

Chapter 11

The Bloated Isles

Trading port.

That's what Lusa had called it.

But, after confronting the deluge of paperwork Black had finally agreed to bring him, Sivan no longer saw the Bloated Isles as a mere *'trading port.'* The sheer amount of goods that went through the spit of isles must have been enough to supply all of the Uncharted people several times over. Merchants came from all over the sea just to do business there. Sivan had asked for a map of Uncharted lands just so he could make sure they weren't making up point of origins.

For, despite the moniker, the Uncharted lands were in fact charted. Just, not by any human, and all of the maps were in the Uncharted language. Black had helped him translate them, and Sivan had redrawn a map with most of the major cities in the common tongue. It was likely the first of its kind, and Sivan was using it to resolve trading disputes.

He looked at the documents translated into broken common text. Of course the paperwork had been presented to him in their original Uncharted language, so Sivan had one of the overly helpful caecean accountants translate them for him. But, while her handle on the common language had been particularly great while speaking, it did not hold up to translation on paper.

"I'm going to have to learn Uncharted, aren't I?" Sivan groaned.

"I'm afraid so, my lord," Black said over the clamor of running water. He was preparing a bath for Sivan in the newly sized down bathtub. Sivan had convinced Black that he would be able to recover just as well in the lord's chambers he was now entitled to. But, said chambers had been built for someone Kaerius's size, and it had taken a combination of convincing his new caecean subjects that he would not in fact grow into the room, and a fair bit of magic from Black to make the room more human-sized.

The bath was still far too large. Steam rose up from a great circle of water set into the center of the floor, the tap water heated by Black's magic. But it was at least *smaller* than before, so it didn't take a literal day to fill. Yet it was still large enough for a siren to lounge in, should he be so inclined.

"But you are so good with languages, my lord," Black said, turning off the tap.

"Sure, but my gift starts and ends with human languages. I've tried learning Uncharted several times. The words just don't fit around my tongue right."

"That seems unlikely, you have quite the talented tongue," Black said with a smirk. "Ah, the bath is ready, my lord."

Sivan ignored the comment about his tongue and stood up from his desk, trying to mask the ache of pain that still haunted him. He walked over to the bath while attempting to undo the

many buttons of his shirt. The moment he was within Black's reach, the man was taking the shirt out of his hands and undoing the buttons for him.

"You don't have to," Sivan protested without any real heart to it.

"But I will anyways," Black said, as he always did. The man had taken to undressing Sivan like this, carefully undoing each button and tie one at a time. Sivan had found that his shirts had gotten more complicated recently. Sometimes it felt like they came with more buttons than stitches.

"I thought you would've picked up Uncharted while you were cracking sirenath," Black said as he worked his way down the first line of buttons.

"Oh, I have picked up a few phrases here and there. The language is complicated, but not insurmountable on paper. But..."

"But...?"

"But I like to learn to speak languages the same time I learn to write them. It helps solidify my grasp of the language as a whole."

"So you just have problems speaking it?"

Sivan hummed, rolling the issue around in his mind first. "Well, more or less. I never got very far with my self-taught lessons since I'd get so frustrated trying to pronounce the simplest of words."

"You know, you have a perfectly qualified teacher right here." Black pressed his hand to his own chest.

"You? Black, you're already working so much."

"And spending time with you would not be work. It'll be just like we're trying to decode the seal again."

Sivan smiled and leaned up on his toes to give the pirate a kiss. "I'd like that."

Black finished disassembling Sivan's shirt and carefully folded it on a table. Then there was a tug at his own shirt. He turned to find Sivan, naked, one foot in the bath. Steam curled up around his slim frame.

"Join me?" Sivan asked, his ears burning red. He blamed it on the heat of the water and not the fact he'd completely forgotten how to be forward with Black. The pirate had coaxed it out of him before with how audacious he always was in bed. Anything Sivan did was reserved by comparison. But Black hadn't touched him since they'd been reunited, and Sivan found himself hungering for an intimacy more intense than mere chaste kisses.

