

# Chapter 27

## *The Blackwater*

Sivan woke once again to an unfamiliar ceiling, but he knew where he was even before he opened his eyes and slipped on his glasses. Black's scent permeated the blankets and pillows of his bed, and Sivan would not soon forget the reason his whole body ached deliciously.

He was disappointed to find the pirate captain not in bed with him when he opened his eyes. Judging by brilliant light slipping in through the cracks of the drawn curtains, it was well into day. Sivan had slept far longer than he had meant to, but he had been having but restless nights since being taken into his father's custody. Black could not have been any better rested than he had been, considering the pirate was bound with iron kelp for the last few days.

Sivan drew back the heavy curtain to the bed and did not see Black in the cabin. Meaning he had to be on deck with the crew. A small frown appeared on Sivan's face, concern for the

man bubbling up his throat. Siren or not, he had been near death before Sivan had dumped the seawater on him. Surely he would need longer to fully recover.

He groaned as he sat up in bed. Black had not hurt him, but Sivan had never been fucked that well in his entire life, and his lower back had not appreciated the war table driving into his spine.

Still, a faint blush rose in Sivan's face when he felt the aching throb of his lower body. He felt like he'd always imagined a new bride would have felt after their first night. He'd long abandoned his wildly inaccurate teenage fantasies of sex and love, but the youth in him bubbled with a delirious happiness that left him lightheaded.

That happiness was immediately dulled when Sivan saw the perfectly pressed clothes laid out on the war table along with a ridiculously lavish breakfast.

He massaged the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply and cursing his own stomach for growling as he smelled the decadent meal. Black was going to continue treating Sivan like a proper lord whether or not he wanted it.

He could at least be grateful for the steaming basin of hot water prepared for him. The hot washcloth against Sivan's body did wonders for the persistent aches.

The clothes were another set from his wardrobe on the Spear: a deep gray blouse embroidered with sparkling silver flowers, plus another pair of breeches that were too small for him. The former lord pulled on the clothes without much enjoyment. He had nothing else to pick from, and was thus cornered into letting a pirate dress him.

The breakfast was frustratingly delicious. Rosemary focaccia, spread with a sumptuous soft cheese, capers, and a type of fish Sivan was too annoyed to try and identify. He almost wished that

Black would just once serve him something terrible so he'd have an excuse to turn down his endless indulgent servitude.

These gestures clearly made the pirate happy, but they only served to remind Sivan of their former relationship. He longed to accept Black with an open heart, but there was no way Sivan would have let it go this far if the man was still truly his attendant. Even in some remote possibility where the war hadn't happened and Nereus had been allowed to remain as his attendant for longer than the age of sixteen, Sivan wouldn't have looked at him in the same way.

Right?

The former lord nibbled on the focaccia as he remembered the vision Eliza had shown him. Nereus had only been a year or two older in the memory, but he looked like an entirely different person from the scrawny teen Sivan had last seen. Was he always destined to grow into this terribly handsome devil of a man with a wicked grin?

Would Sivan have been able to resist falling into bed with him even if Nereus had stayed his attendant?

Just the question turned his ears red, and Sivan quickly ate the rest of the delicious meal without tasting much of it.

Hayes entered the captain's quarters to find Sivan piling up the dishes of his breakfast on a platter. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"The captain's not going to like you cleaning up after yourself."

Sivan jolted a little, not having noticed her nearly silent entry amongst the clatter of porcelain and silver. He spun around, looking guilty even though he was simply trying to ease Black's burden. "Ah, well, I figured the least I could do was to clean up after myself since the captain still insists on treating me like a

lord.”

Hayes made a disgruntled sound, but it sounded far more amused than annoyed. The woman had been on the edge of collapsing behind the wheel the day before, but today she looked just as healthy and severe as she always was. Sivan wondered what kind of witchcraft powered the Blackwater that allowed her crew to recover so quickly.

“Perhaps it’s well enough you try to interfere with Black’s persistence. The crew is not used to such sunny weather. Two deckhands have fainted from overexposure just today.” There was a barely detectable hint of light humor in her voice, as though she found the fainting crew rather funny.

“Anyways, I’ve come to bring the map to you. Now that you’ve returned I assume you’ll pick up where you left off.”

Sivan blinked several times before realizing she was referring to the sirenath translation. “Oh! Yes, yes, of course.” He tried to hide the wince when the pain from his lower back lanced up his side as he sat down at the table.

If Hayes noticed she did not care enough to point it out.

