

# Chapter 50

*The Tomb of Estes*

Black stared at the broken entrance to the tomb for several long moments. He seemed as if he were in a daze, like he couldn't understand what he was seeing.

"Perhaps it was broken into long ago," Sivan suggested, although he felt the same dread he saw on the pirate's face.

Brand startled as Black turned on him, looming over the Grenaldian man. "Brand! Was Vivianne allowed into my cabin?!" Black's voice was so intense Sivan almost jumped forward to pull him away. But he made no move to attack the other pirate.

"A-aye, Captain! We 'ad no right ta stop her."

Black snarled out his frustration and turned away to storm the tomb.

"But I made sure tha' she did nah take th' map with her-!" Brand called out after him.

Sivan followed after, joining Black inside the tomb. The

walls were as white as the exterior of the island, giving the whole cavern an unearthly glow even in the dark. Huge pillars held up the ceiling, and carved into them were intricate lines of characters Sivan now recognized as sirenath. It was a beautiful, spotless example of a siren's resting place. And there wasn't a speck of gold in sight.

"What's the matter? Do you think Vivianne got here before us?" Sivan asked, the dread in his stomach now starting to make sense to him.

"If she was allowed into my cabin she could have seen the map. What's worse, she could have read your notes," Black clipped out, eyes darting around the tomb for any sign of treasure.

"But, there's no way she could have made sense of those, let alone finish my translation. Even if she could, we still have the map."

Black shook his head. "You underestimate her. She's far more intelligent than she lets on. She has a perfect memory. If Vivianne got a good look at either the map or your notes she could recreate them."

Finally their eyes adjusted to the darkness enough to allow them to see the full extent of the tomb. At the center lay a pool of dark water. What appeared to be a stone casket rose from the center of the water.

"Oh!" Brand breathed behind them. "We migh' be able ta portage th' dinghy-"

Impatient as ever, Black merely strode into the water. His pants ripped as his legs transformed into the winding siren tail. With just a few flicks of his tail, he reached the casket and opened it. The stone lid landed in the water with a heavy splash.

Black exhaled, relief visible in his shoulders as he saw what lay inside. King Estes's bones were held together by tattered

clothes and a millennia of dust. His skeletal hand gripped a long silver weapon: a deadly looking blade grew from mirrored curved spears, mounted on a staff carved with sirenath runes. Not quite a lance, not quite a trident.

“The Corseque of Estes,” Black breathed.

He picked up the weapon and yanked, pulling it free from the death grip of the siren king. It glittered terribly in the dim light of the cave, lighting the siren pirate with false sunlight.

“She did nah take th’ weapon?” Brand asked, dumbfounded.

“*For the treasure,*” Sivan whispered, remembering Vivianne’s words all the way back on Lissandry. “She only cared about the gold.”

“Aye...” Disappointment crossed over Brand’s face. “Th’ crew will nah be happy about th’ gold.”

Black rejoined them on the shore, grinning madly, brandishing the corseque above the water for them to observe. “Do not fear, Brand! After I kill Jhaeros, everyone on the Blackwater will be rewarded with all the gold their hearts desire.”

A clear and chilling voice cut through the darkness around them.

“What was that about killing me?”

All the breath in Sivan punched out when he heard that voice. It was the one that haunted his nightmares, the one that rang in his worst memories of drowning comrades and the red-stained sea.

Black turned around with a snap, holding the corseque up to defend against any attack. Yet none came, for Jhaeros was lounging lazily on the casket that contained the bones of the long dead siren king. His white tail draped over the edge and into the water, his iridescent scales casting glittering shimmers of light onto the surface. The siren king was far more beautiful than Sivan remembered. His nightmares must have befouled his memory,

because Jhaeros was just as artfully gorgeous as Black, with similar long hair as deep as the night. The two were strikingly similar, but Jhaeros's cerulean eyes were a cold contrast to the vibrant green that glared back at him now.