Black blinked a few times before the surprise on his face gave way to a grin. "Gladly, my lord."

The water was a little too warm, but Sivan sank into it nonetheless. He wanted to hide his embarrassment a little, even if the clear water did nothing to actually disguise him. Black undressed, taking much less time than he took with Sivan's shirt. Sivan covertly watched him from the bath, convincing himself the steam hid his wandering eyes.

When he'd woken up from his near death experience, Black had looked much thinner than when Sivan had left him in Estes' tomb. But after a few short weeks of Sivan making sure Black ate with him at least once or twice a day, the man was starting to look more like his old self. They both had needed to do some recovering.

Black entered the bath rather quickly, the water splashing up over the sides a little. His skin started to grow dark the moment his feet touched the surface, scales populating all over his legs and up his waist. When he had both legs under the water, the transformation truly began. His tail unfurled into the bath with a few sickening cracks of bone. Sivan winced sympathetically with

the sounds, but Black didn't seem to have any reaction at all. He remembered when Jhaeros had turned in the memory; it had looked so painful. But Black took it without so much as a frown.

Water splashed over the edge of the bath, flooding the grates built into the floor surrounding the rim. Black curled his tail around underwater, encircling Sivan with thousands of black opalescent scales.

He opened his arms to Sivan. "Come here."

Sivan did not need to be told twice, and gladly let Black take him into his arms and maneuver him against his chest. Strong arms encircled Sivan, keeping him close against the weight of the water. He let his head rest against the crook of Black's neck, his legs canted alongside the smooth curve of the siren's tail. It was intimate and perfect.

Silver hair clung to Black's chest, and the pirate plucked up a lock to twirl around a finger. "Your hair really has gotten longer," he murmured.

"I haven't had the opportunity to cut it," Sivan hummed.

"As I said before, it suits you."

"Oh," Sivan blinked, the memory of the dream coming back to him. "So those really were dreams we shared."

"Yes," Black nodded, rubbing his nose against Sivan's hairline. "The handprint I marked you with created a bond between us. And our...coupling made the link stronger."

Sivan remembered the sweet residual slick that came from Black's siren magic, and how he'd swallowed it countless times. Every time he had, there had been a flush of memories, of emotion, desire. Black would press into his mind like he would with his body. It made sense that it could manifest in dreams even when they were leagues apart.

"I was so sure my mind was just giving me a place to escape to. Had I known we were really together in those dreams,

perhaps we could have been reunited sooner.”

“Perhaps,” Black said with a frown. “I didn’t realize our bond had grown that strong. I didn’t realize it myself until I used it to reach into Jhaeros’s mind.” He traced his hand along the translucent shadow of Sivan’s enchanted arm. “Which I regret doing.”

Sivan brought his shadowy arm up to cup Black’s face. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Black smiled at him, but there was no real warmth to it. Nothing Sivan could say could sway that kind of guilt. He knew that all too well.

“When he cut off your arm, he also cut the bond. But that kind of thing isn’t so easily broken.” Black took Sivan’s hand from his face and held it in his own, rubbing his thumb into the palm in a distracting way. “My heart ticking away in your chest should have rekindled it to a degree.”

Sivan shivered, the motion of Black’s thumb on his shadowy palm was far more sensual than it had any right to be. He felt heat in his gut, pleasure unfurling from his chest. A sensation he had not even thought of in months.

“Shall we put it to the test?”

Black’s brow raised for a moment before a toothy grin took over his expression. “Oh, my lord, I am not sure if you have recovered enough to take that.”

“I feel fine,” Sivan said, too quickly.

Black hummed, swirling his thumb over Sivan’s palm again. “Nothing would make me happier, but I’m afraid I must stand firm. I do not want to hurt you.”

Sivan couldn’t help the pout that slipped onto his face.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Black laughed lightly. “I would not deny you of other pleasures, my lord.”

