

# Chapter 7

## The Devil's Whip

The sound of a heart beating should not have been unique. It was an organ pumping blood, same as any other.

But to Sivan, the faint rhythm he heard while deep in the abyss could only have been made by one heart.

*"...just let him die."*

*"Either help me with this or I'm doing it myself!"*

He could hear moments through the rhythm, shrouded and distant. It was like when he'd heard Eliza while listening to Black's heart in his dream.

*"You're a fool, you know that?"*

*"I learned by example."*

*"Tsk. Except you did it for nothing."*

*"No, I did it for love."*

*"Oh, love, is it? Will you still be able to say that when it devours you from within?"*

*"I know the cost."*

These conversations made no sense to Sivan. But he recognized Black's voice, especially in the quiet moments when it was just the pirate alone.

*"You came back to me. I should have trusted you."*

*"No one will take you from me again."*

The heartbeat lulled Sivan deeper into the dark. Memories that were not his own played on repeat. Some, he recognized. Like the time he'd gifted Nereus his first sword. Or the first storm that brought Nereus to his room for shelter. Some were less fond memories. Young Nereus following his brother, spying on Betaux drinking his blood. Running away from the man who Jhaeros had paid to smuggle him off the island. The streets were better than the awful way the lecherous man used to watch him.

There was one memory that stood out to Sivan.

The creation of the pirate lord.



Much has been told about the legend of Captain Black, demon pirate lord of the Blackwater. They say he's a kraken, or he controls one as a pet. They say he's a sea witch, or he sold his soul to one in exchange for dark powers.

The reality is that he is a man of indomitable stubbornness and little else.

In the early years of the war, the Uncharted attempted to take prisoners. At no point in their history had the people of the sea taken prisoners, but their new king insisted on it. He told them to take these prisoners to an island just outside the Devil's Whip. A prison was built, and the prisoners were put to work.

"Well, I can undeniably say that didn't work," Nereus said, his tone light despite straining against the iron stockades they

were locked in. He was older here, nineteen or twenty, but not yet hardened from years of being a pirate.

“Is tha’ right, matey?” Brand grumbled in the stockade next to him.

Nereus laughed apologetically. “Oh, I’m sorry, Brand. I wouldn’t have dragged you into that rebellion had I known it would end up like this.”

“Water under tha bridge. Worth it ta have a shot at gettin’ out of ‘ere. I told me daughter I’d get back ta ‘er, but that be lookin’ less likely day after day.”

“Mm, you give up too easily. These Uncharted guards still don’t know what they’re doing,” Nereus gestured vaguely at the Uncharted soldiers standing watch over them. The nearby sound of gears churning kept them from overhearing their stockaded prisoners. Nereus could just barely see the huge machine spitting out tar onto a rocky field. As the tar oozed out, prisoners began dragging rakes through the shallow black sludge.

“Wha’ makes ya say tha’?” Brand asked, snapping Nereus’s attention back to their conversation.

He grinned, toothy canines glinting. “It’s the way they beat us. They don’t know where to hit without causing total incapacitation.”

“Uh huh. How would I know, yer tha one who won’t keep his damn mouth shut an’ gets beaten for it.”

Nereus snickered, wishing he could slap the older man on the shoulder. “It’s no fun without a little provocation, Brand.”

One of the prisoners shouted, drawing their attention from the stockade. She’d found something, and was desperately trying to show it to the overseer.

“How much do you want to bet it’s just another rock?”

“We don’ ‘ave anythin’ ta bet, kid.”

The overseer, a rail thin Uncharted woman with a ruff full

of spines, came over and did in fact see that it was just another rock. She grabbed her whip from her side and began whipping the prisoner without restraint.

The two men in the stockade winced at the sight. It was a common occurrence, but this prisoner must have been new and she screeched in agony until it was over.

“What do you think they’re trying to find in these pits?” Nereus asked, not really expecting an answer.

“Probably not them rocks,” Brand answered anyways.

The younger man’s pale green eyes raked over the bubbling pit of tar. The island was full of them, but there was one giant one at the center. Everything reeked of rotten eggs, and the heat of the sun made the the whole prison smell like rot and death.

“I bet it’s treasure,” he mused.

“All o’ this fer an odd bit o’ gold? May tha Crimson Sea take ‘em,” Brand spat.

“Crimson Sea?” Nereus asked.

“The place all bilge rats go when they die. Scoundrels, thieves, murderers. A sea o’ boilin’ red water tha strips th’ flesh off yer bones fer all eternity.” Brand said this with a dark light in his eyes, as if he were remembering all those who he’d cursed to wind up in the Crimson Sea for putting him in this place.

“I bet they know exactly wha’ be in tha’ pit.”

“Oh?” Nereus was curious to find Brand had an opinion on this. He hadn’t known him for long, but he found Brand was a good but simple man.

“Nothin’. They just wan’ us ta suffer.”

“Ah, you might have a point there, my friend,” Nereus agreed bitterly. “Hey, when we do get out of here, what say you and I take a little back after so much has been taken from us?”

Brand squinted at him from the corner of his eye. The angle was too sharp for him to really see Nereus with their stockades

being right next to each other. “Whaddya takin’ abou’?”

