

Chapter 15

The Blackwater

Sivan made sure Renalt was put in Hayes's cabin despite the man's insistence that he could help. He was barely able to stand at that point, and Sivan knew he would do best out of the way of the frantic pirates.

The storm had escalated to a hurricane while Sivan was below deck. Gale force winds tossed the Blackwater into chaotic, foamy walls of water. Hayes was at the helm, concentrating on directing the crew as she continuously adjusted the wheel.

One of the sails had not been tied up properly and was now unfurled, catching the wind. The wood of the masts creaked painfully at the force, testing the strength of the ship's core. The crew was trying to haul the sail back up. Pirates dotted the yard of the mainmast's topsail like panicked crows on a branch. Dragging the sail back into place was slow and dangerous work in this storm.

As much as it creaked and groaned, the Blackwater seemed

quite resilient to the forces of the sea. But that didn't stop water from pouring in through the waves that crashed down on them. A line of pirates were hauling water out from below with buckets. Sivan was among them, passing along heavy buckets as they came to him.

A scream up top diverted Sivan's attention to the topsail. One of the pirates had been flung off the yard and was now hanging by his foot tangled in a rope. The other pirates were too busy trying to keep the sail from falling again to save him.

Sivan broke the line of water carriers and started climbing up the mast. He didn't allow himself to think that this was a pirate who had been party to his capture; he just knew that he'd seen far too much death in his life to simply turn away someone who could be saved. The mast and ropes were slippery with rain, and the wind constantly tested his strength. But Sivan persevered and reached the man flailing in the ropes.

"Stop thrashing! I'll get you down!" he tried to shout over the roar of the wind, but it was unlikely the man heard him. Sivan pulled at the ropes around the man's foot to no avail. They had been twisted into knots during the man's attempt to break free.

He needed a knife.

"Oi!"

Sivan could barely hear someone yelling at him from directly above. It was Vivianne, and she had one of her tentacles unfurled and pulling out the knife from her belt. She still had both arms pulling up the sail along with the rest of her tentacles, which had seemed to multiply in the storm. Sivan reached out and caught the knife as it was tossed to him. He cut at the pirate's ropes, sawing away each thick bond one by one. Finally, the man was freed, and he was safely turned upright while holding onto the mast.

The pirates above him finally got the sail tied up, and all of them cheered at their success. Sivan thought it was odd that he could hear them so clearly now when it had been almost impossible to hear even himself shout.

Then, in a matter of seconds, the rain stopped and the sun sliced through the clouds. The wind died down to a mere strong breeze. Most of the crew looked confused, but a few understood what had happened.

They were in the eye of the hurricane.

The *Blackwater* drifted to the center of the circle of clear sky and dropped anchor. It was surreal to be surrounded on all sides by the wall of storm that had nearly capsized them. The crew was taking survey of the ship to assess the damage. Yet she continued to maintain her reputation as neigh indestructible as all that needed to be repaired was a torn sail and a handful of broken lines.

Below deck held another story. The stores were a mess, barrels exploded and boxes overturned. A few of the livestock had died in the turbulence, but for the most part the majority of their supplies were salvageable.

The hold was still an unknown. None of the crew would even go near the stairs which led to *Black* down below. A dark energy seemed to spill out of the staircase, suggesting the man did not want to be disturbed.

Sivan was on the top deck, leaning over the railing. He was frowning at the wall of dark clouds that was now his new jail cell. Except this time he was trapped in it with the entirety of the *Blackwater* crew.

“What did you say to him down there?” Hayes demanded as a greeting. For the first time Sivan saw her looking haggard. That was to be expected after she had somehow maintained her position at the helm for the entirety of the hurricane, but for

some reason Sivan had assumed it impossible for her to look anything other than severe.

“Nothing that he didn’t deserve,” Sivan said obstinately, turning his gaze back on the storm.

“Fuck,” she swore, pinching the bridge of her nose. Sivan could feel her glaring at him, trying to decide on how to intimidate him into doing what she wanted. Instead she leaned on the rail and slowly slid down to sit on the deck. “You’re going to fix this,” Hayes said, but there wasn’t any of the usual growl to it. Black had been sulking for days now and was likely skipping his command shifts to avoid Sivan better. How long had Hayes gone without rest?

Sivan let her rest there. The crew anxiously worked around her. They likely had never seen the first mate in this state of exhaustion.

He made his way down the decks, and the pirates down there looked at him with a range of expressions. Some knew he had caused the captain’s mood to spiral out of control. Others had witnessed him help on the top deck and save a crew member’s life. None knew what to think of him.

