

Chapter 16

The Bloated Isles

Sivan had not appreciated the stubborn stillness to the Bloated Isles until his return. The ocean was chaotic around them, white froth splashing violently against the sides of the craggy rocks, but the isles themselves stayed firm. Over the years their shapes may be eroded down, but in the present moment they persisted against the might of the ocean.

Sivan would think of those rocks when the weight of everything became too heavy.

Think of becoming as unmovable as the isles, don't think of your father's face as he died by your hand.

"My lord." Black's voice brought him back to the present, back to the railing of the Blackwater, staring up at sheer faces of island rock.

Sivan hummed in response, making an attempt to hide how deep he'd just gone inside his mind.

Black looked at him for a long moment before responding.

Doubt was there, doubt that Sivan could keep it together. And doubt that Black could do anything about it while he himself slipped further into madness.

“We’ve been docked for some time. The gangway is free if you’d like to take care of anything before we leave for Belator.”

“Oh,” Sivan said, blinking quickly as he reoriented himself for speaking. “Yes, thank you.” He crossed the deck of the *Blackwater*, not really having a need to go anywhere, but since spacing out on the ship wasn’t an option, he would find somewhere else to ideate on becoming a rock.

“We set off at sunrise,” Black called after him. Sivan waved a hand to show he heard, but knew Black would probably still come fetch him before then.

Black had tried to comfort him in his new stilted way, but there was nothing to comfort. Sivan was doing what he always did when something was too terrible for him to handle. He compartmentalized. Locked it away. It couldn’t hurt him if he couldn’t think about it.

Sivan was good at this. Nereus was the only one who had slipped free of that mental cage. He’d been the exception.

He set his mind to finding Lusa. The medical wing first came to mind, though Sivan had not returned there since his initial recovery.

The acrid smell of medicine startled Sivan at first. He had gotten used to this room smelling like Black’s sea-stained hair and nostalgic cooking. This sharp tang was what it was supposed to smell like when it wasn’t being monopolized by a jealous pirate and his half-dead lover.

There were multiple caeceans in the beds, each of them meticulously bandaged up in Lusa’s pristine way. As Sivan walked through the bay, a few of the patients stirred and attempted to bow their heads at him.

Right, he was technically their lord. And despite their unreadable black eyes, Sivan sensed expressions of wariness at his arrival.

Lusa was at the back of the room, attempting to feed the purple-gray caecean that had almost killed Sivan when they first arrived. It was Lusa's cousin, Lubin, now without a spear or the crazed look in his eyes.

Lubin glanced towards Sivan as he approached. Recognition glanced off the caecean's face before he jumped, his expression stumbling towards wild anger. The spoon Lusa had been offering him flew out of his hand and clattered to the floor with a tense, metal clang.

But instead of attacking Sivan, Lubin shuddered and pinched the bridge of his nose, as if he were in pain.

"You're back," Lusa snapped, irritation plain in his voice. "I wish you would have *called* for me instead of barging in here and testing my cousin's fragile mental state."

Sivan's mouth opened and closed, slow to find his response. "I-I'm sorry."

Lubin used one of his human hands to smack Lusa on the shoulder. "I'm not that fragile. Stop treating me like a child. And stop trying to feed me, I can do it myself."

Lusa rubbed at his shoulder and directed his frown towards his cousin. "What do you expect? You couldn't form full sentences a few weeks ago," he said with the caged bite of a family member who is used to meaningless bickering.

Lubin shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "He's the lord now, right? I'll have to get used to it sometime. Unless you wanna kill him and take over?"

To Sivan's immense relief, Lusa made a gagging noise at the idea. "And do all that paperwork? No, thank you." He stood up and pointed both a finger and claw at his cousin. "Eat, or I will

get Palis to force feed you.”

Lubin’s gray-purple skin turned ashen at the thought. He picked up a bowl of soup and drank directly from it.

Lusa nodded in satisfaction before jabbing a finger at Sivan. “You. Follow me.”

Sivan was not going to argue with him, especially when Lusa’s patience was clearly worn thin. The caecean man looked exhausted, the orange skin around his eyes tinged an angry red.

“Are you the only nurse here?” Sivan asked.

“Palis is helping, but she’s not trained, so *yes*, I am the only nurse,” Lusa said, his tone short. He lead Sivan around a corner to a pool of water where Palis was soaking.

