Hayes spit bitterly at her, hackles raised. "Not your ship, *witch*."

Eliza smiled, teeth sharper than Sivan remembered. She stepped towards the bristling woman and snatched her chin, forcing her to look up into the icy gleam of Eliza's eyes. "Do not forget the debt you owe me, my sweet."

Hayes practically hissed as she stepped out of Eliza's grasp, her dark eyes like two burning coal fires. The sea witch chuckled and sauntered into the captain's quarters.

"I'm going to skin that woman one day," Hayes growled.

Sivan knew he should probably leave the matter alone, but his curiosity got the better of him. "What debt do you owe Eliza?"

Hayes rounded on him, the ferocity in her face forcing Sivan back a few steps. "*What do you know of debt?*" She spit at the floor again before stomping off to the captain's quarters.

A low chuckle behind him reminded Sivan that Black was lingering on the edge of the ship. "They don't get along."

"I can tell," Sivan sighed. "Do you know what debt Hayes was speaking of?"

"I do." Black turned the answer over in his mouth, clearly considering how much he should tell Sivan. "Hayes was gravely injured when we escaped the prison island. Eliza saved her from death. I doubt she will ever actually try to collect that debt; Eliza just likes holding it over Hayes' head."

Sivan hummed in agreement. He had seen enough of the sea witch's vindictive nature that he did not doubt it. "Is that why Hayes is bound to the Blackwater?"

Black smiled at him, but it was a pitying expression. "Not

quite. Sorry, my lord, but Hayes does not like people to know of her...situation. I fear she would kill us both if I told you."

"Indeed." Quite frankly, both women scared him a little. If they ever had the ability to get along, their combined efforts could have ended the war in a day. Or, more likely, they would end up starting a new war of their own.

Suddenly, Black's face grew sour, his glare burning at the gangplank. "What is he doing here?" He growled.

Sivan looked behind him and saw Lusa boarding the Blackwater, black eyes sparkling as he marveled at the ship. "I invited him, be nice."

"He can't be here. Not on the Blackwater. Not in —"

—*in the captain's quarters*. Sivan completed the sentence in his head. He could not understand Black's hatred towards his nurse. The jealousy was unfounded and irrational, but the pirate had become quite overprotective of Sivan since they'd been reunited. It was understandable, but unfounded nonetheless.

"Lusa worked in the Uncharted castle for years. He knows how Jhaeros operates. His insight could be vital in avoiding him as we search for the corseque," Sivan said, keeping his tone even and calm to soothe the antsy pirate.

"Don't worry, I'm only here to observe. I wouldn't dare step on your toes, *captain*." Lusa gave him a mock salute. Black's lip curled up in a snarl, baring his sharp teeth at the caecean man.

Sivan wanted to smack both of them. "You're not helping," he grumbled at his nurse. Lusa just beamed at him, making Black growl louder. Sivan gave in and smacked both of them before pointing at the captain's quarters. "Come on! Let's get this over with."

After corralling the two men into the door, Sivan was less than pleased to see that Black was pulling out a chair for him at the head of the table. Eliza was at the other end of the table, and

every other seat had been taken up by Hayes, Brand, and Lusa. Sivan did not feel like he should be the leader of this meeting, but it *had* been his idea and he *was* the reigning lord of the isles. He sat begrudgingly, Black taking the seat to his left, Hayes scowling on his right. He noted that Hayes, now digging a knife into the map table, had chosen the seat furthest away from Eliza without having to actually face her.

Everyone looked at Sivan, expecting some great plan. He hoped he had one.

“This war has been going on for nine years. Too long, especially when my— when Grenaldia has been losing the fight for nearly as long. Well, during my imprisonment, I found out why Jhaeros has been letting it drag on for so long: he plans to raze the land into the sea.”

“And how the fuck is he going to do that?” Hayes snarled.

“With leviathans,” Black answered for him.

Sivan heard Hayes’ jaw click.

“Jhaeros showed me the leviathans he has captured. There are...many of them. I have only seen glimpses of their power through visions Eliza has shared, but I have no doubt in my mind that the king will succeed if he is not stopped.”

“It won’t happen,” Eliza interjected. “Even if what you say is true, leviathans cannot step on land. It poisons them, killing them in minutes.”

“*That* is why Jhaeros wants the Corseque of Estes,” Sivan continued. “I translated sirenath tomes while I was held prisoner. They say that the corseque will allow the wielder to control the leviathans, even giving them the power to walk on land without death at their heels.”

“So we have you to thank for this new development,” Hayes seethed, digging her knife deep into the table.

Sivan tried not to let his unease show on his face. He was

aware he was inadvertently the source of this information, even if he had been under duress at the time. “Had I known what I was revealing, I would not have done the translations.”

“What’s done is done,” Black said before plucking the knife out of Hayes’s hand. He plunged the tip into the wide expanse of Uncharted territory on the table’s map. “Jhaeros must be stopped now more than ever. We must find the real corseque before he does.”

“The real corseque?” Lusa asked, looking a little lost.

“Aye, we found Estes tomb months ago, but tha’ mutinous rat Vivianne got ta it first,” Brand supplied.

“I may have helped,” Eliza added, giving a thin smile.

Lusa laughed weakly, shifting away from the sea witch a fraction.