"Wh- when did he get 'ere?" Brand asked to no one in particular.

Jhaeros laughed joylessly, disdain apparent on his beautiful face. "Oh, please. You're in my realm. Did you really think I wouldn't notice the stench of humans?"

That laugh churned Sivan's stomach. Just the sound of it forced his whole body to go weak, and the familiar burn in his arm resurfaced. He had to look at it to confirm that the only mark on his skin now was that black handprint. Somehow, this phantom pain still haunted him when confronted with the source of it. Sivan staggered, catching onto Black's coat to steady himself.

Black flashed a glance over at Sivan, concern washing over his face before he refocused on the threat before them.

"I really must thank you for discovering Estes' tomb for me. I've been so unlucky in my attempts," Jhaeros yawned, seemingly bored by the whole situation.

"Your luck's about to get much worse, Jhaeros!" Black snarled before diving into the pool, his long black tail propelling him across the water to the casket. He rose the deadly corseque, aiming it at the siren king's heart. A flash of gold signaled Jhaeros drawing his sword. A loud clang of metal on metal echoed through the tomb. The king's sword locked with the corseque, preventing the wicked tip from piercing his chest.

Jhaeros looked up at the other siren with a wild intensity. "Come on, you'll have to do better than that. I've been so curious to find out if this weapon actually can kill one of us."

His words were tinged with a shrill bite that hinted towards

the siren king's unstable state. Black snarled at him and twisted the corseque away to try striking him again.

Again, Jhaeros blocked the weapon with his golden sword. Sivan gripped the hilts of his swords, instinctively wanting to back Black up. But no matter how firm his grip, fear prevented him from actually drawing the weapons. When faced with the ultimate antagonist of his nightmares, Sivan was useless.

Jhaeros let Black try to hit him several more times, but the Uncharted king was just too fast. Sivan felt shame roil in his gut as he realized that Black was far faster than he'd let on in their sparring. He'd let Sivan win.

And there was no way he would win against Jhaeros.

Sivan's hands slid from their grips on his sword hilts.

A flash of red fire crackled from Jhaeros's sword, hitting Black square on and throwing him against the wall of the tomb. There was a terrible crunching noise upon impact. The stone wall crumbled around where his body had collided. Dread took over Sivan as he saw the man he loved collapse lifeless onto the floor. Jhaeros was once again upon Black in a flash, red sparks of magic coming off him like water droplets. "Get up!" he shouted before slashing another wave of dark red fire at him. It hit the pirate in the chest, wrenching a terrible howl out of him. The smell of burning flesh curled through the tomb.

Black's chest was red with burns, his skin boiling painfully. Despite this, he managed to stand upright, using the corseque as leverage.

Jhaeros made a sound of disappointment. "You could have been so much, Nereus. I offered you everything, little brother."

Black spit out blood at the siren king. Sivan processed the words.

"Brother...?"

His question had been a whisper, but Jhaeros still heard it,

and turned his head to look at him. He puffed out a laugh upon seeing Sivan's shock.

"Oh, your precious lord doesn't even know? Yes, indeed, Nereus and I are bound by blood." Jhaeros seemed to delight in revealing this, and looked eagerly between Black and Sivan to see their reactions.

When Sivan thought about it, the connection made sense. Nereus had been an orphan, and he'd always been tight-lipped about his early days. The two even looked alike. Still, the revelation was jarring. Sivan looked at Black, his golden eyes wide with shock. The pirate was struggling to stay conscious, but his expression was nonetheless pinched in the shamed terror of being revealed.

"Let me guess, he told you he was fully human." Jhaeros leaned over to grab his brother by the hair and wrench him up as an example. "Simply under a...a spell or something."

Black spit in his face, forcing the older siren to drop him with an angry snarl. Then, with a speed he did not appear he could have summoned in that state, Black drove the corseque into Jhaeros's stomach.

The Uncharted king roared, scrambling away from his brother and trying to pull the weapon out. His white tail thrashed, splashing in and out of the pool of water.

