

Chapter 11

The Northern
Spear

Sivan woke up to the noise of a precise knock at the door. It opened without him saying anything, and he groaned, pulling the covers over his head stubbornly.

“It is past seven, my lord,” a familiar voice informed him. “We have much to do before the Spearhead arrives.”

The blanket atop him was cruelly yanked off his body, the cool air hitting his skin with a snap. Sivan reluctantly sat up, and looked at the boy who had woken him. His attendant stood before him, shoulder length black hair tied up into his usual half ponytail. “Nereus. Why do you always wake me up in such a cruel manner?” he grumbled.

“Because my lord would not wake up otherwise,” the boy said politely, but his small grin indicated to Sivan that he clearly enjoyed it. Nereus had grown several inches since he had saved Sivan’s life, and he was now nearly as tall as the lord he attended to. The boy’s eyes were still a crystal clear green, bright and

sharp whenever Sivan spoke to him. He was beginning to grow out of his youth, his jaw starting to become more defined. By any account he was growing into a very handsome young man, but his past as a starved vagrant still clung to his figure.

Nereus stepped forward as Sivan kicked his legs over the side of the bed and offered a cup of tea to him. The lord took it gratefully, blowing on it despite knowing his attendant always brought him the morning tea at the perfect temperature. He took a sip, trying to will himself into full consciousness through the action. A clinking of metal signaled that his breakfast was ready, and Sivan sat down at the table in front of one of the tall windows to eat it.

“Looks delicious,” Sivan hummed and dug in. The main dish was a bowl of spicy chili, a soft boiled egg nestled in the center. “Did Eliza make this one or you?”

“I did,” Nereus replied. His clear green eyes looked for approval, hoping the meal was to his lord’s tastes.

Sivan laughed lightly. “It tastes lovely. It’s getting harder and harder to tell which one of you is making my meals.”

Nereus still looked somewhat disappointed. “I had hoped I would have surpassed her by now,” he admitted.

“You still have plenty of time to do that,” Sivan said, trying to be reassuring. But they both knew that would soon no longer be a reality. Nereus was fifteen now, and Sivan’s father had already made it clear that the boy would be joining the navy once he reached the recruitment age in a year. The earl had allowed his son to take in the vagrant child who had saved his life, but as the years passed the less Sivan’s father tolerated his son having a nameless attendant by his side.

Besides, Sivan would be of age to marry in a month’s time, and his future husband would not likely allow him to keep his childhood retainers.



Sivan redirected his attention to the window, noting how cold it was for such a clear spring morning. “What’s your take on the weather today?” he asked his attendant.

Nereus stepped forward and opened a window, and Sivan shivered as the cooler air entered his room. The boy inhaled, clear eyes peering out over the sea and sky. He frowned at the seemingly eternal blue and said, “It is going to storm today.”

“Really?” Sivan asked. “There isn’t a cloud in the sky.”

“No, but there is a cold breeze coming down from the north. It carries something dark with it,” Nereus continued, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

Sivan looked out over the ocean as well. Uncharted territory lay to the north, so anytime a southbound cloud wandered over to the little island the native folk would immediately herald it as a new sign of the end days. Sivan knew Nereus usually did not share his fellow islanders’ superstitions, but the boy had a knack for predicting the weather.

“Then I’ll have to bring an umbrella today,” Sivan decided, and returned to eating his breakfast.

Nereus continued to stare out towards the northern sea, his face unreadable. It took Sivan complaining about being cold for his attendant to snap back to his senses and close the window.



The next stage in their morning routine took place in the training arena atop the manor. A portion of the roof had been leveled off to provide Sivan a place to practice his fencing. Canvas had been stretched on poles over the area, allowing Sivan to practice in rain or shine.

Despite being the son of an earl who governed over the entire military of Grenaldia, Sivan was not allowed to actually become a sailor. Not that he had any particular desire to risk life and death in a real battle, but it frustrated him that his fencing had only ever been a means for his father to show off his youngest child’s talents. So that when the time came, Sivan would have plenty of offers from nobles who had been enamored by his skill with a blade in competitions.

Sometimes he felt like a pet his father had groomed for show. A deadly pet, but a pet all the same.

It was not like that when he trained with his attendant. Sivan had gifted the boy the sword nearly two years ago and had been training him in the art of the blade ever since.

“Your back toe is overextended,” Sivan critiqued as he parried away an attack from Nereus.