“I’ve heard whispers that Vivianne set up shop in Corsair,” Hayes said. “It’s a costal city in the western continent of Belator. Sounds like she used the Estes fortune to purchase a tidy little casino there.”

Sivan wasn’t sure how Hayes had heard such rumors, being bound to the Blackwater as she was, but the fire in her eyes told him she knew the information to be true.

“Then to Belator we sail,” Sivan declared. “Time is of the essence. It’s only a matter of time before these rumors reach Jhaeros as well, and he will realize that a wealthy former Blackwater pirate must have gotten her hands on Estes’ treasure and therefore the corseque.”

Everyone started arguing at once.

“I won’t allow it. That corseque should remain buried. It’s too dangerous,” Eliza said.

“We should just barge in to this damn Corsair city. If it’s on the coast, my cannons can reach them just fine,” Hayes nearly shouted.

“There is a good chance Jhaeros will not make that connection. If this Vivianne has any brains she will keep her history on the Blackwater a secret. Going to Belator will only draw Jhaeros’s eye there,” Lusa reasoned.

“Aye, we should be at the very least makin’ a better plan. Send me ta Belator country. I’ll bring ye back more reliable information,” Brand offered.

“Are you saying my information’s not reliable?!” Hayes barked.

“Tha’s not-”

“You’re stuck on a ship, my sweet. Birds can only tell you so much.”

“I don’t talk to fucking *birds*—”

“*Quiet, all of you!!!*” Black roared, standing up from his seat next to Sivan. Anger rolled off him in dark waves, the shadows of his form fluctuating and deepening. The room grew darker, tendrils of shadow flaring off the siren’s anger. “I will go Belator to find the corseque. Then I’m going to find my brother and use it to split him in two.” His voice was deep, distorted, his hatred bleeding off like heat from black flames.

The group was dead silent, fear a pallid shock on their faces. Everyone but Lusa was used to Black’s outbursts, but they were never like this. The darkness Sivan had glimpsed in the man’s dead eyes had revealed itself; a sharp and toxic version of the pirate that could not be reasoned with.

Still, Sivan had to try.

He slowly, so slowly, placed his real hand on Black’s trembling arm. His skin was hot, too hot. “Yes, that is the plan. We *all* want to find the corseque. We all have the same goal.”

Black heaved a few deep breaths, coal-dark eyes skating over Sivan as if he did not recognize him. But Sivan did not move, did not take his hand off Black. Then, in an instant, the darkness

folded back into the siren's form. He looked a little stunned, unsure of what had just happened. Black nodded and tried to shake off the daze as the sat back down.

The silence was tense. Sivan knew the others were giving each other concerned glances, but he could not bear to meet them.

"We need to enter the city covertly," Sivan said, trying to break up the tension and steer them back on track. "If we enter cannons blazing, we will assure drawing Jhaeros's gaze."

Hayes huffed, she would not be able to join them even if she agreed with their tactic.

Eliza sighed. "I suppose I can't convince you to leave it alone, will I? Fine, I will lend you what aid I can. Besides, I have a score to settle with Vivianne."

"Remind me again," Hayes started, her voice lightened with amusement. "How did Vivianne get the corseque from you?"

Steel blue eyes twitched, the sea witch subtly seething. "... she drugged my wine."

It was such an obvious method, one so easily avoidable. But Eliza was a powerful witch. No one had even considered poisoning her in years. No one would have dared.

But Vivianne did. And Eliza hadn't seen it coming.

"Right, well, we should depart soon. Like I said, time is of the essence," Sivan said.

"Absolutely not," Black said. Everyone tensed for a moment, but Black's voice was back to normal, the supernatural anger once again contained deep within him.

"What?" Sivan asked. What could be the problem now?

"You're not going," Black said, voice firm.

"Hmm, yes, I'm not sure if you've recovered enough to travel that much," Lusa agreed, although there was a strain of that awful amusement in his voice.

“You’ll just weigh us down,” Hayes said, as if she wasn’t stuck on the ship too.

For a moment Sivan couldn’t say anything, then irritation flared in his throat. “Oh, I’m sorry, do any of *you* speak Belatoran? Hm? *Anyone?*” He looked around the table, knowing very well none of them did. “I didn’t think so. If this is meant to be a covert venture, we will need to talk our way into and through Corsair without drawing attention to ourselves.”

“He has a point,” Eliza said.

“One week.” It was Black, giving Sivan an odd look, as though no one else was in the room. “If you can fully regain your strength in a week, you can go.”

Part of Sivan wanted to bristle, to point out that none of them were in fact in charge of him and he could very well go where he damn pleased. But after Black’s little outburst, Sivan wanted to keep him placated until he could figure out what was going on.

“Fine. We depart in a week.”



The meeting ended, and Sivan hurried Black back to their room in the caecean manor. When they were safely inside and away from prying ears, Sivan turned on him, his face serious.

“What is wrong with you lately?”

“What do you mean?” Black drawled as he shrugged out of his jacket.

Sivan had to reign in his overwhelming urge to smack the man again. “Don’t give me that. What was that outburst on the Blackwater? You’ve been so angry lately, and you haven’t — you haven’t been yourself.”

Black rolled his head to the side to look at him. “Maybe I’ve always been this way, and I’m just tired of hiding it.”

Sivan knew that wasn't true. He knew the bright, hopeful Nereus, and the maddening but endearing Black, and this man was neither of those. "Please, just—" Sivan stepped closer to him. "Tell me what has darkened your heart so I may help you."