“I’ll hire more medical staff, as many hands as you need.”

“Oh, *thank you*, my lord,” Lusa said mockingly as he gave Sivan a bow. “Can you believe the benevolence, Palis?”

“Lusa-” Sivan started, but was cut off by a snap of the nurse’s claws.

“If you want to help, get your damn pirate lover out of here,” Lusa snapped.

“Black? What does he have to do with this?”

Lusa laughed a little manically at that. “All those subjects of yours out there are the casualties of your mad siren’s little outbursts.”

“What?” Sivan inhaled, his stomach sinking.

“Oh, he keeps it hidden from you *so well*, doesn’t he?” Lusa shook his head, as if he were trying to shake the pity out of it. “Your man is a violent demigod with crumbling control. If someone looks at him wrong, out comes that shiny black sword. Or sometimes it’s just siren magic burning their skin off!”

A horror like bile seeped into Sivan’s mouth through his throat. He knew Black was losing his mind, but he hadn’t realized it’d already progressed this far.

His face must have showed his dismay, for Lusa sighed and cooled down his tone. "I know it's not your fault, but- You're the lord of this place now. Find some way to control him, because if he keeps taking it out on your subjects, one of them will kill you and take your place. It's how it works here."

Sivan nodded, but he had no idea how he was going to pull that off.

"How did Eliza control her siren donor?" Palis asked from the pool.

"Huh?! Lusa barked.

"How do you know about that?" Sivan asked.

Palis shrugged. "The sound of her heartbeat is the same as yours and mine. And her magic is far too powerful for a human heart to withstand."

Sivan hesitated telling them since it was not his secret to tell, but he had to put his trust in someone, and Lusa and Palis hadn't failed him yet. "...she didn't control him. He's rotting in an iron kelp tank."

"Oh," Palis breathed, frowning deepening.

Lusa balked, horrified. "What is *wrong* with humans? Is this what happens when you drink the red liquid?"

It took Sivan a second to remember the corkscrew and their conversation about alcohol being a strictly human invention. Then he remembered the the sea witch's incident with poison. "No, I think Eliza has sworn off wine. Don't worry, I would never do that to Black."

"Well...it's not the *worst* idea-" Lusa started before catching Sivan's glare. "I'm kidding! But you are going to have to find some method of restraining him if this gets worse."

Sivan shook his head. "I know. That's why I'm here. I wanted to ask you two more about...what happens when this kind of thing is done. To- To someone." He gestured at his chest, Black's

heart beating away peacefully within.

Palis and Lusa exchanged a look between themselves. “Very little is known of the Uncharted who receive a siren’s heart,” Palis began. “Even less is known of humans who do so. It’s a very taboo subject, and the sirens who do it usually recede from Uncharted society entirely.”

“Your siren pirate is not alone in doing it to save a lover,” Lusa said. “Those are the only tales I’ve heard. The only stories romantic enough to get told despite the taboo. Still, they’re not happy endings. The siren becomes more paranoid and divorced from reality, and they end up hiding their mortal lover under lock and key.”

Sivan didn’t like the way this was going. This sounded too similar to the things Black had said to him in his darker moments.

“Then what of the minds of the mortals? Have you heard of any of *them*-- Also going mad?” Sivan could not meet their gazes. It was such an obvious question, perhaps it would have been better to just tell them about what happened with his father. But he could not stand to recount that yet.

“In theory,” Palis started, “Black’s madness should not affect you since you are the keeper of the heart. But that shadow hand of yours was conjured by him, yes?”

Sivan nodded. “I could feel the magic coursing from Black’s heart when he made it for me.”

“Interesting,” Palis hummed. “If you’re that closely connected to his magic, it is possible that you may be affected by it somehow. But I doubt it will be potent enough to affect your mind. At least not in the way it’s affecting your siren.”

This didn’t reassure Sivan like he thought it would. If he had an excuse for killing his father, he could place the blame elsewhere. He couldn’t stop himself. He was going mad. It wasn’t

his fault. But there was no excuse for what he'd done. It'd all been Sivan, sane and fully accountable for his actions.

"Couldn't you ask the sea witch about all this?" Lusa asked. "She would know firsthand, wouldn't she?"

A nervous laugh crept out of Sivan before he could stifle it. "I don't think she would take kindly to being asked if she's gone insane. Eliza always scared me, even back when she was my cook."