The boy fixed his foot immediately and followed through with a lunge. Sivan easily caught the oncoming blade with his own, but was surprised at the force of it. Nereus had a long way to go with his footwork, but his strength had been growing by leagues lately. The lord was still able to disarm the boy with a lightning fast twist of his sword, and it sent the other blade clattering across the arena.

Sivan lowered his sword, allowing Nereus to hastily pick up his fallen blade. “Your lunges are sloppy. You focus too much on might, and you step forward before your blade even moves. Your opponent will always be able to see it coming.”

“Understood, my lord!” Nereus shouted as he reclaimed his sword. He was breathing fast, sweat collecting on his forehead. He looked nothing other than determined, and faced Sivan once more with burning green eyes.

“Now, try to disarm me,” Sivan said. He raised his sword, gesturing with his free hand for his opponent to make the first move.

Nereus advanced upon him well, his footwork controlled and precise, just as Sivan had taught him. But he was focusing too hard on the movements and lost all of his force. This was fine if he were fencing for play, but if he wanted to win in a competition, or more importantly if he wanted to win in a battle, he had to perfect both footwork and force.

Sivan parried away Nereus’s blade to the side, but the boy

had been mid lunge and fell forward when his attack had been foiled. He crashed into Sivan, who was able to catch him by the arm. “Now, now, Nereus. You aren’t giving a training example. Give it your all.”

Nereus looked up at him, face burning red. This happened far too often for Sivan to pay it much thought. For some reason his attendant always flushed with embarrassment whenever they collided in training. Sivan figured it had something to do with either being ashamed he hadn’t done the drill well or the fact that the boy likely did not have much physical interaction on the streets.

Nereus squeezed Sivan’s arm for a fraction of a second before he stepped back. Sivan wasn’t even sure if he had imagined it or not.

His attendant faced him once more, eyes determined, sword raised. This time he waited, staring Sivan down until his lord was forced to make the first move.

Then he returned the attack with such force it rattled Sivan’s arm. His footwork was nowhere to be seen, but the ferocity in which he struck made Sivan retreat back a few steps. The boy continued to swing, completely unaffected by Sivan’s attempts to finesse his more skilled hand into disarming the attack. Sivan’s back hit a pole, and at the same time Nereus hit his saber with such strength Sivan lost his grip on the handle. Then the boy’s hand brushed against his own before yanking the sword out of his hand.

Sivan held his breath as his attendant held the sword he had gifted him up to the lord’s neck. It was inches away from being an actual threat, but it was the first time Nereus had actually succeeded in disarming him.

“You cheated,” Sivan exhaled. “Grabbing a sword hilt like that is against the rules and very dangerous.”

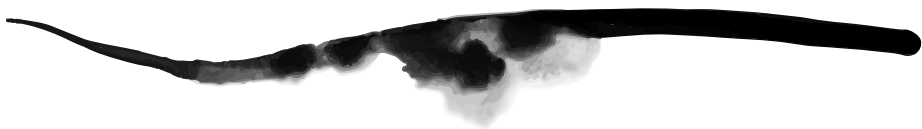
The corner of Nereus's lips curled up into a small smirk. "You are too skilled for me to disarm without cheating a little, my lord."

"In that case I can cheat a little too," Sivan returned, and touched the tip of the other sword he had drawn to the boy's side. "Always keep count of how many swords your opponent has."

Nereus did not disengage immediately. He fixed Sivan with a look the lord did not understand. His breath quickened, and he leaned into the tip of Sivan's sword by a fraction, snagging it on a button.

Sivan's heart quickened, and he wasn't sure if it was from the fear of accidentally harming his attendant or if it was from something else entirely.

He pulled back his sword before it could do any real damage and gently pushed Nereus back a step, the boy sucking in a breath and blinking rapidly, as if broken out of a spell. "That strength of yours is getting more impressive by the day," Sivan said lightly. "But your footwork still needs attention." He patted the boy's head, trying not to notice how his pale skin had once again turned an embarrassed crimson hue.



The rest of Sivan's morning was filled with making preparations for the return of the Spearhead. His father had sent out a ship into Uncharted territory in an attempt to finally make a claim on the unknown waters. The vessel was manned by the best and the brightest new graduates from the training academy, and apparently their mission had been successful. The earl had

told his son that the Spearhead had successfully staked out an island. Few of the Uncharted creatures that ruled the territory had been living there, and they vacated voluntarily when the Spearhead had arrived.

Sivan doubted that last part. He had heard rumors of how deeply possessive the Uncharted were of what they considered theirs. It seemed unlikely that they just gave up their home to Grenaldia.