Black huffed out an aborted laugh. "Nothing has *darkened* my heart. Yes, I am angry. I am angry at *everything*. I have a right to be angry. My brother took you from me. He took *part* of you. Now I have you back, but— You'll have to forgive me if I cannot just let that go."

The heart in Sivan's chest ached. It was his heart, but it was also Black's. They ached together; the scars had healed but the memories were still hot and fresh in both their minds.

"Okay," Sivan murmured, and took Black's hand in his own. He kissed the calloused knuckles and ran a shadowy finger across his pulse. "I understand, but- Just remember you are not alone. I am here with you. So is everyone on the Blackwater." He left out Lusa. Black didn't need to be reminded of him then. "You don't have to rely on your own strength. We have plenty of anger too, you know."

Black smiled at him, and it was so close to being real Sivan almost convinced himself he didn't still see that simmering darkness in the man's eyes.

"Ah, if you are coming with to Corsair, you will need these—" Black turned away and pulled out a long box he had hidden away in his jacket. Sivan had no idea how he had fit it in there while wearing it, but he supposed that wasn't the most unusual thing he'd seen that night. Black handed the box to them, and just from the weight of it, Sivan instantly knew what it was.

Opening the box, his twin sabers glinted in the moonlight filtering in through the windows. "You kept them," Sivan breathed.

"Always," Black murmured, kissing the top of Sivan's head.

He plucked both sabers out of the box and presented them to Sivan with a flourish. “But this time, please keep them with you.”

Sivan laughed, and took the swords, their filigree handles curving around his fingers with a swelling familiarity. “I will.”

Chapter 13

The Bloated Isles

The next day, swords back in hand, Sivan ignored Black's protests and made his way to the guard's training grounds. The Bloated Isles didn't have an army per se, but Kaerius had made sure the lucrative trading port was always well defended. That had been evident enough during the Blackwater's siege. The pirates had been losing until Sivan killed the caecean lord.

"If you insist on this, would you like me to be your sparring partner today?" Black asked as he followed Sivan up the winding, open stairs to the training grounds.

Sivan wiped the sea spray off his face, but did not pause to look back at the man. "I could barely keep up with you when I had *both* my arms."

"Nonsense, you nearly bested me if I remember correctly," Black said, and Sivan did not need to see his face to know he was grinning.

Sivan scoffed. "Surely not. Brand has agreed to be my

opponent today.” He stopped for a moment and threw the pirate a withering look. “Plus, you cheat.”

The field the guards used to train was a shallow bowl of rock with tiny holes bored through to allow the inevitable spray of seawater to drain back into the ocean. Globes of lichen clung fiercely to the rock, giving some manner of traction to an otherwise slippery arena. Surely it worked well for the caeceans, who were used to living on distended, wet rock, but it was by no means ideal for Sivan. He would have to get a more suitable training grounds built within the manor if he ended up remaining the Bloated Isles lord.

Perhaps one with a lock on the door, he thought, remembering the heated sparring match he had with Black in the castle on Calloway Cay. Then, Black had been a raging heat against Sivan’s lips, rich and burning, and he had not known peace since. He longed for the pirate, for the insatiable terror he could be in bed. But it had been over a week since the one-sided hand job in the bath, and Black still hadn’t touched him.

Maybe a heated sparring match was what they needed to rekindle that fire. But Sivan wasn’t ready to put that to the test, especially when Brand had already agreed to assist him.

He waved at the old Grenaldian man on the field, who was inspecting a practice sword.

“A practice sword, Brand? Would you not prefer your usual weapon?” Sivan asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice. He had wanted to use his own swords. It had been so long since he felt their familiar handles.

Brand chuckled and tossed Sivan a pair of practice sabers similar enough to his own. “Aye, but ye still be th’ Two Headed Viper if I be rememberin’ correctly.”

“I am hardly still worth that title.” Sivan grimaced at his old moniker, and shot a glare towards Black, who he’d confided it to

privately. The pirate just shrugged, but the grin on his face told all.

“Still, I don’ fancy me-self gettin’ cut up today. Practice swords it shall be. Plus...” Brand’s eyes flitted towards Black nervously. “Best be avoidin’ any accidentals, ye understand?”

Sivan understood the older man’s real concern at once. Black wouldn’t react kindly to his newly mended lord being injured. Truthfully, there was still a dark gleam in the siren’s eyes anytime someone looked at Sivan too long. Black would not touch Sivan, but he still guarded him fiercely.

“Of course,” Sivan said to Brand and motioned towards the training field.

In an attempt to shake off the rust in his joints, Sivan took a few moments to go through a few footwork routines. He let the dull practice sabers slice through the air, trying to help his body remember how to fight.

Then he began sparring with Brand. Sivan had thought the old Grenaldian man would be the perfect opponent for him; not as ferocious as Black and more human than the caecean guards who were still convinced he’d drive a seaglass spear through them at any moment.

He’d been wrong.

Brand was a tenacious fighter. What he lacked in ferocity and speed, he made up for in skill and decades of learned instincts. Sivan sparred with him around the field, and time and time again Brand would knock one of the sabers out of his hands with ease. He leaned down to pick his lost saber up.

“Ye ‘ave ta hold on ta yer swords, me lord” Brand teased.

