

Chapter 12

The Bloated Isles

Another week went by, and there was still no sign that Jhaeros had even heard of Sivan's escape and subsequent takeover of the Bloated Isles. What Lusa had told him was true, of course; the trading port was too integral to the Uncharted economy for Jhaeros to siege outright, but Sivan expected *something* from the obsessive siren king.

Sivan had brought it up with Black, who had not been surprised at all.

"My brother has become deeply untrusting and bitter," Black had said with an equally bitter laugh. "We went diving into his unrestrained mind. I already knew much of what my brother had gone through, but seeing it through his own memories opened my own mind to how lost he's truly become. I pity him to some degree, don't you?"

Sivan nodded silently in agreement.

"Well, Jhae no doubt sensed that pity," Black continued. "It's

not a feeling he's been at the mercy of for many years. I doubt he's keen to experience it again. He left you alone after that night, didn't he?"

Sivan nodded once again.

"There you have it. I'm sure he's still plotting our demise, but he will do so from afar. At least until we force his hand."

"Force his hand?"

Black grinned, sharp teeth gleaming. "When we find the real Corseque of Estes."

This was, in fact, the topic during Sivan's first time back on the Blackwater. It had taken some convincing to get Black to agree to the reunion. He was set on keeping Sivan held as an invalid despite his remarkably swift recovery.

Despite the scowl on her face, Sivan was glad to see Hayes alive and well on the Blackwater. Her dark eyes followed him up the gangplank as he boarded.

"Well, well, the *lorð* has graced us with his presence," she said to him, her tone a mocking drawl as she pushed off the railing of the ship and bowed to him. "It is *lorð* again, right? Seems like you're fated to be one, no matter how hard you try."

"It's good to see you too, Hayes," Sivan responded politely, not taking her bait.

She half groaned, half growled at him before tugging her tricorne hat down so she could sulk more fiercely.

Sivan paused, looking around the ship. There were other crew mates about, cleaning the deck or carrying barrels, but they all gave Hayes a wide berth. In fact, all of them were trying very hard to not look at her whatsoever.

"Is something wrong?" Sivan asked her.

Hayes barked out a gruff laugh. "I'm just not pleased with the company on my ship tonight."

As if on queue, the uneven clank of a seaglass leg against

wood signaled Eliza's arrival on the Blackwater.

"Ahh, it is good to be back on my ship," the sea witch said, arms open wide as she stepped aboard.

Hayes spit bitterly at her, hackles raised. "Not your ship, *witch*."

Eliza smiled, teeth sharper than Sivan remembered. She stepped towards the bristling woman and snatched her chin, forcing her to look up into the icy gleam of Eliza's eyes. "Do not forget the debt you owe me, my sweet."

Hayes practically hissed as she stepped out of Eliza's grasp, her dark eyes like two burning coal fires. The sea witch chuckled and sauntered into the captain's quarters.

"I'm going to skin that woman one day," Hayes growled.

Sivan knew he should probably leave the matter alone, but his curiosity got the better of him. "What debt do you owe Eliza?"

Hayes rounded on him, the ferocity in her face forcing Sivan back a few steps. "*What do you know of debt?*" She spit at the floor again before stomping off to the captain's quarters.

A low chuckle behind him reminded Sivan that Black was lingering on the edge of the ship. "They don't get along."

"I can tell," Sivan sighed. "Do you know what debt Hayes was speaking of?"

"I do." Black turned the answer over in his mouth, clearly considering how much he should tell Sivan. "Hayes was gravely injured when we escaped the prison island. Eliza saved her from death. I doubt she will ever actually try to collect that debt; Eliza just likes holding it over Hayes' head."

Sivan hummed in agreement. He had seen enough of the sea witch's vindictive nature that he did not doubt it. "Is that why Hayes is bound to the Blackwater?"

Black smiled at him, but it was a pitying expression. "Not

quite. Sorry, my lord, but Hayes does not like people to know of her...situation. I fear she would kill us both if I told you."

"Indeed." Quite frankly, both women scared him a little. If they ever had the ability to get along, their combined efforts could have ended the war in a day. Or, more likely, they would end up starting a new war of their own.

Suddenly, Black's face grew sour, his glare burning at the gangplank. "What is he doing here?" He growled.

Sivan looked behind him and saw Lusa boarding the Blackwater, black eyes sparkling as he marveled at the ship. "I invited him, be nice."

"He can't be here. Not on the Blackwater. Not in—"

—*in the captain's quarters*. Sivan completed the sentence in his head. He could not understand Black's hatred towards his nurse. The jealousy was unfounded and irrational, but the pirate had become quite overprotective of Sivan since they'd been reunited. It was understandable, but unfounded nonetheless.

"Lusa worked in the Uncharted castle for years. He knows how Jhaeros operates. His insight could be vital in avoiding him as we search for the corseque," Sivan said, keeping his tone even and calm to soothe the antsy pirate.

