

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.