Sivan huffed and went at the old pirate again. But no matter how spot on his footwork was, his right hand was always a second behind. The shadowy hand was incredible magic, but there was a slight delay from command to action.

With a sliding clang, Brand twisted *both* sabers out of Sivan's hand. The force of it surprised Sivan, and he slipped on a patch of exposed wet rock, landing on his ass in damp lichen.

A howling laugh sounded from the other side of the field, letting Sivan know that Lusa had showed up at some point.

"Two-Headed Viper, indeed! Tell me, my lord, do the heads re-attach?" Lusa shouted, amusement high in his voice.

Sivan glowered in the nurse's direction. Palis had arrived with the caecean man, though she lingered near the edge, where the spray of surf curled around her siren tail.

"This damn hand has a delay," he muttered while standing up. "I'm sorry, Brand, I think you're a little too much for me at the moment. I need to go back to basics first." Sivan did not let the Grenaldian man answer before he plucked his blades and marched towards the jovial nurse. "Perhaps *you* could assist me, Lusa?"

"*Me?*" Lusa blinked, black eyes startled. "Oh, no, no. I don't think that's a wise idea—"

Sivan grinned tightly and thrust the hilt of one of his practice swords towards the caecean man's direction. "I insist. You're the only one on my level as a *headless viper*."

Lusa sheepishly took the mock saber with one of his five-fingered hands. He held it like it was poisonous. A viper, indeed.

The caecean man meekly trudged into the field, glancing nervously towards Black's direction. Sivan followed his gaze and saw the pirate glaring daggers at his new opponent. He still didn't understand Black's ire towards Lusa, but perhaps trouncing him in a sparring match would settle the siren's rage.

Sivan had to start the skirmish; Lusa wouldn't budge from where he stood. He used his shadowy hand, figuring it would give the nurse the advantage he needed while letting Sivan practice his timing. Yet the inexperienced man was surprisingly

adept at parrying Sivan's blows. Then, Lusa took him off guard him with a flurry of blows, accurate and effective.

A practice saber was flung across the field. Surprising all, it had been Sivan's weapon, not Lusa's.

A cold but dull point was tipped against Sivan's throat. Lusa smiled, white teeth sharp against the contrast of his orange skin. "Did you really think I survived all those years working in Jhaeros's castle by merely being *clever*?"

Sivan couldn't help but smile and put his hands up in a sign of defeat.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a blur of pitch rushing at them.

Lusa was experienced enough to see the same blur, and threw his sword up just in time to block a great black scimitar from slicing through him. Black was on him like a rabid dog, aggressively slashing at Lusa with wild, unrestrained power.

"Black! Stop!" Sivan shouted, but the pirate did not stop. Even though Lusa had been more experienced with swordplay than one would guess, it was still not enough to have him face off against the demon of the Blackwater. Lusa's sword was flung across the field, somewhere alongside Sivan's. The only thing that kept Black's sword from dealing a killing blow was the hardened claws Lusa used to fend off the attack. Yet soon, Lusa's strength was spent, his arms shaking as he flung off Black's attacks once final time.

It all happened so fast. Sivan only now thought to reach for his own real swords at his hip. But before he could draw them, a blur of white hair and emerald scales snapped across the field with surprising speed.

Then, Black went in for the killing blow. His darkened blade sung through flesh and bone.

"Palis!" Lusa stumbled backwards, black eyes wide with

horror as he saw that the pirate's scimitar had ran through Palis instead of him.

Yet, she was a siren and would not fall that easily. White arcs of magic exploded from her hands, blasting Black across the field. She yanked the weapon out of her chest and tossed it into the ocean.

"Black, stop!" Sivan shouted, stepping towards him, but Black was not there. Pure rage was etched into his face as he pulled himself up, green magic thrumming around him in response. Sivan sagged to his knees, feeling the pull of the magic from the heart in his chest, molten hot in his veins.

A white bolt of an arrow shot towards Black. He caught the arrow, eyes widening with recognition.

Sivan saw that Palis had summoned a white bow of magic. She was already knocking another white lightning arrow into place. A whisper of a memory snagged in Sivan's mind.

The siren that had broken the bridge the day Jhaeros had started his war.

The one who had separated Nereus from Sivan all those years ago.

That had been Palis.

The scorching heat in his chest told Sivan that Black was making the same realization. Green fire blazed around him. Palis loosed another arrow at him. The fire consumed it like a twig. Black started walking towards the other siren, his pace slow but heavy with deadly intent. A great gust plucked his scimitar out of the ocean and placed it back in his hand. The skies above churned into dark, clotted globs of clouds heavy with eerie green light.

Palis sent arrow after arrow, but they did nothing against the raging whips of fire. She looked remarkably calm for someone so clearly outmatched.

A flare of green fire was unintentionally sent towards Sivan, who brought his shadowy hand up to guard his face. Yet it did nothing to him. The magic that created his hand was the same as the green fire, the same magic that was causing an apocalyptic storm to rain fire down on all of the Bloated Isles. Brand and Lusa were dodging out of the way of the fire, clearly feeling its heat, but to Sivan it was harmless.

He realized he was the only one who could stop Black in this moment. He struggled to his feet and made his way to Black. The green fire that pelted him did nothing.

“Nereus—” Sivan reached out with his shadowy arm to touch the pirate’s shoulder.