The translation notes were still on the war table, and Black had evidently organized them after Sivan’s ass had strewn them all over the table. Hayes pulled out a worn leather scroll from inside her shirt and dropped it on the table gracelessly.

“That’s it.”

The woman was hard to read, so Sivan couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. He tentatively took the scroll and unfurled it, revealing a very old but very detailed circular map inscribed with the strange characters Sivan recognized as sirenath.

“You- You just had this very valuable map on your person this whole time?”

Her expression did not change. The same severe but placid set to her mouth barely moved as she spoke. “Yes, of course. I’d

drown anyone before letting them take it.”

Something about her stiff posture made Sivan think that she had indeed drowned someone for taking it.

“What...what precisely happened to Vivianne?”

Her dark eyes glittered with hatred for a moment before responding. “She drowned.”

“Ah,” Sivan responded quietly. So he’d been right. Then he remembered how Renalt had escaped the Blackwater. “Why did you let Renalt go?”

Hayes narrowed her eyes, quickly catching on to Sivan’s suspicion. “I cannot enter the sea witch’s lair myself. I used him to flush the two of you out.”

“Wrapped in iron kelp. Black almost died.”

“But you were with him, so he did not.”

Sivan opened his mouth to continue arguing, but abruptly realized Hayes had indirectly revealed her trust in him. She let Renalt go knowing he would lead the Royal Navy to the Cay, but she knew that while Sivan was no match for the sea witch, he would do anything to protect Black from the wrath of Grenaldian law. It was the closest thing Sivan would get to approval from Hayes, so he shut his mouth and started to sort through his notes.

Just from glancing over the map, Sivan could tell that it was a set of islands not seen in Grenaldia. The islands that littered the coast of the country were utterly random, clustered in groups and vaguely shaped into varying degrees of ovals and circles.

The islands on this map were carved into alternating curving daggers. It was like a giant beast had carved into the land before it had filled with the ocean. The collection of islands formed a staircase from one another, twisting the sea into a deadly maze that would be near impossible for a ship to navigate safely, map or not.

A small red 'x' was pinned upon the entry of a diamond-shaped cave at the center of the map. The ink had faded over time. What was once assumedly a brilliant vermilion was now dark and browned, as if it had been inked in blood. Sivan felt that was more appropriate, considering the danger one had to journey through to get there.

"Do you know where this is? It seems like a rather distinctive set of islands."

"Somewhere in Uncharted waters." Hayes gestured vaguely to the far more sparse side of the war table. It wasn't that the Uncharted territory was entirely devoid of land, but true to its name, the majority of it was still not charted on a map. At least one which any Grenaldian knew of. Few sailors had escaped the Uncharted waters alive, let alone any cartographers. "I believe it lies somewhere in the northern sea, but that's why you're here. To give us exact coordinates."

Sivan chose his response slowly, dread pooling in his gut. "Even if I give you the coordinates, there's no way the Blackwater can make it through these narrow passages. We'll be grounded as soon as we enter."

"Of course it can." Hayes's face soured, as if Sivan had just insulted her child. "As long as I navigate we will make it through without so much as a scratch."


Despite Hayes's reassurance, the dread was justified. Sivan wondered if these pirates' blind belief in themselves was a plague brought on by Black's terrible influence. Even if Sivan knew how fragile he was on the inside, Black still managed to strut around his crew like a self-important, incredibly dangerous peacock.

Sivan got to work, spreading out his mended translation notes. "This shouldn't take long...I hope."

He could almost feel Hayes's patience breaking. "...hope? It

better not. We've already lost more than a week thanks to Black's carelessness. I need those coordinates now."

"Okay, okay," Sivan tried to sound annoyed that she was interrupting his work and not very intimidated like he actually was.



It was sundown by the time Sivan stumbled upon the coordinates. The map hadn't been given a proper ruler, so there was no way of referencing the drawing itself. He had to read through every single piece of sirenath on the document to glean anything helpful at all.

He scratched the coordinates down upon scrap paper to give to Hayes. He'd also learned of several tips that would help with trying to navigate the treacherous waters, but somehow he doubted Hayes would listen to him.

Sivan lingered at the door leading out of the captain's quarters. No doubt the crew would stare openly at him the moment he stepped out of Black's cabin. He'd doubted their fervent love-making had gone completely undetected the night before, and the collar of his dark gray blouse was not nearly tall enough to conceal the mottled mess of marks Black had made on his neck.

He never enjoyed facing other's judgement, but he stepped out onto the deck nonetheless.