"Th' captain did it!" Brand cheered, and Sivan felt a surge of hope at the thought of ending this once and for all.

But as Jhaeros's screams echoed through the chamber, they shifted into hollow laughter. The siren looked down at the corseque that he was impaled on. This was supposed to be the one weapon that could kill a siren. The only one.

"Little brother, you are so naive. The weapon is a myth. As if anything that could kill a siren can exist." He pulled the corseque out of his body, blood running off it in rivulets. "Nothing can

stop me from carrying out my divine purpose.”

Jhaeros then raised the weapon and turned it around on Black. He returned the blow, impaling his brother through the stomach. The king did it with so much force it blew the pirate captain back into the wall. The corseque entered the rock, pinning the weakened Black to the ground.

“Black!!” Sivan screamed, and finally freed his sabers from their psychological prison. He rushed at the Uncharted king, heedless of the siren’s proven invulnerability.

The only thought in his head was that he had to protect the one he loved at any cost.

Jhaeros barely granted him an icy look before raising his golden sword to knock the attack away. He did it so easily, looking like it required the same effort of swatting a fly. Sivan flew back, barely being saved from colliding with a pillar when Brand caught him. Black hissed at his brother, rage darkening his eyes.

“I’ll kill you, I swear it!”

Black was flashed a cruel smile, one far sharper than the pirate’s rage. “Oh, and how are you going to do that, little brother? Your fabled corseque failed you.” Jhaeros slithered in a half circle around Black, taking a moment to consider him. “And it’s not like I’m the one who’s been stupid enough to make a pneumarium.” Black’s eyes grew wide as his brother produced a small vial of light out of the air.

Sivan’s heart grew cold. It was that same bottle of light he’d lost during their escape from the Blackwater. “H-how did you get that?” He asked, a breathless whisper, but Jhaeros still heard him effortlessly.

The siren king looked back at him, then back at his brother. He assessed them slowly, redrawing the lines of what he knew in his mind. “He gave this to you?”

“Don’t worry about it, my lord. It’s nothing—gnh!” Red

flames licked down the corseque, burning Black's insides.

Sivan wavered, not sure if he should tell the truth or not. "It came to me in the ocean."

"It came to you..." Jhaeros processed this, and his face grew steadily into a mask of cruel amusement. "So the little lord doesn't even know what this is?"

The king laughed, holding up the vial, his grip tight around the glass. Sivan wasn't sure what the vial was to Black, but he knew he did not want it in Jhaeros's hands.

"This, Lord Montgomery, is a pneumarium. Wicked, ancient magic. Most sirens know to stay far away from it, but not my foolish brother."

Sivan looked to Black, who looked halfway between death and wanting to rush over and cover Sivan's ears.

"This contains a fraction of his soul. He carved it out himself and bottled it up. They're meant to be safeguards, assuring that even if a siren dies he can be reborn with a pneumarium to his corpse's lips." Jhaeros then turned to his brother, brandishing the small vial of light. "But it does not come without risk. I wonder what would happen if I crushed this precious bottle?" His hand tightened around the pneumarium, the glass cracking under the pressure. "It likely won't kill you, but I wonder what it's like to have part of your soul destroyed..."

Black howled in pain, his face turning a far worse pallor than when he'd been restrained by the iron kelp. Sivan's heart cried out, instinctively reacting to the death throes of his beloved.

"Wait!" Sivan shouted. His voice was far more broken than he had hoped it would sound. To his surprise, the siren king did in fact loosen his grip around the pneumarium, and Black's screams blessedly stopped. He turned and glared at Sivan, his eerily blue eyes bright with hate.

"Don't tell me what to do, human filth."



“I can translate sirenath for you. There must be countless Uncharted artifacts that remain a mystery to you.” Sivan offered more quietly. He did not miss the spark of interest in the Uncharted king’s eyes at the mention of the ancient tongue.