Black spun, scimitar raging with green fire.

It sliced at his shadowy arm, which dissolved in a flash.

The siren’s dark eyes took a moment to settle on Sivan. Realizing what he’d done, his expression of rage melted into shock, horror.

The moment chilled Sivan. For a second Black had greatly resembled Jhaeros when he’d taken Sivan’s arm. The brothers could not have been more different, but their rage was the same.

The green fire dissipated and the skies lightened. Black’s magic had been stopped.

Sivan shook off the chill and glared at the pirate. “What is *wrong* with you?! You’re out of control, Black!”

The man’s expression turned into a scowl before he turned away from Sivan.

“Where are you going?! Get back here!” But Black marched out of the training grounds, ignoring Sivan’s berating.

Palis helped Lusa pat out the green fire that had singed his clothes. “I’m fine, *you’re* the one who had a sword run through her,” Lusa said with a grimace as he sat down.

“I’ve had worse,” she said simply. Truly, the siren woman

barely looked ruffled despite the vertical tear through her shirt.

“I’m so sorry,” Sivan said, approaching them. “He’s not usually like this. I don’t— I don’t know why he’s become like this. It’s like—”

“Like he’s going mad?” Palis looked at him, steel in her gaze, but still somehow pitying.

“What do you mean?” Sivan asked, but he had a sinking feeling in his gut. “Do you know what’s wrong with him?”

Palis looked away, as if she couldn’t bear to tell this to Sivan’s face. “Sirens can live without their hearts, yes. But it’s a taboo measure, most don’t even dare to consider it. Sirens who take out their hearts change. Any warmth, love, or compassion they had within them before goes with the heart. Black will not get better. He will slowly lose his mind until the heart keeping you alive is put back into his chest.”

These words dropped like a cold pit into Sivan’s stomach. He looked at Lusa, hoping desperately that the nurse would tell him otherwise. It’s all superstition. A myth. Anything.

But Lusa nodded at him solemnly. He’d tried to warn Sivan of this. *‘He exchanged more than his heart when he saved you,’* Lusa had said. Sivan had meant to ask him more about this but never got around to it. Perhaps he’d been avoiding the conversation, hoping it was just his imagination all along.

Without a word, Sivan turned away from them and followed after Black.

He knew it was true but prayed it was false.

His heart, Black’s heart, clenched.

Chapter 14

The Bloated Isles

The door to their chambers felt heavier than it usually did. Black was seated in front of the fire, ornate armchair dwarfed by his sulking form. For a moment, Sivan envisioned he was back on the Blackwater, the pirate captain drying off in front of the stove in his quarters. But the armchair was too nice. This was not the Blackwater, and this was not the same Black as he had been back then.

Sivan approached him wordlessly. Before, he'd been able to call out to Nereus. He'd berated him, reassured him, and Black would turn into a sobbing mess in his arms. It'd been messy, but Sivan knew how to handle that Black.

With this Black, he was lost.

"I'm sorry for attacking you," Black said in a drone, no emotion behind it. He motioned at Sivan to come closer. Sivan did, and he took his missing arm, pulling magic back into the shadowy form of a hand.

Sivan flexed the hand before he used it to cross his arms over his chest, staring down at the pirate. “Just that? You’re not sorry for raining fire down upon this whole place? Or for almost killing Palis and Lusa?”

Black hissed through his teeth and looked away. “People shouldn’t touch what is mine,” he mumbled darkly.

Sivan’s eyebrows shot up. “*Excuse me?*” Irritation lanced up his throat, settling in the back of his mouth. “I’m not your *property*.”

Black stood up with a growl, the ornate chair tipping over. He stepped close to Sivan and jabbed a finger at the Y-incision on his chest. “Is *that* not mine?”

The irritation escaped him in a gasp, replaced by a thick knot of dread. Palis’s words haunted him. If it were true, if Black had been corrupted by the same sacrifice that had saved Sivan’s life... this man was merely an imitation of the one he’d fallen in love with.

Yet he still kept Black’s face. His wickedly handsome face, the same one that had lured Sivan into bed over and over. There had to be something wrong with him, for the dread warped into a hot flare of desire.

As if Black sensed this, he took Sivan’s chin in his hand, gold rings sliding along his throat.

“Are *you* not mine?” he purred, sharp teeth glinting into a grin.

Sivan couldn’t stop his pupils from dilating, his entire body betraying him, screaming at him to say yes, gods yes, to just fuck him, to just *want* him again.

“I...I am yours,” he gasped, despite his best effort to reign in this corrupted need.

Black fisted a hand in his silver hair, yanking Sivan’s head back to devour his lips. His whole body thrummed with want,

gripping the pirate's clothes as the man nipped his way down Sivan's throat.

"You do not need to kill someone to know that," Sivan whispered, praying that the old Black would hear him.

But the siren just growled and sucked angry marks into the tender skin of Sivan's neck. Large hands latched around his hips and held them in place as Black ground his hardening cock against Sivan's own. Pleasure blinded him, and the elation at feeling the man's reciprocated arousal sent all dread out of his mind for the moment. Black wanted him, and Sivan was damned if he was going to deny him now.

"Fuck me, please—" Sivan panted, desperation high in his voice.