Brand was mopping the far corner of the deck and waved to him when Sivan stepped out. But, other than him, the pirates gave him no more than a passive acknowledgement of his existence. Either the crew was truly nonplussed by their captain having an affair with their former captive noble or Black had

threatened them into being polite.

Unable to decide which option was worse, Sivan trudged his way up to where Black was steering the wheel, Hayes at his side. He noticed that the crew was all wearing their lightest, thinnest clothes today. The sun was nearing the horizon, but it still shone so brightly it cast a heavy, oppressive heat over the sea. The pirates were sweating as they worked, a few of them collapsed to the side of the deck, unable to withstand the unending heat.

“My lord!” Black called when he saw him. The man’s voice was far too excited, and the entire crew glared at their captain for his happiness at the expense of their misery.

Sivan sighed and climbed up the stairs to the helm. Black completely abandoned his station at the wheel to snatch Sivan’s hand up and kiss it gently. He could practically feel the man’s joy through their skin contact, and it caused the furious blush to return to his face.

“Did you sleep well, my lord?” He murmured, breath ghosting across Sivan’s knuckles.

Sivan nodded and pulled his hand away. This was too much affection for him to deal with publicly. It was too much for him to deal with privately, either, but still Black persisted.

He pulled out the scrap paper and handed them to Hayes, who had angrily taken over the wheel when Black abandoned it. “Here are the coordinates.”

“About time,” she snapped.

Black smiled at her kindly, but his eyes clouded over with a shadow of irritation. “You’ll have to forgive my lord, Hayes. Facing death so often does interfere with his translation work.”

She grumbled, heedless of his sour tone. “Whatever, go away. I’m taking over the night shift.”

Black’s smile widened genuinely, and he turned away, gesturing for Sivan to follow. But Sivan waved him off to speak with



Hayes first.

"I've discovered a secret passage through the islands on the map," he told her.

She barely spared him a glance. "An unnecessary discovery. I can navigate those waters fine."

"But—"

Hayes cut him off with a dark glare. "There's no part of the ocean I can't travel. Uncharted or not." Yet she motioned to him, beckoning him to lean in so she could whisper in his ear. "If you truly wish to help, find some way to dampen the captain's mood. We can't enter Uncharted waters with him shining the sun on us at all times. It will attract too much attention."

Sivan sighed and nodded. Hayes was a far more intimidating task than Black was. He'd work on persuading the woman to listen to reason later. Toning down Black's mood was a far more realistic goal for the day, even if he didn't want to prevent the man from enjoying his happiness.

He followed the captain back to his quarters, and the crew broke whatever vow of deference they'd made to stare at the pair. Black opened the door for him, and Sivan did not like the far too pleased look the pirate captain gave him as he entered the cabin.

The door closed and Black was behind him instantly. Strong arms wrapped around Sivan, drawing him into the man's heady warmth. Black nuzzled into his neck, kissing his bruised copper skin tenderly.

"Are you sore today, my lord?"

Despite his aching back and perpetual embarrassment, Sivan shivered when Black's words ghosted against his skin. The part of him that had been blazing with passion the night before stirred, interested in how large the pirate felt behind him.

"A little, but nothing unbearable," Sivan murmured breath-

lessly.

“Amazing,” Black hummed behind Sivan’s ear, breathing against his earlobe. “You can take my cock so easily and still stand the next day. Perhaps I was too gentle with you...”

Sivan was grateful he was not facing the man, or else he would be sorely tempted to kick him away out of sheer embarrassment. Words like these reminded him that Black was indeed a pirate and was every bit deserving of that sincerely wicked grin. It was such a thrilling part of him, but it was also completely at odds with the part that wished to be Sivan’s overindulgent attendant.

As much as Sivan wanted to let Black seduce him back into bed, he couldn’t let this sit unaddressed any longer. “Black,” he sighed and pulled one of the man’s large hands from his waist. “I must speak with you about something. Will you listen?”

“Of course, my lord,” he said and let Sivan turn around.

“Good, well, it’s...it’s about that, actually.”

Black looked at him quizzically. “About what, my lord?”

“That.” Sivan sighed again as Black still seemed to not understand. “You know I’ve appreciated everything you’ve done for me. On the Spear, now, everything in between. But...” Sivan briefly lost his train of thought as the man’s green eyes glittered at being praised for practically nothing. “But I am no longer a lord, and you are no longer my attendant.”

Black was silent for a moment, his eyes refusing to come to any kind of realization. Sivan suspected he was being selectively slow-witted on purpose.

