

Chapter 16

The Blackwater

They had a string of exceedingly nice days. The fair weather even went so far as to break up a storm as it approached on the horizon.

The crew of the Blackwater were bewildered to say the least. They had consigned themselves to only seeing the sun when their captain was too drunk to be anything other than happy. Many of them had not seen the sun for more than a few hours in a very long time.

There were whispers among the crew that Sivan was really a very powerful witch who had cast a spell on Black while they were in the hold. It was of course unfounded and ridiculous, but nonetheless everyone except for Hayes and Black seemed to be a little suspicious of Sivan now. Whoever could walk into that darkness with nothing but an unimpressive sword and a lantern and tame their unmovable captain surely had to possess dark powers.

Sivan couldn't stand overhearing their whispers. As it turned out, pirates were horrible gossips and even worse at doing it quietly. He would have been content to stay within the captain's cabin if it were not for the captain himself.

"What would you like to wear tomorrow, my lord?" Black asked pleasantly, laying out some outfits onto the long wooden table.

Sivan hummed, keeping his nose to his translation notes to show that he wasn't interested. The sun was growing low on the horizon, lighting the cabin with a warm glow. Black's cabin had always been rather tidy, but after coming out of the hold it had reached a spartan level of cleanliness. Between the glow of the sunset, the opulence of Black's furniture, and the tidy presentation, Sivan honestly would have guessed that he was in some wealthy lord's manor and not aboard the most feared pirate ship along the Grenaldian coast.

His disinterest was not taken seriously by Black, and Sivan found his mess of notes being fastidiously organized into neat stacks by the pirate. "Please look at them, my lord," Black requested, plucking the page Sivan was reading out of his hand.

Given no choice, Sivan stood up and circled the table, looking at the outfits.

"These are too small," he determined.

"Forgive me for disagreeing my lord, but they are not," Black retorted politely.

Sivan looked at the garments again. They were all finely tailored, the pleats and seams done with an expert hand. They all held some shade of gold or silver with an occasional splash of embroidered blues or greens. Sivan reasoned he could maybe squeeze into the vest and blouses if he wanted to be uncomfortable, but there was no denying that the pants were too small.

"Hold on..." Sivan looked closer at the vests. They were all

of Grenaldian make, and the style of the collar indicated that these were made roughly a decade earlier. It had been such a long time it had taken Sivan a moment to recognize the clothes as his own. “These are mine! From—from the Spear!”

Black smiled at him, seemingly happy that Sivan finally noticed. “Yes, they are. I managed to save some of your wardrobe before we left the island.”

Sivan pinched the bridge of his nose, his head throbbing. He thought he would be able to understand Black better after their reconciliation in the hold. Yet for some reason the man was reverting back to his attendant days, serving Sivan dutifully despite his many protests. Then there were instances like this, where Black did something so deeply sentimental it bordered on obsession.

“Do you not like them anymore?” Black’s voice went soft, his clear green eyes marked with worry.

“It’s not that!” Sivan scrambled to save the situation. He found that he had to be exceedingly careful with his words or the man would twist them into new ways for Sivan to be disappointed in him. After escaping the hurricane Sivan wanted to keep Black happy long enough for them to at least make land somewhere. “It’s just. These are from ten years ago, Black. They won’t fit me.”

“Not to worry, my lord. I had a tailor-witch enchant them to accommodate whoever wears them.” Black brightened, worry vanishing instantly. He suspected that the man was manipulating Sivan’s newfound sympathy for him in order to get his way.

Sivan relented and picked out one with green floral embroidery on the collar of the vest. Black put the other outfits away neatly, leaving the chosen one out on the table. As the pirate prepared a hot iron for his clothes, Sivan found his way back to the chair he’d been sitting in and slumped down in it. He was

growing truly wearisome of this play they were enacting. Ever since they returned from the hold Black had insisted on preparing Sivan's clothes, his meals, his every possible daily need. Sivan had accepted such things from his attendant in the past because that was what was expected of a lord, but he hadn't taken another attendant since the war started. Grenaldia was a different country now, and Sivan was a different man.