Another growl from Black, and Sivan was picked up and carried to the bed. Fabric ripped as his pants were torn open and pulled off, shoes and all. Black's face was open with hard want, needing to possess, to *own*. And it certainly did something for Sivan. He was pliant as Black spread him wide, shoving two slick fingers inside him.

Sivan hadn't seen Black grab oil, perhaps he had magicked it. Regardless, he wasn't thinking of that as thick fingers opened him up roughly, fast and demanding and so, *so* good.

"Black, *please*—"

It wasn't enough, especially when they hadn't done this in months, but at the same time, *it wasn't enough*. Sivan needed him, *now*, and the burn was worth it as Black slid in, full and hot inside him.

The pirate took his legs and splayed Sivan open as he began fucking him, only giving him a few gentle thrusts before he drove into him fast and hard. Black's eyes were fixed on him, dead embers, darker than any night, but hotter than any flame. Self-loathing threatened to quash Sivan's desire even as he moaned

for more. He hated that he was so desperate for this, for him, even if it were a dark shadow of the real Black. It had just been so long, and that familiar heat was something he clung to. That same coal-hot gaze had always burned right through Sivan, whether green or black.

For a moment, as Black was fucking him, as good as it had always been, Sivan could convince himself that this was still the man he loved.

The shell, at least. And he would still love him.

“I love you—ah!” Sivan groaned, high and needly as he came.

There was almost no reaction from Black. Just that heated gaze, completely focused on pleasure and little else. Sivan wondered if the man had even heard him.

Black came inside him with a growl. The grip he had on Sivan’s legs turned painful for a moment, leaving red half-moon indents along his knees. He collapsed on top of Sivan, both of them still panting.

As Sivan came down from his high, he began to feel foul. He so desperately needed that, but he should not have given in to this desire. As he was, Black could only reciprocate in this dark and possessive manner. Sivan needed to bring him back from this edge he was on. A sinister precipice above total madness.

“Palis told me what happens to sirens who take out their hearts,” Sivan whispered to Black. “How they change, eventually go mad.” He tightened his arms around the man, wishing this would all go away. “I can’t watch that happen to you, Black.”

“And I couldn’t let you die,” the pirate murmured against the y-incision on Sivan’s chest. “Sometimes I think of caging you up like Jhaeros did. Keep you safe, so no one can take you from me again. I don’t want to let the world take away more from me than it already has.”

Sivan hesitated to respond. He didn't want that, being a captive again would break him. But it might have been better than watching this happen to Black.

"Would it help?" He asked.

Black sighed. "I think it would make it worse."

He pulled out, his seed making a wet pool beneath Sivan. After wiping it up, Black stood, tucking himself back into his pants.

"Where are you going?" Sivan asked, trying to keep the sadness out of his voice.

"I'm going to clean up this mess I caused." It was an excuse. There's no way Black would make nice with Palis and Lusa. This mess couldn't be cleaned up. But Sivan didn't know how to stop him. If he asked him to stay, and Black just walked away, that would break him more than any amount of captivity.

So he let him go. Black closed the door to their chambers and left without looking back.

Sivan let out the sobs he'd been holding back.

He didn't know what to say or what to do to make Black better. *'Black will not get better.'* Palis had said. The thought made him sob harder. He just got Black back, but the man was still so far away from him.

Sivan had said he loved him. He thought for sure, of all things, that would have brought back the Black who had once been so desperate for Sivan's affections. But he hadn't said it back.

He wondered if Black even had the capacity to love anymore.

Chapter 15

Unnamed Island

There was one thing left for Sivan to do before they departed for Belator. Black had tried to talk him out of it, even Eliza said it was a lost cause.

“Your father will not show up,” Black said, tone gentle, though a tense line ran through his words.

“Maybe, but we will still wait a little longer,” Sivan replied quietly. He looked out at the expanse of empty sea, no ships in sight.

He had sent a bird to Varis, to the Admiral of the Royal Navy himself. To Sivan’s father. Logically, he knew he owed no allegiance to the man who had disowned him and tried to execute Black. Yet he wasn’t doing this for Tristan Montgomery. He was doing this for Varis, for Grenaldia. He was doing this for all the land Jhaeros would try to raze to the sea. The least he could do was warn them of the danger if they failed.

A tiny speck on the horizon slowly faded into view. Sivan

raised binoculars up to confirm that it was a ship. Indeed, it was, but it bore no discernible flags.

“No flags,” he said.

Black snarled and deflated a little. “It’s probably him, then. We’re on the edge of Uncharted territory. Any ship flying a Grenaldian flag spotted would be attacked.”

It was true. The island they were on was little more than a rock, usually not marked on any maps. But Sivan had memorized his father’s war table map and always found it odd that there was a speck of land nestled perfectly in the crosshairs of the graticule lines. They had talked about it once, as an oddity. So it was easy enough to chose a location he could give coordinates to that only his father would recognize.

Sivan turned towards Black, who’s expression had grown dark. “I want you to wait offshore when he comes.”

The pirate scoffed at him. “And give him a chance to steal you away? I don’t think so.”

Sivan breathed in deeply, willing himself the patience to deal with Black when he was like this. “Black, you almost killed Lusa for beating me in a *sparring* match. What are you going to do to the man who tried to cut off your head?”

Black shrugged. “I don’t care what he does to me. It’s you I worry about.” Then, he turned to walk up the grassy hill, muttering, “I’ll not have you stolen again.”