"She was your *cook*?" Lusa laughed, delight in his black eyes.

"Oh, please don't spread that. I think she already wants to kill me," Sivan pleaded.

"My lips are sealed," Lusa grinned, although Sivan did not trust that promise for an instant. "But seriously, you may want to consider taking a page from her book, even if it's ghastly. She seems intimidating, but I don't see any of the siren madness in her."

Sivan shook his head. "I won't do that to Black. Absolutely not."

"What's the point of the second life he's given you if you're drowning in his madness?" Palis asked, her soft voice cutting.

"It's not happening," Sivan snapped and turned to leave.

He would not give up on Black, even if the siren madness consumed them both. Sivan would rather cut the heart out of himself than see Black reduced to the wretched captive he'd seen in Eliza's office.



Palis and Lusa did not come with Sivan to Belator. Lusa had far too many patients to take care of, and Palis would still not

even set eyes upon the Blackwater.

It was probably for the best, since the two of them seemed to set off Black's temper.

His temper, which always seemed to be on the verge of overflowing. A persistent thunderhead followed them during their voyage. It only struck lightning when Black snapped at someone. Which is how Sivan knew that something was going on outside the captain's quarters.

A mighty crack of nearby thunder brought a groan to Sivan as he set down his book of belatoran vocabulary. He stepped outside just in time to see Black toss Brand overboard.

"Brand!" Sivan shouted along with several crew members. They rushed to the side of the ship, throwing a rope to him, but the Blackwater was too fast and he quickly disappeared behind the ship.

"What was that for?!" Hayes barked. She shoved aside the crew member behind the helm to take over. The wheel spun supernaturally fast, and everyone had to grab on to something as the Blackwater lurched to the left.

Brand came into view quickly, and Sivan was relieved to see that he was alive and treading water. As soon as the ship was in range, they threw the rope to the old Grenaldian man again. He caught it and they started to tow him in.

Knowing that Brand would be safe, Sivan then rounded on Black. "Black! What on earth could have possibly justified that?!"

Black's eyes, once a sparkling green, were now dim and clouded by shadow, encircled by a wild ring of white. He glared at where Brand had been standing, refusing to look Sivan in the eye. "He was going to take you from me."

"He said no such thing!" Hayes shouted at Black, now stomping towards him. "I hear everything that happens on this

fucking ship, so if you heard such words they must have come from your own damn mind.”

Black snarled and rounded on her, hands crackling with green magic. “This is *my* ship, I can throw whoever I want--”

Hayes did not move, but Black was suddenly wrenched downward. Wooden planks came to life and wrapped around his legs. He was pulled into the floor halfway, and despite a flash of green magic, the planks did not budge. Black struggled against the deck, but even his siren strength could not free him.

Hayes’s boots clacked firmly across the floor and stopped in front of the infuriated Black. “You might captain this crew, but do not forget the Blackwater is mine *alone*. You will keep yourself in check or I will make you swim to Corsair.” Her dark eyes were burning, two hot embers in the abyss.

Black only growled in response, but the struggle was already going out of him.

The planks around the captain’s body tightened, causing him to groan in pain. Sivan reached out a hand instinctively, but he could do nothing to help. Hayes was right. Her control of the Blackwater made her the real one in charge.

“Do you understand?” she said through clenched teeth, sharper than usual.

Black let out a final growl, but let his head fall. “Yes, yes! Let me out!”

Hayes turned away, and the planks receded, freeing Black from the deck. He stood up, dusting himself off, although the anger was still fresh and evident on his face.

“On second thought,” Black grumbled, “a swim sounds nice.” He strode over to the side and jumped up onto the rail. “Enjoy your *ship*,” he said, the last word derisive and pointed at Hayes.

A muffled splash was all they heard after Black dove overboard. Hayes let out an aggravated sigh and closed her eyes.

“Are- Are you alright?” Sivan asked, unsure of what else to say.

She snapped her eyes back open to glare at him too, although the unnerving glow of them was now gone. “I’d rip out that siren heart inside you and put it back where it belongs-“ She hesitated, deflating with a huff. “If I didn’t think it’d only make him worse.”

Hayes stormed off, and Sivan did not think it wise to follow.

“It’s so lively on this ship now that you’re back,” Eliza commented from behind him.