And Black was supposed to be a dreaded pirate lord, feared by all who crossed his path. Yet here he was, ironing Sivan's clothes.

It felt more than a little foolish now.

"You know," Sivan started, watching the audacity of the twin barracuda tattooed arms delicately pressing creases out of a blouse, "this isn't what I meant by 'redemption.'"

Black did not look up at him, but Sivan didn't miss his grin. "I know."

Sivan sighed, losing the battle over this. Maybe Black needed to be his pretend attendant once again, to get it out of his system. He didn't miss how happy it had made the man over the last few days, so Sivan didn't have the heart to argue it with any force.

There was a firm knock on the door and Hayes walked in without waiting for a response. She took in the sight of a cursed pirate lord ironing clothes, and her already hard expression soured more. She shot a glare at Sivan, as if she thought he was forcing the captain into this domestic role.

"I'm taking over the watch for the night. Is there anything to report?" Hayes asked Black.

"Not that I'm aware of," Black hummed. "Vivianne has been giving me hourly reports."

In truth, the Uncharted woman had only disturbed them once that day. It was not uncommon for the captain or Hayes to let another crew member oversee things for awhile, but Black

had been making it a habit over the last few days. He preferred to spend his time obsessing over Sivan's needs now that he had been given permission to do so again.

As much as it was overwhelming to Sivan, it clearly irritated Hayes to no end. Sivan had unintentionally turned their legendary demon of a pirate captain into a housewife.

"Come with me, we need to talk," she said to Black, her voice low.

Black set the iron aside and looked up at her, eyes darkening. "Whatever you have to say to me you can say to me in here."

Sivan was about to offer to leave the room, but Hayes didn't give him the chance.

"Fine!" Hayes stomped a boot on the floor, grinding it into the wood. "Have you even set foot out there today?"

Black's face remained hard, no part of his expression giving her an answer. But Sivan knew he hadn't.

"The crew needs to see you, Black. After that hurricane of yours most of them are starting to question your competence. Now you've locked yourself away to what? Iron clothes? Do you want your crew to mutiny against you?" she spat at him.

"I'd like to see them try," Black glowered.

Hayes rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, you'd win in a fight against any one of them, but these are pirates. The second they think you are not serving their best interests they will cast you out."

A thick silence fell over the room. Sivan felt incredibly awkward being a silent participant in this conversation, but he really didn't know enough about pirate politics to say anything. Even if he did, he was indirectly the cause of this conflict.

"I'll take the night shift," Black said. The reality of the situation finally seemed to sink in for Black.

"Good," Hayes returned sharply, satisfied at the gesture but still irritated.

Black slipped on his overcoat, but turned to Sivan before he left. He bowed, sweeping up one of Sivan's hands in his own.

"Forgive me, my lord. I must attend to this tonight instead," the pirate said to him. His voice was low, apologetic, but the way he said it almost made it sound like he was breaking a far more scandalous promise than simply not cleaning up after Sivan. That paired with the man's large hand in his own and his exceedingly handsome face made Sivan's heart race.

"It's fine," Sivan said, his voice much smaller than he had intended it to be. "You don't have to do any of this for me anyways," he said a little more firmly.

Black grinned at him, one part wicked, one part affectionate. "I know, my lord."

The captain left the room, leaving Sivan trying to suppress a flush under Hayes's scrutiny.

After the door had shut behind Black, Sivan dropped his head to the table, letting out a large exhale. "I swear I'm not making him do any of this," he groaned into his hands.

Hayes growled quietly. "I am aware. But you're not stopping him either."

Sivan dragged his face up, looking at her miserably. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Beats me," she shrugged. "How's the translation coming?"

Sivan brightened a little at being able to share his progress. "Well, actually! It's a complicated language, but I should be able to fully translate that map soon."