Sivan let go of the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. It’d been like this since that night. Black could pretend he was his usual self well enough in front of others, but now that Sivan had been told the truth of his impending madness...there was nothing hiding him from Sivan. The darkness was setting in, possessiveness and paranoia ringing his eyes with shadow. And whenever Sivan tried talking to him about it, Black would always sulk back into himself, slipping further and further away

from him.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, not letting himself cry before facing his father. He'd find a way to bring the pirate he loved back from the brink, but now was not the time to show weakness.

The unmarked ship arrived at the shore with little fanfare. It was small and understated, a marked difference from the grandeur the admiral of the Royal Navy usually travelled with. Sivan was grateful he had the Blackwater moor on the opposite side of the island. They kept it just out of sight, beyond the swell of land and trees. He wanted this exchange to remain as non-confrontational as possible, and the key to that was seeing that his father felt unthreatened by the pirates who had slipped through his fingers time and time again. Sivan had *tried* to keep Black from coming along, but that had been out of the question.

"It's good to see you, father," Sivan greeted the earl with. Tristan Montgomery and two guards equipped with spears stepped off the dinghy that made the short hop to the sand. The spears were browned, sorely rusted despite their sharp points. The Royal Navy had enforced strict rules on maintaining their weapons, but Sivan wondered if they even had any blacksmiths left.

"Father? I see no son of mine here," the earl spat.

Sivan clenched his teeth, but gave him no other reaction. It hurt, but this situation was more important than his own feelings. He chose to defect from Grenaldia, from his family, to find his own place in the world with Black. He had made the decision, and there was no going back.

Looking at his father, Sivan could see the last few months had not been kind to the man. A fresh scar had been cut into his jaw, red and new against his usually severely cropped beard. The earl had let it grow out, perhaps as a failed attempt to hide the

scar, but it only accentuated the haggard shadow that lay over his features.

“How has the war been going?” Sivan asked.

“You mean you don’t know?” his father hissed. The disdain on his face was expected but the severity of it made Sivan frown. “Grenaldia is dead. We have no navy left. The remaining aristocracy has fled inland, along with any who could afford to follow, which weren’t many.”

Sivan tried to hide his horror, but a sharp breath still escaped him. “How did this happen? We endured for so long.”

“*You* endured nothing,” the earl corrected ruthlessly. “*You* hopped on the first pirate ship that crossed your path and abandoned us to the wolves.”

Before Sivan could stop him, Black had his sword drawn and pointed it at the earl. The guards behind him quickly readied their spears, but the pirate was too quick and had the side of his weapon against the earl’s throat.

“Take that back,” Black hissed, rage making his voice deep. “Your *son* gave you nine years of his fucking life to fight for his country. And the second he gets injured you sold him to the highest bidder.”

Sivan’s father did not flinch. His steel eyes glared at Black, hollow but for the anger that persisted deep within them. “And you stole him away. Corrupted him beyond recognition. Cut out his heart.”

There was no way his father could have known about the loss of his own heart or the transplant. It was just a metaphor, and he knew it would hurt Black to the bone.

Sivan stepped forward slowly, and pulled at Black’s elbow. “Please, Black, don’t...”

It took several moments for Black to back off. He only pulled his sword away after Sivan pinched his elbow with a twist. The

pirate sheathed his weapon and let the earl step away shakily. Sivan let out a small sigh of relief. The familial love he had for his father had dimmed after being disowned, but he still did not want to see the man harmed.

“I see you’ve been having fun trying to keep these murderous pirates in line,” the earl huffed as he rubbed at the thin line of blood at his neck.

Sivan couldn’t help the terse smile from forming on his lips. “Actually, I’ve been a prisoner of King Jhaeros for the last few months.”

His father frowned, disbelief evident in the lines of his face. “Uncharted don’t keep prisoners.”

“No, they don’t. I was a prisoner of the king, not Uncharted. Regardless, during that time I learned what Jhaeros’s true intentions are with this war.”

A harsh laugh slipped out of the old admiral. “You needed to be kidnapped to understand that? The Uncharted King wants to purge us from the ocean entirely.”

“Not just the ocean,” Sivan warned.

“What?”

“Jhaeros has been capturing leviathans. I’ve seen them with my own eyes. He plans on wielding their power to *‘raze the land back into the sea.’*”

“...I don’t believe you,” the earl hissed.

Sivan squeezed his eyes shut. He thought his father might react this way. “You don’t have to believe me, but please- you know it’s only a matter of time before Jhaeros makes a move on Varis. Evacuate the city. Please, just — get yourself out of there.”

A quieter but just as harsh laugh slipped out of the earl. “If what you say is true...no land will be safe.”

The sound of the ocean sliding against the shore filled their ears. There was nothing Sivan could think to say that could give

his father hope again.

“Perhaps. Just, I wanted to warn you. That’s all,” Sivan said before turning away from him.

“Wait,” the earl stopped him with. “Do you really think I can let you leave here?”

Sivan turned around and saw the guards had stepped forward and pointed their rusted spears towards them. Black moved in front of Sivan on instinct, exposing his throat to the guards.

“You’re not taking him from me again,” Black warned. He had no weapon drawn, but the rage in his voice was enough to make the guards falter briefly.

“Oh, I didn’t mean him,” the earl laughed. “I meant *you*.”

What? He wanted Black?