Sivan grabbed a lantern hanging from the wall. He would need it where he was going.

Brand was waiting at the staircase down to the hold. Perhaps he was guarding it, although it was unlikely the old pirate would do much good against a siren throwing a tantrum. Sivan marched up to him and put out his hand. “Give me your sword. I’m going down there.”

The old Grenaldian man was surprised for a moment before shaking his head at him. “It won’ do any good, I be telling’ ye.”

“I’m not going to hurt him, but I don’t know what I’ll find down there,” Sivan tried to reason.

“Ye wouldn’t be able ta hurt him if ye tried,” Brand said seri-

ously, frowning at the dark staircase. "I've only seen him be like this once. When we escaped th' prison island."

"When he was thrown into a tar pit?" Sivan instantly remembered the story of how Nereus became known as 'Black.'

Brand raised his eyebrows, surprised at Sivan's knowledge. "So he told ye. I not be sure if it started thar, but tha' was th' first time I saw him as truly dangerous. He wasn't...all thar' in th' head." He tapped his temple with a finger to make the point.

"He blacks out?" Sivan asked, surprise in his voice. The story Black had told him had sounded heroic. This sounded like something else.

"Somethin' like tha', yes. He could recognize me and Hayes, but all those other prisoners..." Brand looked at him, pity in his face. Not for Sivan. For Black. "It wasn't his fault, but it tore him up fer ages after."

Sivan faced the dark shadow that cut into the staircase below. Whatever was going on down there seemed like it was dangerous not only to himself and the crew of the Blackwater, but to Black himself as well. Sivan had already witnessed his long lost attendant turn into a devil of a pirate and then into a monster of a siren. Nothing could surprise him at this point.

Since Brand was not in support of him going down there, Sivan used the trick that had become old hat for him on the Blackwater.

He stole the pirate's sword and marched down the stairs with it into the hold.

Brand shouted at him from above, but the man did not follow after Sivan. It was cold and pitch dark down here. He had no magical talent, but even he could sense the raw power coming from somewhere deep in the hold. Sivan could not fault the crew for not wanting to venture into the ominous void he was now embraced in.

The lantern was his only reprieve from the dark, but even it seemed to wither the further he went in. It barely cast enough light for Sivan to see where he was stepping. The waves had made their way down here during the hurricane, so he was currently wading through several inches of ice cold seawater.

“Black!” Sivan called.

There was no response other than the gentle sloshing of water in the hold.

He continued his trek into the bowels of the ship. Strangely, the water seemed to get warmer and thicker. Sivan held his lantern close to the waterline to see what was happening to it, but it didn’t appear any different. Slightly murky from the debris in the hold, but still clear enough for Sivan to see his own boots.

Before bringing the lamp back up, Sivan thought he saw a very faint glow further in. He squinted, trying to get a better look at it, but it flickered back into darkness once he raised the lamp. He tried holding the light behind his back, and the glow appeared once more. It was just a sliver of green in the dark, but it was still too dim for Sivan to really understand what it was.

He approached cautiously, his nerves tensing upon remembering the faces of the pirates who had fled the hold in horror. Several more of the green slivers of light appeared, each one uniformly placed in a row.

Sivan was upon the lights now, but he still could not make heads or tails of what it was. His lamp had nearly gone out, although it still contained a fair amount of oil. The darkness had overgrown here, and it clotted the light the lamp produced until it barely shone at all. He shook the lantern, trying to persuade it to give out more light, but it only made an unpleasant rattling noise.

A splash of water was the only indication Sivan had before he was smacked on the back of his knees by something wet and

hard. He buckled under the hit, dropping both sword and lantern, and falling face first into the shallow water.

The water was even thicker over here. Unprepared for the blow, Sivan accidentally swallowed some of the strange substance that saturated the water. It was warm, strangely sweet, and it sat on his tongue even after swallowing. He struggled to stand back up, feeling for the lantern in the water as he rubbed at the slime that was covering his eyes.

Instead of the lantern, Sivan's hand met warm scales. He panicked for a moment, thinking it was the crocodile who had revived and had dealt him the blow just now. Then he opened his eyes.

The faint green glow had exploded at Sivan's touch. Bioluminescence lit up the area, allowing Sivan's eyes to view Black, fully transformed into a siren.

Except there was something wrong with him.

The green light was coming from Black himself. Scales of his siren tail lit up in brilliant greens, forming delicate, winding patterns. The slimy substance which had thickened the water seemed to be coming from him, as it covered him in a wet gleam. From that substance, thick ropes of shadows unfurled, undulating around Black. The man was unconscious, but the tentacles that formed from his shadows supported him, keeping his torso raised above the water.