"That's good." Hayes nodded, but seemed uninterested in hearing further. Her mind still seemed preoccupied with the captain's faltering position with his crew.

"What..." Sivan started, unsure of how to word his question. "What happens if the crew thinks Black isn't serving their best interests?"

Her dark gaze hardened. “The crew will call for a vote. If he loses they will give him the option of accepting it and remaining on the Blackwater as part of the crew. Or, more likely...they will restrain him and drop him off at the nearest deserted island.”

Sivan frowned. There wasn't really a concern of Black being stranded on an island now that he could turn into a siren. Although, the loss of the Blackwater would be a mighty blow to the man who was far more fragile than he projected to most people.

Sivan suspected Black would not accept the vote peacefully if it came down to it.

“If you want to help with his image, come with me to the mess deck,” Hayes said.

“Why would that help?” Sivan asked.

“Right now they're afraid of you. I hear whispers among them about you casting a mind control spell on the captain.”

Sivan scrunched up his face. “That's ridiculous. I've don't have any magical talent whatsoever.”

“I know, but they don't. Especially since you haven't left this room much at all.”

“Well, so far I haven't been giving the opportunity,” Sivan returned.

Hayes motioned towards the unlocked door. “I'm giving it to you now.”

The two of them left the cabin trying to be inconspicuous, but Sivan's proper noble attire and Hayes's cloud of severity did not go unnoticed by the crew. They were also not unnoticed by Black, who was at the helm, his hand on the wheel twitching as if he wanted to stop them.

Hayes ignored him and shuffled Sivan off to the floor below.

Obsidian Uncharted eyes and varying colors of human eyes stared at them as they walked through the dining hall. The day

shift had just started eating dinner, and they were clustered in groups around wooden tables. They watched Sivan openly, a few hostile, a few nervous. Some of the pirates were curious, wondering why the captain's pet and/or master was stooping low enough to eat with them.

In truth, Sivan had already eaten. This was a fact Hayes seemed to know already, and she went over to a barrel of lager and poured both of them a pint.

Sivan drank it, trying not to grimace at the taste. He had never enjoyed lager. His noble upbringing taught him to have a palette for aged wines and fine liquors distilled many times over. Still, the stares from the crew made him uncomfortable, so he drank it down dutifully.

Hayes brought him over to an empty table and took a seat next to him. "Look at them all. Quivering like mice."

Sivan glanced over the grizzled pirates decorated in varying shades of grey clothes and scars. "I think your judgement of the crew is a little off."

Hayes grunted dismissively and took another drink of her lager. The woman was odd. This was the first time Sivan had seen her actually sit down, and she seemed like it was a relatively uncomfortable task for her to do. Her tense nature was only outmatched by the severity of her presence. Hayes could easily have captained her own ship and had the crew operating at peak efficiency on intimidation alone. Yet she chose to follow Black for whatever reason. No doubt Black had his own qualities when he wasn't distracted by his own emotions, but Sivan wondered where that loyalty came from.

"You've known Black for quite a long time, haven't you? He said you escaped the prison with him," Sivan tried to say casually, the buzz from the potent lager making him talkative.

"He told you about that?" Hayes looked a little surprised,

just as Brand had when he had mentioned the prison. “Yes, something like that. We’ve been sailing together ever since.”

“I see.” Sivan felt a tiny pang of regret. He’d missed watching Nereus mature into the man he was today. Hayes had seen it, Brand had seen it, and likely some of the other crew had seen it as well. Instead, Sivan had left him in enemy territory to fend for himself.

“He’s told me about you. Of course he has, he won’t shut up about you when he’s drunk,” Hayes grumbled. Sivan’s ears flushed, but she continued. “I thought you had been close. I have to say I’m surprised it took you so long to recognize him.”

“Ah...yes, well, I feel rather foolish now,” Sivan said quietly. “He’s quite different now. Very different.”

“Piracy will do that do a man,” Hayes said glibly.