He turned around to see her leaning on the door to Hayes’s cabin, her sea glass leg crossed elegantly behind her ankle. Eliza was not his favored sight right then. He still didn’t trust her after she betrayed them.

“You’ve done this before, right? There has to be some way to undo it,” Sivan demanded, eyes furious but needing answers.

Eliza laughed coldly. “You were dead for a few good minutes there. Nereus had already broken through his own ribs by the time I arrived.”

“So? You’re the all powerful sea witch. Surely there’s another way.”

“Ah, spoken by a man truly ignorant of the craft,” she said, a chuckle still in her tone. She then pointed at Sivan’s chest. “That siren heart called you back from the Crimson Sea. It alone keeps your soul tied to your body. Death is not an easy thing to undo for mortals. It requires true sacrifice. Hence the heart. And his madness.”

Sivan let out a shaky breath, despair on his tongue. Eliza watched him for a moment before nodding towards the room behind her.

“Have a drink with me.”

Sivan hesitated. “...I thought that was Hayes’s room.”

“It is,” she said before disappearing behind the door.

He did not particularly want to befriend this woman, but he truly needed a drink, so he followed her into the room.

Eliza picked up a gold carafe likely pinched from the captain's quarters and poured Sivan a glass of wine.

"I thought you would have sworn off wine after Vivianne," Sivan said and took the glass offered to him.

The woman huffed. "Only if someone else is serving it to me." Her smile was sharp as she watched Sivan take the first sip of wine. It made him uneasy, but the sea witch did not have to resort to poisoning his drink if she wanted to hurt him. Sivan swallowed. The wine was very dry, too bitter for his taste.

"You once said the Blackwater was yours."

"Ah, did I?" Eliza hummed. "Well, I like to think she is. Maybe once that was true."

Sivan did not have the patience to unpack that. Eliza poured herself a glass and sat down on an elegant looking armchair that had not been there last time Sivan was in here. The map was still on the ceiling, along with the knives.

"You know, I watched this happen with my husband," Eliza said.

"You watched? I thought you said it wasn't voluntary."

A small, sad chuckle puffed out of her. "I lied. Magic is hard on a mortal's body, especially the heart. I may have been looking for a siren to steal the heart of, but I was in no shape to do the procedure by the time I found one. He gave it to me willingly." She took a long drink of wine. "Although, it did not feel that way by the end of it."

Sivan sat down in another, less elegant chair, now very glad he decided on that drink. So she had gone through the same thing. "By the end?"

Eliza took another long sip from her glass. "He will get worse. Until he can't recognize friend from foe, and the only

voices he listens to are the ones only he can hear.”

Despair clenched at the siren heart in Sivan’s chest. “Is there really no way to stop it?”

“Short of returning the heart, no,” she told him with a strange measure of pity. “Although... Well, you won’t like it.”

“Anything, please-”

Eliza peered at him, knowing this information would not help, but perhaps she wanted to share the burden with a sympathetic heart. “I have my husband monitored while I’m away from the cay. After I leave, he goes dormant, practically dead. Maybe he can sense his own heart nearby when I’m around. He seems to only know peace when I’m far away.”

“...you’re saying I should leave him?” Sivan breathed, just the thought of it hurting him.

“Well, I don’t think he would allow it in his current state of mind, but that hasn’t stopped you before,” Eliza said with a casually biting raise of her brows.

Sivan frowned at her, but it was no different than what his own guilt would have said. “I promised him I wouldn’t. I don’t want to hurt him more than I already have.”

“Oh, he would hurt. But this time that frightful yearning he goes through would be replaced by a sedate acceptance. Is that not better than going mad?”

She had a point, but Sivan still did not like it. He had resolved to stick by Black through it all this time. Yet it might be better for them both if he took her advice and walked away.

“Well,” Eliza shrugged, as if they were merely chatting about idle gossip, “Nereus is very strong willed, much more-so than my husband. So there is a thin ray of hope that he might make it through this without going completely insane. I’ve seen that boy do the impossible.” Her steel blue eyes narrowed at Sivan. “But if he does come to the point of true madness, I will rip out that

heart inside you and put it back inside him.”

Sivan huffed a small, bitter laugh. “Hayes said the same thing. But she said it’d only make it worse.”

The sea witch sneered at him. “Well, he learned to live without you before. He can do it again.”