

Chapter 15

Unnamed Island

There was one thing left for Sivan to do before they departed for Belator. Black had tried to talk him out of it, even Eliza said it was a lost cause.

“Your father will not show up,” Black said, tone gentle, though a tense line ran through his words.

“Maybe, but we will still wait a little longer,” Sivan replied quietly. He looked out at the expanse of empty sea, no ships in sight.

He had sent a bird to Varis, to the Admiral of the Royal Navy himself. To Sivan’s father. Logically, he knew he owed no allegiance to the man who had disowned him and tried to execute Black. Yet he wasn’t doing this for Tristan Montgomery. He was doing this for Varis, for Grenaldia. He was doing this for all the land Jhaeros would try to raze to the sea. The least he could do was warn them of the danger if they failed.

A tiny speck on the horizon slowly faded into view. Sivan

raised binoculars up to confirm that it was a ship. Indeed, it was, but it bore no discernible flags.

“No flags,” he said.

Black snarled and deflated a little. “It’s probably him, then. We’re on the edge of Uncharted territory. Any ship flying a Grenaldian flag spotted would be attacked.”

It was true. The island they were on was little more than a rock, usually not marked on any maps. But Sivan had memorized his father’s war table map and always found it odd that there was a speck of land nestled perfectly in the crosshairs of the graticule lines. They had talked about it once, as an oddity. So it was easy enough to chose a location he could give coordinates to that only his father would recognize.

Sivan turned towards Black, who’s expression had grown dark. “I want you to wait offshore when he comes.”

The pirate scoffed at him. “And give him a chance to steal you away? I don’t think so.”

Sivan breathed in deeply, willing himself the patience to deal with Black when he was like this. “Black, you almost killed Lusa for beating me in a *sparring* match. What are you going to do to the man who tried to cut off your head?”

Black shrugged. “I don’t care what he does to me. It’s you I worry about.” Then, he turned to walk up the grassy hill, muttering, “I’ll not have you stolen again.”

Sivan let go of the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. It’d been like this since that night. Black could pretend he was his usual self well enough in front of others, but now that Sivan had been told the truth of his impending madness...there was nothing hiding him from Sivan. The darkness was setting in, possessiveness and paranoia ringing his eyes with shadow. And whenever Sivan tried talking to him about it, Black would always sulk back into himself, slipping further and further away

from him.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, not letting himself cry before facing his father. He'd find a way to bring the pirate he loved back from the brink, but now was not the time to show weakness.

The unmarked ship arrived at the shore with little fanfare. It was small and understated, a marked difference from the grandeur the admiral of the Royal Navy usually travelled with. Sivan was grateful he had the Blackwater moor on the opposite side of the island. They kept it just out of sight, beyond the swell of land and trees. He wanted this exchange to remain as non-confrontational as possible, and the key to that was seeing that his father felt unthreatened by the pirates who had slipped through his fingers time and time again. Sivan had *tried* to keep Black from coming along, but that had been out of the question.

"It's good to see you, father," Sivan greeted the earl with. Tristan Montgomery and two guards equipped with spears stepped off the dinghy that made the short hop to the sand. The spears were browned, sorely rusted despite their sharp points. The Royal Navy had enforced strict rules on maintaining their weapons, but Sivan wondered if they even had any blacksmiths left.

"Father? I see no son of mine here," the earl spat.

Sivan clenched his teeth, but gave him no other reaction. It hurt, but this situation was more important than his own feelings. He chose to defect from Grenaldia, from his family, to find his own place in the world with Black. He had made the decision, and there was no going back.

Looking at his father, Sivan could see the last few months had not been kind to the man. A fresh scar had been cut into his jaw, red and new against his usually severely cropped beard. The earl had let it grow out, perhaps as a failed attempt to hide the

scar, but it only accentuated the haggard shadow that lay over his features.

“How has the war been going?” Sivan asked.

“You mean you don’t know?” his father hissed. The disdain on his face was expected but the severity of it made Sivan frown. “Grenaldia is dead. We have no navy left. The remaining aristocracy has fled inland, along with any who could afford to follow, which weren’t many.”

Sivan tried to hide his horror, but a sharp breath still escaped him. “How did this happen? We endured for so long.”