Regardless, the Spearhead was returning to port late this afternoon, and Sivan had somehow been put in charge of organizing the regalia to welcome their return.

He had to check everything from the florist who was decorating the pier with Grenaldian white roses, to the numerous nobles who lived on the island who all wanted to have the very best view. It had been an exhausting few days of preparations, and Sivan was grateful that Nereus was by his side to assist him.

Being in charge was new to Sivan, and he felt almost as out of his depth as his attendant had when he had first taken the position. Nereus likely saw that and did everything he could to help him share this burden.

“What’s next on the agenda?” Sivan asked, rubbing his temples. The two of them stood in a hallway of the Montgomery manor lined with great open windows. Sunlight streamed in peacefully, the storm Nereus had warned him about before was nowhere in sight. They had just left the welcoming orchestra conductor, who had been having a nervous breakdown after two of his cellists ran away together late the previous night. Sivan had somehow managed to find replacement musicians, but it was just one of many small catastrophes he had narrowly averted that morning.

“All that’s left is to check in on the catering, my lord,” Nereus informed him, scratching off notes in a leather bound schedule.

“Very well, to the kitchen then,” Sivan sighed and began walking down the hall.

Nereus froze for a few moments before he followed after him. Usually the boy would follow him far too eagerly, and Sivan still found himself reminding him to walk next to him or at least one pace behind so he would not bump into him endlessly. The hesitation was quite obvious, and Sivan slowed to allow his attendant to catch up to him.

“What are you and Eliza fighting about now?” Sivan asked outright.

Nereus’s expression soured, his usual pleasant neutral smile replaced by an uncomfortable mask of dread. “We aren’t fighting...yet.”

“Ah, is that what I’m about to walk into?” Sivan couldn’t help but chuckle. The chef of the house had taken Nereus in under her wing, treated him like a son, but the two were constantly at each other’s throats even now.

“I forgot to clean up after I made breakfast for you this morning. She said she was going to skin me after lunch.”

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Sivan said.

“I am sorry, my lord,” Nereus apologized, bowing his head. “I should not be making more trouble for you at such a time.”

“Nonsense, it was for my breakfast after all, wasn’t it?” He patted the boy’s head, although it was a little awkward to touch the top of someone who was nearly his own height. “I’m sure Eliza will understand if I am there as well.”

Nereus nodded, his face turning pink from what Sivan assumed was embarrassment at needing him to calm the temper of the woman who terrified him.

They walked to the kitchen, where there was a flurry of floating pots and pans and trays and foods of all kinds. In the middle of it all was a buxom middle-aged woman directing it

with a scowl. Her red hair was tied up severely but elegantly, and her sharp steel blue eyes could see right through your heart and mind. She was wearing a spotless white blouse and a black pinstriped skirt that didn't show a trace of flour or grime. All the stains from her cooking were firmly allocated to the apron tied around her waist, as if she had made an agreement with all the ingredients to not touch her clothes.

"Mrs. Day, how are your preparations for the Spearhead coming?" Sivan called out, causing the woman to turn her attention towards them. She saw Nereus and her glare deepened, causing the boy to hide behind Sivan even more than he already was.

"I'd be done by now, my lord, if it weren't for a certain ungrateful brat who can't clean up after himself!" she barked, and walked towards them through the floating cookware. The pots and pans moved to allow a path for her silently, as if they were as afraid of her as Nereus was.

"Now, now, he was merely preparing my breakfast," Sivan tried to explain, waving his hands as if that would put out the flames of the woman's ire. "We have been preparing for the Spearhead's arrival all morning, so I have not allowed him a moment to go clean up. The fault is all mine."

"Please do not say it was your fault, my lord!" Nereus piped up, stepping out from behind him. "I could not bear it if you felt guilt over such a small thing."

Eliza sighed loudly and stepped forward to grab the boy by his ear, dragging him into the kitchen, where he collided with a few floating pots. "There is no need to apologize, my lord. Just lend me your devoted attendant for an hour or so to finish this up."

"Very well." Sivan didn't have much of a choice, so he just gave Nereus an apologetic look before turning away.

He decided to cut through the courtyard to return to his room. He needed to start changing into his clothes for the welcoming ceremony. As he stepped out onto the lush grass a single heavy raindrop hit his head. Sivan looked up, not at all surprised to find that Nereus's prediction of the weather souring was turning out to be true.

He frowned at the sky, remembering what the boy had said to him about the northern breeze carrying something "dark."