“You are enjoying the fact that my title has been reinstated

too much.”

“Immeasurably.”

Black let go of his palm to dip his hand under the water and squeeze the inner meat of Sivan’s thigh. Sivan gasped, his cock twitching.

“You’re teasing me,” Sivan groaned. He gasped when Black tugged at his hair to crane his neck back, nipping at the tender skin of his throat.

“I would never.” Black whispered, hot against his pulse.

Skillful fingers danced around the tender inside of Sivan’s thighs before gently taking the head of his hardening cock and rolling the pad of a thumb across the tip. Hot veins of pleasure took him, making Sivan shiver and moan. Black’s took his time working him to fullness, using only the pad of his thumb against his sensitive head. Sivan panicked a little at how quickly this was undoing him. He didn’t want this to end so soon. But it had been so, so long since he’d felt pleasure outside a dream. His time spent as Jhaeros’s captive had only been two months, but it yawned inside him into years of loneliness and grief. It lingered still, so Sivan craved moments like this; intimacy and need to stave off the bitter memories.

Perhaps Black sensed this, for he set a leisurely pace to his hand around Sivan’s cock. His strokes were slow, decadent. He savored Sivan with just his hand.

“*Black-*” Sivan groaned, his voice already a husky warble of need. His hands grasped at the pirate’s face, bringing him close to smash his mouth against his own. It took a moment for Black to respond, perhaps surprised by the lack of grace from his usually prim lord. But then, with a chuckle, he dove past Sivan’s waiting lips, sharp teeth biting down on his lower lip.

Black picked up the pace of his hand, and Sivan’s moan of protest was swallowed along with the pinpricks of blood drawn

from the siren's teeth. He could feel himself slipping into the steady slope of orgasm. Black's hand, his *teeth*- It all was sending him faster and faster down the hill.

The pirate's other hand gripped his waist, keeping him close. When Sivan tried bucking his hips into the delicious tightness of Black's hand, he was stopped, held in place. It only made him groan louder.

"Black-" he rasped, voice hitching halfway through his name. The man nipped at his neck in response, sharp pins of pleasure intensifying Sivan's need. He thought about stopping it all, begging the pirate to just fuck him over the edge of the bath. He wanted more, but it was also too much-

And then Sivan was coming into Black's hand. His orgasm was wrung out of him, sweet and desperate.

He clung to the siren as he came down from the high, his body tingly and weightless in the water. They kissed, Black's teeth less bitey to give Sivan's swollen lips relief.

"I can- I can return the favor," Sivan suggested, glancing down into the water.

Black paused for a moment. Sivan hoped he was considering whether or not to rescind his ban on more *strenuous* activities, but then the man said, "there is no need, I am not in the mood."

It took another moment for the words to make sense to Sivan. This had never happened; Black was *always* in the mood. Perhaps he was teasing him somehow, but there was not the usual glint in the pirate's eyes. Indeed, there was nothing in his eyes. They were cold and flat, and no matter how much Black affixed his mouth into a smile, no real light ever reached his eyes.

"Okay," Sivan said quietly. He now felt small and insignificant in the man's arms. Even when Black guided him to lay his head down on his broad chest, Sivan did not feel the content warmth he should have.

He grit his teeth, trying to keep the pin pricks of tears from manifesting on his face. It was embarrassing, but this was something he'd come to love about Black. The man always made him feel so *wanted*. Sivan could always see it in the light green sparks of his eyes. Brilliant, hot flashes of the sun that consumed Sivan's being with desire and need.

But that light was gone.

Something had changed. He wasn't sure what had happened, but the Black he had loved was now warped and bent. The pirate may be able to put on a decent act of his former self, but Sivan knew. He was keeping something from him, deep and dark and secret.

Or, at least he hoped Black was hiding some secret.

The alternative was too terrible—

That Black was not hiding anything at all and simply did not want him anymore.