“But I’ve told you, my lord, it does not matter to me what your official title is. To me you’ll always be—”

“That’s not the point! If you wish to be intimate with me you cannot act like my attendant any longer!”

In lieu of any sensible reaction, Black merely shifted his gaze

to the platter of dishes poorly stacked on top of each other on the table. “You should have left the cleaning up to me, my lord.”

Sivan had to step back. The pirate’s willful ignorance was starting to irritate him more than any of the attendant issues had. “This is what I’m trying to tell you. Even if I were still a lord, I can still feed and clothe myself without your assistance.”

Black’s expression finally drooped as Sivan’s words set in. “I know, my lord, but—”

“If I were still a lord and you were still my attendant I would not have allowed this relationship to get this far. It’d be improper. That is why you can’t act like my attendant anymore.”

The pirate’s eyes grew stormy, his mouth setting into an indignant pout. “Why does that matter? It’s not like anyone on the Blackwater will care.”

“I care. Proper lords shouldn’t engage intimately with their attendants. I don’t want to feel like I’m taking advantage of you every time we kiss.” Sivan’s words were sincere, and he tried to be gentle, but they still provoked a humorless laugh out of Black. The pirate left Sivan at the pile of poorly stacked dishes and stomped over to the worn armchair in front of the unlit stove to collapse into it.

Sivan sighed for what seemed like the thousandth time since he’d boarded the Blackwater. Dealing with the petulant pirate his dear Nereus had become always extracted the most out of Sivan’s well of patience.

The room darkened, the blinding light coming from the windows suddenly tempered by a dreary cloud. There was a muted cheer from the crew behind the doors. At least he’d succeeded in souring the captain’s mood, although he felt quite bad about it.

Sivan followed the pirate over to the cold stove and sank to his knees next to the chair. “Black, I don’t wish to fight with you. I just want you to understand where I’m coming from.”

The man sighed, taking Sivan's hand when it was offered. "I'm trying to. But, I've always called you that. I cannot let go of it that easily."

Black's voice was soft, and for a moment Sivan was stunned by the resemblance he bore to his younger self. He could not fathom how he'd gone for so long without recognizing Nereus. His heart clenched, the former lord's weakness for the boy crushing the stubbornness inside him.

"Fine, you can still call me by my former title. Just promise me you'll at least try to let me take care of myself a bit."

The pirate nodded, his dark eyes lightening a shade. "I can do that."

Sivan smiled, squeezing his hand. "Thank you. I haven't taken a personal attendant since you, so I'm actually quite unaccustomed to it."

Green eyes sparkled above him, and Sivan found himself hoisted into Black's lap.

"Really? No one since me? You have no idea how happy that makes me, my lord."

Sivan flushed, but shot the man a disapproving frown. Honestly, this pirate was shameless. "There was a war, Black. I couldn't exactly bring an attendant to the front lines."

Black pulled him even closer, nosing against his cheek. "I would have gone with you."

"Of course you would have." Sivan sighed, again, exasperated.

The room brightened once more, the dreary cloud passing abruptly. A muted, collective groan came from the door to the deck.

"Black," Sivan said. He pushed the man away gently and motioned to the door. "There's something else. Hayes requested I try to sour your mood in order to assuage the effect it has on the

weather. It could be a problem if we are to bring such brilliant weather into Uncharted waters.”

He frowned slightly. “Is this why you brought up your title?”

“No, no. That was a genuine concern of mine. But, I don’t particularly wish to be on bad terms with you. I wouldn’t be able to bare it, actually.”

“My lord...” Black’s voice was touched, tears prickling his eyes. He hugged Sivan tightly, burying his face into the deep gray blouse he’d picked out for him. “Thank you. My heart is much weaker than it appears to be.”

“Oh, I know,” Sivan huffed. He began stroking the back of his head, his fingers sliding over the dark locks and occasionally ghosting over the gold beads. “But Black, I think you may be able to control it. You were able to keep up that wall of water surrounding Lissandry yesterday. Even while we were-ah, distracted.”

Black puffed a silent laugh against the gray fabric. “That’s one word for it.”

Sivan smacked the back of his head lightly. “You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Black confirmed. He pulled back, his expression more serious. “But I don’t think I can control this. I’ve never had much of a handle on the skies.”

“Hmm. Well, I have a feeling you have more control over it than you give yourself credit for. Can you at least try? For me? I don’t want Hayes glaring at me more than she already does.”

The pirate nodded, his doubtful frown melting into a warm smile. Sivan let Black hold him, giving in to his warm embrace.