Sivan ignored her tone and continued, “Right. And his eyes are darker. And it’s more than just the color. Is that part of the curse as well?”

“The curse?” she asked, frown deepening.

“Um, the curse that turns him into a siren? Does he have more than one curse on him?” Sivan asked, confused, since she didn’t immediately know what he was referencing.

“Ah...that curse,” Hayes said into her lager before taking a swig. “He’s certainly under one or two spells of his own designs.”

Sivan couldn’t quite parse what that meant, and the woman really didn’t look like she was in the mood to clarify herself.

“My lord,” a voice with a heavy Vheltan accent interrupted them. Sivan looked up and saw a rather pretty woman standing before him, holding an envelope. Her face was soft and open, her skin milky white, her hair fair as a spring day. The woman looked determined, gripping the piece of paper while staring at Sivan fiercely. “I am told you can read Oltinish.”

“I can,” Sivan confirmed. He turned to face her, and realized

she had captured the attention of most of the pirates there. The woman was a little too clean and slight to have been with the crew for long, and Sivan wondered where she came from.

“Can you please translate the letter for me?” She offered the letter out to Sivan, although her grip on it was so tight he wasn’t sure if she’d let go of it.

“What’s your name?” Sivan asked. He’d of course translate this letter for her if it were a personal matter, but he had been allegedly kidnapped for a translation. At this point Sivan felt like he deserved to at least know what he was getting into.

“Marquis,” she answered. “I worked on the smuggler’s ship until your captain liberated us.”

“Liberated?” From what? Sivan had thought the pirates had executed everyone on board. He was not aware that anyone from the ship had survived, yet alone done better for it.

“In a sense,” Marquis continued. “A group of us had been tricked into working for the master of the smuggler’s ship. Our contract was to end when they made port, but they made a point to never return to shore. We were in effect prisoners.”

“That’s quite awful,” Sivan sympathized.

“Captain Black gave us a choice when he boarded the ship: join the fight against the smugglers or be killed along with them. So we joined.”

Of course they had. Could that have really been called a choice?

“He’s promised to drop us off the next time we returned to land. And with enough fare to wherever home is,” she said quietly, a little disbelief on her own face at the idea of it.

“I see,” Sivan responded, just as quiet. So Black hadn’t just blindly killed everyone on the island. His methods were still far from being admirable, but at least he wasn’t as far gone as Sivan had initially feared.

“This letter is from my husband. He...he’s from Oltin, but he can’t write the common tongue. Nor can I read his native tongue.”

“I see,” he replied again. “Hand it over to me. I will translate it for you.”

Her face instantly illuminated with hope, and she carefully placed the letter in his hands. The envelope looked worn, as if she had opened and closed it many times. Indeed, when Sivan took out the paper inside he could tell that the creases had been worked often with worry. The woman had clearly poured over the letter despite not being able to understand what it said.

“My dearest Marquis,” Sivan started, reading the rather sloppy Oltinish handwriting. “I apologize for not writing you in the common tongue, but I did not have any time to find a translator before the smuggler left. He tells me of the master on the ship and how he is holding you there. I will do my very best to save you, but I know how stubborn and resourceful you are. If you can escape before I make my way to you, know that I will wait for you on the first of every month in the tavern in Varis where we met. With all my love, Yorick.”

Marquis had tears in her eyes, and she was clutching at her blouse as if it could contain her heart. “Thank you,” she said tearfully, taking the letter back from Sivan. She returned to a table of men and women who were also too clean to be part of the Blackwater crew. The pirates returned to their meals. Some of them still watched Sivan suspiciously, but there were far fewer eyes on him than before.

“Very nice,” Hayes murmured after the din of the mess deck returned.

“What exactly is so nice?” Sivan asked, frowning at her.

“I brought you down here so you could indoctrinate good will towards Black. What you just did was a small step towards that.”

Sivan's frown deepened. "I only helped her because she asked."

Hayes shrugged and knocked back the rest of her lager.