“*You* endured nothing,” the earl corrected ruthlessly. “*You* hopped on the first pirate ship that crossed your path and abandoned us to the wolves.”

Before Sivan could stop him, Black had his sword drawn and pointed it at the earl. The guards behind him quickly readied their spears, but the pirate was too quick and had the side of his weapon against the earl’s throat.

“Take that back,” Black hissed, rage making his voice deep. “Your *son* gave you nine years of his fucking life to fight for his country. And the second he gets injured you sold him to the highest bidder.”

Sivan’s father did not flinch. His steel eyes glared at Black, hollow but for the anger that persisted deep within them. “And you stole him away. Corrupted him beyond recognition. Cut out his heart.”

There was no way his father could have known about the loss of his own heart or the transplant. It was just a metaphor, and he knew it would hurt Black to the bone.

Sivan stepped forward slowly, and pulled at Black’s elbow. “Please, Black, don’t...”

It took several moments for Black to back off. He only pulled his sword away after Sivan pinched his elbow with a twist. The

pirate sheathed his weapon and let the earl step away shakily. Sivan let out a small sigh of relief. The familial love he had for his father had dimmed after being disowned, but he still did not want to see the man harmed.

“I see you’ve been having fun trying to keep these murderous pirates in line,” the earl huffed as he rubbed at the thin line of blood at his neck.

Sivan couldn’t help the terse smile from forming on his lips. “Actually, I’ve been a prisoner of King Jhaeros for the last few months.”

His father frowned, disbelief evident in the lines of his face. “Uncharted don’t keep prisoners.”

“No, they don’t. I was a prisoner of the king, not Uncharted. Regardless, during that time I learned what Jhaeros’s true intentions are with this war.”

A harsh laugh slipped out of the old admiral. “You needed to be kidnapped to understand that? The Uncharted King wants to purge us from the ocean entirely.”

“Not just the ocean,” Sivan warned.

“What?”

“Jhaeros has been capturing leviathans. I’ve seen them with my own eyes. He plans on wielding their power to *‘raze the land back into the sea.’*”

“...I don’t believe you,” the earl hissed.

Sivan squeezed his eyes shut. He thought his father might react this way. “You don’t have to believe me, but please- you know it’s only a matter of time before Jhaeros makes a move on Varis. Evacuate the city. Please, just — get yourself out of there.”

A quieter but just as harsh laugh slipped out of the earl. “If what you say is true...no land will be safe.”

The sound of the ocean sliding against the shore filled their ears. There was nothing Sivan could think to say that could give

his father hope again.

“Perhaps. Just, I wanted to warn you. That’s all,” Sivan said before turning away from him.

“Wait,” the earl stopped him with. “Do you really think I can let you leave here?”

Sivan turned around and saw the guards had stepped forward and pointed their rusted spears towards them. Black moved in front of Sivan on instinct, exposing his throat to the guards.

“You’re not taking him from me again,” Black warned. He had no weapon drawn, but the rage in his voice was enough to make the guards falter briefly.

“Oh, I didn’t mean him,” the earl laughed. “I meant *you*.”

What? He wanted Black?

“You know, there’s been a rumor going around that you, little Nereus who turned into a murderous pirate, is the long lost brother of King Jhaeros. I didn’t think much of it, until I learned you were only *half* siren. Same as the Uncharted king. Not many of you around, are there?”

“No, but I can crush you just as well as he can,” Black sneered.

“I’m sure,” the earl sneered back. “But these spears-” He plucked one from the guards. “These spears are forged with iron kelp. I’m told they can *actually* kill a siren.”

Black’s face faltered for a moment, the painful memories of being bound in iron kelp surely resurfacing.

“And your brother, well, he’s put out word that he wants you captured. Alive or dead. I’m sure this is all futile, but if all it takes is one pirate’s head to end this war, well...”

The spear glinted the dim light of the overcast sky, and Sivan saw it was not rusted at all, but honed to a deadly edge between layers and layers of steel and iron kelp. And that flash of light

was all it took for Sivan to rush forward, twin sabers drawn.

He felt the warm spray of blood on his hands before he realized what he'd done.

Steel eyes looked at Sivan in shock as the earl's body trembled and collapsed to the ground, dead. Sivan went down with him, both sabers imbedded in his father's chest.

