

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 gage 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.