“You know, there’s been a rumor going around that you, little Nereus who turned into a murderous pirate, is the long lost brother of King Jhaeros. I didn’t think much of it, until I learned you were only *half* siren. Same as the Uncharted king. Not many of you around, are there?”

“No, but I can crush you just as well as he can,” Black sneered.

“I’m sure,” the earl sneered back. “But these spears-” He plucked one from the guards. “These spears are forged with iron kelp. I’m told they can *actually* kill a siren.”

Black’s face faltered for a moment, the painful memories of being bound in iron kelp surely resurfacing.

“And your brother, well, he’s put out word that he wants you captured. Alive or dead. I’m sure this is all futile, but if all it takes is one pirate’s head to end this war, well...”

The spear glinted the dim light of the overcast sky, and Sivan saw it was not rusted at all, but honed to a deadly edge between layers and layers of steel and iron kelp. And that flash of light

was all it took for Sivan to rush forward, twin sabers drawn.

He felt the warm spray of blood on his hands before he realized what he'd done.

Steel eyes looked at Sivan in shock as the earl's body trembled and collapsed to the ground, dead. Sivan went down with him, both sabers imbedded in his father's chest.

These sabers- They had been a gift for Sivan's thirteenth birthday. His father had given them to him with a note: *for my son, who is so gifted with a sword he needs two.* Tristian Montgomery was not one for superfluous compliments, so it was nearly the only physical evidence Sivan had of his father's approval. He had treasured the note almost as much as he had treasured the blades. It was possible that, somewhere in the ruins of the Montgomery manor, in some decaying drawer, the note remained.

Sivan was dimly aware of the guards reacting to the earl's murder, of Black drawing his sword and killing them before they even got close. Sivan tried to cry out, but his sob died behind his teeth. He tried to pull out the two sabers, even though it wouldn't have helped, his father was already dead. But they remained fast in the dead man's chest, as if he was set on taking them back from Sivan after all this time.

"They've seen what happened. They're sending more men to shore," Black said urgently, but Sivan did not react. He could not react. Reacting had gotten him here, with his father dead on the dot of nothing land on the war table they had once bonded over.

"My lord, we have to go. My lord-"

A warm hand on his back.

"Sivan!"

He jolted up, meeting Black's serious gaze with a lost look. "I couldn't- I couldn't let him take you from me."

A look of pity crossed over the pirate's face, although Sivan could not tell if it was genuine or not.

“I know, my lord. Please, let’s go before the others get to shore.”

Sivan nodded numbly and let the man lift him up, leaving his father’s corpse in the sand. Black led him up the swell of land towards the Blackwater, but Sivan’s eyes remained fixed on his twin sabers imbedded in his father’s chest, watching their red-tinted glint until the land blocked his vision.

He was hazy on how they back on to the Blackwater. He barely registered the crew’s looks of shock as they saw him sword-less and covered in blood. Black shouted orders at them Sivan didn’t hear, and before he realized it, the spray of seawater on his face signaled that they were once again out at sea, racing away from the lone Royal Navy ship.

Sivan hadn’t moved since he’d gotten on the ship. It was like he wasn’t there. He was still on the shore with his father’s corpse, or maybe he was still thirteen and feeling the weight of the twin sabers in his hands for the first time.

A hand at his back brought Sivan back to the present. He gasped and turned to see Black’s face set into an unreadable mask. “To the cabin, my lord,” he murmured, and led him into the captain’s quarters.

Inside, Black brought him over to the stove, smoldering with dim embers. He pushed him into the large, well-worn armchair the siren would use to dry off. Ottoman kicked out of the way, Black turned to the stove to toss more wood inside. “We need to get you warmed up,” he said quietly to the stoking embers.

Was it warm? Sivan could see the fire come to life, but he felt no heat. He didn’t feel much of anything. He supposed that was better than the alternative.

Deft hands worked Sivan’s bloodied vest and shirt off, and a washcloth wiped the splatter from his face. Then Black took one of his own shirts that had been drying next to the stove and

wrangled Sivan's unresponsive limbs into it. The pirate frowned as he looked at him. Sivan was a million leagues away, his body a warming husk. Black stepped away to find a quilt and draped it over him. He tucked it closely around Sivan's head, making him look like one of those nuns who used to give him etiquette lessons. Sivan wondered if they had made it inland with the nobility. He hoped so.

"Hey," Black spoke, and Sivan blinked at him, forgetting he was there. The pirate was kneeling in front of him, Sivan's smaller hands gripped firmly by Black's larger ones. When had he done that?

"You're compartmentalizing, I know you are. It's what you do. And that's fine. You compartmentalize all you need right now. But I need you here. So come back to me when you've found a place to put this, okay?" Black's calloused thumbs rubbed over his knuckles as he spoke, drawing Sivan back to the present.

He was being so tender, doing exactly what Sivan didn't have the presence of mind to realize he needed. And although Black's hands were warm, it was the only warmth he could feel from the pirate. His eyes remained that dead coal color. Years of taking care of his lord, of knowing every facet of Sivan's psyche- that had taught Black what to do. He was going through the motions

He closed his eyes, unable to look at the pirate's face. It was too much, he couldn't let any part of Black be sucked into this. Nereus had spent too long stuck in one of the boxes of his mind.

"It's a big one," Sivan whispered, voice cracking.

"I know," Black said, just as quietly.