"Don't worry, I'm only here to observe. I wouldn't dare step on your toes, *captain*." Lusa gave him a mock salute. Black's lip curled up in a snarl, baring his sharp teeth at the caecean man.

Sivan wanted to smack both of them. "You're not helping," he grumbled at his nurse. Lusa just beamed at him, making Black growl louder. Sivan gave in and smacked both of them before pointing at the captain's quarters. "Come on! Let's get this over with."

After corralling the two men into the door, Sivan was less than pleased to see that Black was pulling out a chair for him at the head of the table. Eliza was at the other end of the table, and

every other seat had been taken up by Hayes, Brand, and Lusa. Sivan did not feel like he should be the leader of this meeting, but it *had* been his idea and he *was* the reigning lord of the isles. He sat begrudgingly, Black taking the seat to his left, Hayes scowling on his right. He noted that Hayes, now digging a knife into the map table, had chosen the seat furthest away from Eliza without having to actually face her.

Everyone looked at Sivan, expecting some great plan. He hoped he had one.

“This war has been going on for nine years. Too long, especially when my— when Grenaldia has been losing the fight for nearly as long. Well, during my imprisonment, I found out why Jhaeros has been letting it drag on for so long: he plans to raze the land into the sea.”

“And how the fuck is he going to do that?” Hayes snarled.

“With leviathans,” Black answered for him.

Sivan heard Hayes’ jaw click.

“Jhaeros showed me the leviathans he has captured. There are...many of them. I have only seen glimpses of their power through visions Eliza has shared, but I have no doubt in my mind that the king will succeed if he is not stopped.”

“It won’t happen,” Eliza interjected. “Even if what you say is true, leviathans cannot step on land. It poisons them, killing them in minutes.”

“*That* is why Jhaeros wants the Corseque of Estes,” Sivan continued. “I translated sirenath tomes while I was held prisoner. They say that the corseque will allow the wielder to control the leviathans, even giving them the power to walk on land without death at their heels.”

“So we have you to thank for this new development,” Hayes seethed, digging her knife deep into the table.

Sivan tried not to let his unease show on his face. He was

aware he was inadvertently the source of this information, even if he had been under duress at the time. “Had I known what I was revealing, I would not have done the translations.”

“What’s done is done,” Black said before plucking the knife out of Hayes’s hand. He plunged the tip into the wide expanse of Uncharted territory on the table’s map. “Jhaeros must be stopped now more than ever. We must find the real corseque before he does.”

“The real corseque?” Lusa asked, looking a little lost.

“Aye, we found Estes tomb months ago, but tha’ mutinous rat Vivianne got ta it first,” Brand supplied.

“I may have helped,” Eliza added, giving a thin smile.

Lusa laughed weakly, shifting away from the sea witch a fraction.

“I’ve heard whispers that Vivianne set up shop in Corsair,” Hayes said. “It’s a costal city in the western continent of Belator. Sounds like she used the Estes fortune to purchase a tidy little casino there.”

Sivan wasn’t sure how Hayes had heard such rumors, being bound to the Blackwater as she was, but the fire in her eyes told him she knew the information to be true.

“Then to Belator we sail,” Sivan declared. “Time is of the essence. It’s only a matter of time before these rumors reach Jhaeros as well, and he will realize that a wealthy former Blackwater pirate must have gotten her hands on Estes’ treasure and therefore the corseque.”

Everyone started arguing at once.

“I won’t allow it. That corseque should remain buried. It’s too dangerous,” Eliza said.

“We should just barge in to this damn Corsair city. If it’s on the coast, my cannons can reach them just fine,” Hayes nearly shouted.

“There is a good chance Jhaeros will not make that connection. If this Vivianne has any brains she will keep her history on the Blackwater a secret. Going to Belator will only draw Jhaeros’s eye there,” Lusa reasoned.

“Aye, we should be at the very least makin’ a better plan. Send me ta Belator country. I’ll bring ye back more reliable information,” Brand offered.

“Are you saying my information’s not reliable?!” Hayes barked.

“Tha’s not-”

“You’re stuck on a ship, my sweet. Birds can only tell you so much.”

“I don’t talk to fucking *birds*—”

“*Quiet, all of you!!!*” Black roared, standing up from his seat next to Sivan. Anger rolled off him in dark waves, the shadows of his form fluctuating and deepening. The room grew darker, tendrils of shadow flaring off the siren’s anger. “I will go Belator to find the corseque. Then I’m going to find my brother and use it to split him in two.” His voice was deep, distorted, his hatred bleeding off like heat from black flames.

The group was dead silent, fear a pallid shock on their faces. Everyone but Lusa was used to Black’s outbursts, but they were never like this. The darkness Sivan had glimpsed in the man’s dead eyes had revealed itself; a sharp and toxic version of the pirate that could not be reasoned with.

Still, Sivan had to try.