“You lie,” Jhaeros hissed. Then, turning back around, he brandished the breaking vial once again.

Sivan threw his sabers, the twin blades clattering on the tomb floor. “Take me instead!”

“My lord, no!” With how Black screamed, writhing against the corseque he was impaled on, one would have thought he had been cut open by his brother’s golden sword.

Jhaeros lowered his weapon, and looked at Sivan with cold interest.

“How else do you think we found this tomb? I translated the sirenath map to it.”

The Uncharted king swerved his way over to him, his long tail trailing like white smoke behind him. “What else?”

Sivan blinked, not understanding the question. “What?”

“What else do you want? Take you, yes, but what else? Spare my blood traitor of a brother?”

“My lord! Please don’t do this! You can’t trust him, he—“

Jhaeros sent another blast of red magic at Black, causing his brother to spit out a spray of blood upon impact. The king did not break eye contact with Sivan.

“I’m true to my word, Lord Montgomery- Oh, right, it’s not ‘lord’ anymore, is it? I heard about your little disownment.” Jhaeros then took his blade and sliced his palm open. Blood dripped from the cut, almost black in the dark tomb. “As a measure of faith we’ll enter into a blood pact. Name your terms.”

Sivan hesitated, uncertainty roiling in his gut right next to the dread of losing Black again. But he met the king’s icy gaze. “Give me the pneumarium. Let Nereus go. And the crew. Let the

Blackwater sail on unharmed.”

Black let out a weak protest, struggling to get the corseque free from the rock he was nailed to. Jhaeros offered Sivan his golden sword, signaling for him to return the gesture with his hand.

Before he could doubt his decision, Sivan reached out and ran his palm along the impossibly sharp edge. And before he could even wince at the pain, Jhaeros clasped their bloody hands together, Black’s pneumarium between their palms. “With this exchange of blood, the terms have been set,” the king announced. “You’re mine now, Montgomery.”

Sivan found himself locked in the Uncharted king’s cruel cerulean eyes. He could feel himself drowning in the depth of the hatred they bore.

Jhaeros adjusted his grip, letting Sivan have the vial of Black’s soul. The king tugged him by the wrist, away from Black. The siren’s sharp nails dug into his skin, marring the handprint Black had left on him. Jhaeros then lifted his sword and swung it counterclockwise. It cut a red line of magic through the air, as if carving time and space itself. The circle warbled and coalesced into a portal.

He didn’t even need to draw a summoning circle. The siren king was as powerful as Sivan had feared. That much was evident in his battle with Black.

“My lord...” Black croaked, his voice weak, but more heart-breaking was how betrayed he sounded. “You... you promised me you wouldn’t leave me again.”

Sivan inhaled sharply, tears immediately threatening to spill over. The desire he felt to run back to Black’s side was powerful. He wished to apologize, to throw his sacrifice to the wind just so they could die together.

But the thought of Black dying was more terrifying than any-

thing Jhaeros could do to him.

So, Sivan turned away, unable to look at the man he loved any longer without caving in. He cradled the pneumarium to his chest. “Will you please take the corseque out of him?”

Jhaeros narrowed his icy glare at him. “That wasn’t in the terms.”

A long, horrible moment passed. Then, Jhaeros turned and with a flick of his hand the corseque came out of Black’s chest and returned to him. Black crumpled to the floor, unmoving.

“Just to make it perfectly clear, dear brother: when you recover, do not try to come after your precious lord. This is what I will do to him if you get anywhere near Uncharted waters again.”

Then Jhaeros held up the corseque. Red fire crackled and sparked around the weapon. The groan of metal rang through the echoey tomb before the corseque melted into a bubbling puddle on the stone floor.

Unbelievably, Black was already crawling towards them. “My lord, please, you can’t do this...” His voice was so weak Sivan could barely hear him.

But, he can.

He must.

In order to save Black from a fate worse than death, Sivan had to break his promise once more. So he turned his back on Black and let the Uncharted king escort him into dangerous waters.