These sabers- They had been a gift for Sivan's thirteenth birthday. His father had given them to him with a note: *for my son, who is so gifted with a sword he needs two.* Tristian Montgomery was not one for superfluous compliments, so it was nearly the only physical evidence Sivan had of his father's approval. He had treasured the note almost as much as he had treasured the blades. It was possible that, somewhere in the ruins of the Montgomery manor, in some decaying drawer, the note remained.

Sivan was dimly aware of the guards reacting to the earl's murder, of Black drawing his sword and killing them before they even got close. Sivan tried to cry out, but his sob died behind his teeth. He tried to pull out the two sabers, even though it wouldn't have helped, his father was already dead. But they remained fast in the dead man's chest, as if he was set on taking them back from Sivan after all this time.

"They've seen what happened. They're sending more men to shore," Black said urgently, but Sivan did not react. He could not react. Reacting had gotten him here, with his father dead on the dot of nothing land on the war table they had once bonded over.

"My lord, we have to go. My lord-"

A warm hand on his back.

"Sivan!"

He jolted up, meeting Black's serious gaze with a lost look. "I couldn't- I couldn't let him take you from me."

A look of pity crossed over the pirate's face, although Sivan could not tell if it was genuine or not.

“I know, my lord. Please, let’s go before the others get to shore.”

Sivan nodded numbly and let the man lift him up, leaving his father’s corpse in the sand. Black led him up the swell of land towards the Blackwater, but Sivan’s eyes remained fixed on his twin sabers imbedded in his father’s chest, watching their red-tinted glint until the land blocked his vision.

He was hazy on how they back on to the Blackwater. He barely registered the crew’s looks of shock as they saw him sword-less and covered in blood. Black shouted orders at them Sivan didn’t hear, and before he realized it, the spray of seawater on his face signaled that they were once again out at sea, racing away from the lone Royal Navy ship.

Sivan hadn’t moved since he’d gotten on the ship. It was like he wasn’t there. He was still on the shore with his father’s corpse, or maybe he was still thirteen and feeling the weight of the twin sabers in his hands for the first time.

A hand at his back brought Sivan back to the present. He gasped and turned to see Black’s face set into an unreadable mask. “To the cabin, my lord,” he murmured, and led him into the captain’s quarters.

Inside, Black brought him over to the stove, smoldering with dim embers. He pushed him into the large, well-worn armchair the siren would use to dry off. Ottoman kicked out of the way, Black turned to the stove to toss more wood inside. “We need to get you warmed up,” he said quietly to the stoking embers.

Was it warm? Sivan could see the fire come to life, but he felt no heat. He didn’t feel much of anything. He supposed that was better than the alternative.

Deft hands worked Sivan’s bloodied vest and shirt off, and a washcloth wiped the splatter from his face. Then Black took one of his own shirts that had been drying next to the stove and

wrangled Sivan's unresponsive limbs into it. The pirate frowned as he looked at him. Sivan was a million leagues away, his body a warming husk. Black stepped away to find a quilt and draped it over him. He tucked it closely around Sivan's head, making him look like one of those nuns who used to give him etiquette lessons. Sivan wondered if they had made it inland with the nobility. He hoped so.

"Hey," Black spoke, and Sivan blinked at him, forgetting he was there. The pirate was kneeling in front of him, Sivan's smaller hands gripped firmly by Black's larger ones. When had he done that?

"You're compartmentalizing, I know you are. It's what you do. And that's fine. You compartmentalize all you need right now. But I need you here. So come back to me when you've found a place to put this, okay?" Black's calloused thumbs rubbed over his knuckles as he spoke, drawing Sivan back to the present.

He was being so tender, doing exactly what Sivan didn't have the presence of mind to realize he needed. And although Black's hands were warm, it was the only warmth he could feel from the pirate. His eyes remained that dead coal color. Years of taking care of his lord, of knowing every facet of Sivan's psyche- that had taught Black what to do. He was going through the motions

He closed his eyes, unable to look at the pirate's face. It was too much, he couldn't let any part of Black be sucked into this. Nereus had spent too long stuck in one of the boxes of his mind.

"It's a big one," Sivan whispered, voice cracking.

"I know," Black said, just as quietly.