He slowly, so slowly, placed his real hand on Black’s trembling arm. His skin was hot, too hot. “Yes, that is the plan. We *all* want to find the corseque. We all have the same goal.”

Black heaved a few deep breaths, coal-dark eyes skating over Sivan as if he did not recognize him. But Sivan did not move, did not take his hand off Black. Then, in an instant, the darkness

folded back into the siren's form. He looked a little stunned, unsure of what had just happened. Black nodded and tried to shake off the daze as the sat back down.

The silence was tense. Sivan knew the others were giving each other concerned glances, but he could not bear to meet them.

"We need to enter the city covertly," Sivan said, trying to break up the tension and steer them back on track. "If we enter cannons blazing, we will assure drawing Jhaeros's gaze."

Hayes huffed, she would not be able to join them even if she agreed with their tactic.

Eliza sighed. "I suppose I can't convince you to leave it alone, will I? Fine, I will lend you what aid I can. Besides, I have a score to settle with Vivianne."

"Remind me again," Hayes started, her voice lightened with amusement. "How did Vivianne get the corseque from you?"

Steel blue eyes twitched, the sea witch subtly seething. "... she drugged my wine."

It was such an obvious method, one so easily avoidable. But Eliza was a powerful witch. No one had even considered poisoning her in years. No one would have dared.

But Vivianne did. And Eliza hadn't seen it coming.

"Right, well, we should depart soon. Like I said, time is of the essence," Sivan said.

"Absolutely not," Black said. Everyone tensed for a moment, but Black's voice was back to normal, the supernatural anger once again contained deep within him.

"What?" Sivan asked. What could be the problem now?

"You're not going," Black said, voice firm.

"Hmm, yes, I'm not sure if you've recovered enough to travel that much," Lusa agreed, although there was a strain of that awful amusement in his voice.

“You’ll just weigh us down,” Hayes said, as if she wasn’t stuck on the ship too.

For a moment Sivan couldn’t say anything, then irritation flared in his throat. “Oh, I’m sorry, do any of *you* speak Belatoran? Hm? *Anyone?*” He looked around the table, knowing very well none of them did. “I didn’t think so. If this is meant to be a covert venture, we will need to talk our way into and through Corsair without drawing attention to ourselves.”

“He has a point,” Eliza said.

“One week.” It was Black, giving Sivan an odd look, as though no one else was in the room. “If you can fully regain your strength in a week, you can go.”

Part of Sivan wanted to bristle, to point out that none of them were in fact in charge of him and he could very well go where he damn pleased. But after Black’s little outburst, Sivan wanted to keep him placated until he could figure out what was going on.

“Fine. We depart in a week.”



The meeting ended, and Sivan hurried Black back to their room in the caecean manor. When they were safely inside and away from prying ears, Sivan turned on him, his face serious.

“What is wrong with you lately?”

“What do you mean?” Black drawled as he shrugged out of his jacket.

Sivan had to reign in his overwhelming urge to smack the man again. “Don’t give me that. What was that outburst on the Blackwater? You’ve been so angry lately, and you haven’t — you haven’t been yourself.”

Black rolled his head to the side to look at him. “Maybe I’ve always been this way, and I’m just tired of hiding it.”

Sivan knew that wasn't true. He knew the bright, hopeful Nereus, and the maddening but endearing Black, and this man was neither of those. "Please, just—" Sivan stepped closer to him. "Tell me what has darkened your heart so I may help you."

Black huffed out an aborted laugh. "Nothing has *darkened* my heart. Yes, I am angry. I am angry at *everything*. I have a right to be angry. My brother took you from me. He took *part* of you. Now I have you back, but— You'll have to forgive me if I cannot just let that go."

The heart in Sivan's chest ached. It was his heart, but it was also Black's. They ached together; the scars had healed but the memories were still hot and fresh in both their minds.

"Okay," Sivan murmured, and took Black's hand in his own. He kissed the calloused knuckles and ran a shadowy finger across his pulse. "I understand, but- Just remember you are not alone. I am here with you. So is everyone on the Blackwater." He left out Lusa. Black didn't need to be reminded of him then. "You don't have to rely on your own strength. We have plenty of anger too, you know."

Black smiled at him, and it was so close to being real Sivan almost convinced himself he didn't still see that simmering darkness in the man's eyes.

"Ah, if you are coming with to Corsair, you will need these—" Black turned away and pulled out a long box he had hidden away in his jacket. Sivan had no idea how he had fit it in there while wearing it, but he supposed that wasn't the most unusual thing he'd seen that night. Black handed the box to them, and just from the weight of it, Sivan instantly knew what it was.

Opening the box, his twin sabers glinted in the moonlight filtering in through the windows. "You kept them," Sivan breathed.

"Always," Black murmured, kissing the top of Sivan's head.

He plucked both sabers out of the box and presented them to Sivan with a flourish. “But this time, please keep them with you.”

Sivan laughed, and took the swords, their filigree handles curving around his fingers with a swelling familiarity. “I will.”