Sivan suddenly felt very weak, his strength leaving him as he started to go lightheaded.

"Black..." he rasped, hoping the man would respond to him before he passed out.

The pirate himself did not stir, but the shadowy tentacles did. They shot out to wrap themselves around Sivan. One went around his waist and brought him to his knees. Two snaked around his thighs, binding them apart. The adrenaline from the

attack must have shocked the lightheadedness out of Sivan's system, for he was wide awake now. He tried to get a hold on the tentacle around his waist, but it would not budge. The thing was a dark shadow, semi transparent. Sivan could just see himself through it.

"Black! Wake up!" Sivan yelled at the unconscious man. He struggled against the bonds, but they only wrapped tighter around him.

"Come on! I know I said some harsh words to you, but this is no way to deal with your emotions."

Again, no response.

The tentacles began sliding against his body in a way that made Sivan's face burn red. Indecent thoughts flitted around his consciousness. Black's hands on him on Lissandry. The way the pirate groaned his title like a sinful prayer. The tentacles squeezed, and Sivan had to stop himself from grinding back. He shouldn't have been thinking these things now of all times. He'd been able to keep the memory of what happened that night buried amongst the chaos of the invasion and following storm, but for some reason his lust was now catching up to him with a vengeance.

Still, Sivan had years of experience in compartmentalizing memories he didn't want to deal with. So he grit his teeth and shook off the sudden surge of want.

He inched closer to Black, ignoring the shadowy tentacles to get closer to the man himself. He reached up, taking the pirate's face in his hands.

"Black! Captain! Come on, Black!" Sivan's voice was beginning to sound more frantic as he realized the man was truly unresponsive. Panic began to set over him at the thought of Black never waking up again.

"Nereus!"



Finally, there was a reaction on his face. His brows twitched before bright green eyes opened, meeting Sivan's worried frown with surprise. The man blinked a few times, seeming to have a hard time figuring out if he was awake or if this was still a dream.

"My lord...?" Black rasped, his voice ragged from whatever sleep he had fallen into.

Sivan sighed in relief and let go of his face.

"Finally, you're awake. This has gotten out of control, Black." The tentacles started to retreat back into the normal darkness around Black, letting Sivan kneel back into the water. The green

lights on his body still lingered, allowing them to see one another in the pitch black hold.

“Out of control...?” Black was watching Sivan carefully, confusion creasing his brow.

“There’s a hurricane out there. We’re in the eye of it now, but we’re trapped here until you get rid of that storm.”

The surprise that had crossed over Black’s face when he saw Sivan dissipated, and it was replaced by a sullen frown.

“I can’t control it.”

Sivan resisted the urge to shake him and tried talking some sense into the pirate lord who was starting to resemble a pouting child. “Sure you can. You’re the one who brought this upon us, aren’t you? Hayes said your emotions make this storm worse. Just control your emotions, and the storm will settle.”

Black’s eyes darkened, the clear green turning back into murky pools. He turned away from Sivan, rolling onto his side. “I told you I can’t control it.” The dark tentacles began to emerge from his shadows once more. They wrapped around Black’s torso, folding him into darkness. “I’m a failure. Everything I touch goes wrong.”

“You’re not —!” Sivan reached out to touch him, but stopped, remembering how the tentacles had held him hostage moments before. Black was disappearing into the dark, the green lights on his tail that illuminated the hold going out one by one.

“You said it yourself. I’m a disappointment,” the pirate continued. “It’s why you left me on that island.”

The comment stung, more than Sivan would have thought. “That’s not true,” he whispered.

“Yes it is!” Black said indignantly. “You hate me. I saw it on your face when you saw me as a siren for the first time. I’ve turned into the monsters you’ve fought so many of.”

Sivan didn’t know what to say. None of this was true, but

convincing Black of it when he was like this was impossible.

“I had to become this monster,” a weak voice came from the dark. Sivan only knew it was still Black by the timbre and location. “I had to become a pirate, a criminal, this wicked man. I had to.”

“Why?” Sivan asked. It was all he could do.

“So I could get off that island. So I could come back to you.”

Sivan’s heart clenched. He could not imagine all the horror Nereus had experienced on the Spear after he had left him there. His attendant had turned to curses and piracy as a means of escape, as a means of returning to Sivan.

But this couldn’t be the whole story. At some point Nereus had become independent enough to not just become a pirate, but become a pirate lord. One who was feared all across the Grenaldian coast. At some point there was nothing stopping Nereus from finding Sivan. At some point ‘Nereus’ was lost and ‘Black’ took over.

Yet here he was, throwing a tantrum in the bowels of a ship because Sivan had yelled at him.

Nereus was still in there, and Sivan knew what to say to him.

“I see. I understand now why it took you so long to return to me.”

There was no response from the shadows, but Sivan knew Black was listening.

“The dreaded pirate lord Black, the demon captain of the Blackwater, has been a tale between sailors in the Royal Navy for quite some time. But all those stories were just that. Stories.”

The water in front of Sivan sloshed, like Black’s tail had twitched.

“In reality there is no pirate lord. There is no criminal. There is no wicked man.” Sivan’s words were firm, his tone turning harsh.

Tentacles unfurled and Black's baleful face glared back at him.

"There is only a child. Throwing a tantrum!" Sivan shouted, sitting up on his knees.

In a flash Black emerged from the dark, shadowy tentacles falling behind him. He rose to meet Sivan, his glare intensifying into a snarl.

Sivan held his ground. A small part of him wanted to flinch away from the display of intimidation, but he knew doing so would doom Nereus to forever live in the dark.

"Of course I am disappointed in you! And it's not because you're a pirate or even a siren!"

Black's eyes bore down on him, watching Sivan's every move.

"It's what you did with that power. You could have returned to me years ago, and I would have accepted you with open arms. But you chose to stay in the dark and instill fear from there."

Sivan rose a hand slowly and touched the man's face gently.

"But it doesn't mean you're incapable of redemption," Sivan said with a smile. "Making mistakes is easy. Learning from them is what makes a person stronger."

Black's face went slack, the anger melting into something confused and a little hopeful.

"I believe in you now just as much as when you first became my attendant."

The tentacles retracted, disappearing into the darkness. Black's eyes cleared once again, the dark shadows dispersing to reveal the clear viridescent shade from his youth.

Sivan wiped away a droplet of water that had dripped onto Black's cheek from his damp hair. "I tried to return to the Spear. More than once. It was in the heart of the Uncharted invasion, but I still found sailors who were insane enough to follow me into it. Every attempt was a failure, and for that I am sorry."

Those clear green eyes began to water, tears forming on thick, dark lashes. Black swayed, like he was going to crumple under Sivan's touch. Sivan brought his other hand up and held his face even more firmly.

"There is no excuse that will forgive me for breaking that promise, but I hope you will do so anyways."

Black surged forward, hugging Sivan tightly. He sobbed into his chest, his large arms shaking as they encircled his lord who had finally come to save him from the dark.

"My lord, my lord..." the pirate cried, his voice broken and tender.

Sivan hugged him back, kissing the top of his head. He stroked Black's hair soothingly, holding him steady through the sobs. His own tears came, but they were not as desperate as the pirate's. The relief he felt at having Black conscious and willing to speak to him again was enough to temper the guilt.

"I promise I will redeem myself to you, my lord," Black whispered into his shirt. "I'll become worthy of your approval once more."

"Okay, okay, there will be plenty of time for that. I'm not going anywhere," he patted the man's head. It still felt ridiculous with Black being a full grown man and not the child Sivan had once known, but the pirate smiled at him like he had never known joy, and Sivan felt that made it worth it.

Black hugged him once more, his large hands spreading across Sivan's back affectionately. Sivan shivered, the touch reminding him how he had been at the mercy of the man's shadowy tentacles not long ago.

"Are you cold, my lord?" Black asked earnestly, looking up at him with clear green eyes.

Sivan coughed, looking away from him although there was only darkness to see. "Yes, well, it's rather chilly for me down

here. Let's return to the deck, shall we?"

Sivan led the way, although he couldn't see much of where he was going. The bioluminescence from Black's tail was obscured by water as he followed behind him now, but Sivan could not let himself be led because he would be tempted to stare at the enormity of the man's wide back. The pirate's body lit a fire in Sivan he could not control, and it did not pair well with his unending shame at lusting over his once innocent attendant.

"Yer alive—oh!" Brand greeted them when they exited the hold.

Sivan held his head high and resolutely did not look at any of the other pirates on the ship. He did not want to know what they thought of their dreaded pirate captain now following behind Sivan like a happy puppy.

If he had looked, he would have seen them unable to decide if they should be more shocked at the cheerful state of their captain or at the man who went into the dark with nothing but a sword and a lantern and returned with an obedient pirate lord. No one dared to stop them, and no one dared to say a word.

When they made it to the upper deck, Sivan finally let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. The hurricane had begun to break up, dark clouds dispersing under the rays of radiant sunshine. Black snaked around him, his tail curling around Sivan as he took his place next to him.

He was smiling, and Sivan wasn't sure if the sun or the man's smile was more brilliant.