“Well, you were taken prisoner when the Uncharted took over your island. That’s your home, Brand. They took that from you. And me...” Nereus drifted off, the image his beloved lord being yanked out of his grasp still just as vivid as it was the day the Spear was attacked. “Well, they took someone very precious from me.”

“So yer sayin’ we take back our homes?”

“Hm, maybe one day. I’m thinking something a little more practical at first. I want a ship. And I want food. And maybe treasure.”

“Treasure?” Brand laughed, seeing the younger man as a little childish.

Nereus pouted. “And why can’t I have treasure? Here they are, using humans as work horses to dredge tar pits for gods know what. I say we take them for all they have.”

“So we be resortin’ ta theft?”

Nereus rolled the word around in his mouth before letting it spill out.

“Piracy.”

“Hmm,” Brand hummed, not turning down the idea.

“Just a little,” Nereus started, but quickly changed his mind. “Or maybe a lot. Take it from anyone, anywhere, whoever decides to keep it all for themselves. These greedy nobles, Uncharted and human alike, who hoard their wealth and grain to watch their people starve as a war ravages land and sea. Take it all.”

“Take it all,” Brand repeated. “But, Nereus, we be only two men. How can we do all tha’ when we ‘ave no ship to start with?”

“For now,” Nereus said, cooling down, “but who knows what the future holds?”

A canary, bright and yellow against the smog of the tar

island's sky, chirped its arrival and flitted down onto Nereus's finger.

"Another message from yer mysterious accomplice?" Brand asked, noticing the canary. It was a wonder the bird was not noticed by the guards nearby. It was the only wildlife on the island and stuck out horribly against the backdrop of tar pits and stockades.

"You only think Hayes is mysterious because she's kept on the other side of the island. That might as well be an entire world away for us." Nereus held out his thumb and index finger for the bird to place a rolled piece of paper into. It took some doing to get the note unfurled with one hand, but he managed to do it without dropping it.

It read: *You break me out and I'll get you that ship.*

Nereus grinned, delight spreading across his features. Enough fucking around. It was time to brute force their way out of here.

"Hey!" he shouted towards the guards. The loud machine had stopped spitting tar out when the prisoner had called for the overseer, so they had no problem hearing him now. "Do all Uncharted chain up their prisoners like this or are you just cowards?"

They turned around with a snap, their glares pointed on Nereus.

"Wha' are ya doin'?" Brand hissed.

"Just trust me," Nereus reassured him beneath his breath. Then, louder, back at the guards: "I'm surprised you took prisoners at all, isn't it shameful for Uncharted to engage in such human practices?"

One of the guards stomped over and whacked Nereus's jaw with the blunt end of his spear.

He laughed, and spit out the blood that had spilled into his

mouth when a fang caught the inside of his cheek. “Ah, I see. You weren’t strong enough to remain on the battlefield. No point in sending someone so weak to the frontlines. You’d only embarrass the good king’s name.”

The guard snarled and barked at the other to release Nereus from the stockade. They beat him, cracking his ribs and bloodying his face. Nereus did not fight back. He could have, but they would have just shoved him back in the stockade. First, he needed to get the overseer’s attention.

She announced her arrival with the crack of her whip. It struck Nereus on the back. Pain seared across his skin, causing him to collapse onto the rocky ground.

“Get him up,” she snapped at the guards, who roughly took Nereus’s arms to stand him on his knees. “I heard what you said, worm. You think we’re weak? Who’s the prisoner here? I would have rather died than be captured.”

“Maybe I want to be here. Maybe I let myself be captured so I could see your pretty face,” Nereus crooned mockingly despite the blood pouring from his lips.

The overseer snarled at him and kicked him in the face again. “I’ve had enough of you constantly causing trouble around here.” She pointed at the largest tar pit. “Throw him in there.”

“No-!” Brand’s cry was ignored as they started dragging Nereus away.

To be thrown in the tar pit was a death sentence. The sludge sucked you in, seemingly sucking all the air around you at the same time. The toxic fumes would end your life before you even fully made it under the surface. It was the most suffocating death one could imagine.

Nereus was paraded through the throng of prisoners sifting through the shallow tar. Some of them had participated in the rebellion he’d tried to start and were pulling extra shifts out here

because of it. Their leader was to be made into an example for the others to learn from. "From now on, any of you who act out like this cur will meet the same fate," the overseer cried out to the prisoners as they waded through them.

He was hauled up onto a ledge that overlooked the massive tar pit. It bubbled ominously beneath him, threatening him with a noxious and sticky death.

"Wait, wait," Nereus dug his feet into the ground, rocks tumbling off the ledge and into the pit. The guards did actually stop, though their grip on him remained tight. The prisoner's mouth curled into a bloodied grin. "I'm not dressed for a swim."

The overseer scoffed and motioned her hand to throw him in. And the guards did, tossing Nereus off the ledge with some force.

Other unfortunate prisoners who had been sentenced to the pit had flailed and screamed when they'd been tossed, but not Nereus. He twisted his body into a dive, arms coming up above his head to split as deep into the tar as possible.

Nereus did not hear their reaction, nor did he care. The tar was thick, but the force from his dive sank him deep enough into the pit that he could feel the less dense layer with his arms. He pushed through the sludge, swimming, praying to the gods that it would give way to the seawater he'd been told was below.

Eventually the tar became thin enough for Nereus to free himself from the viscous surface. His arms turned first, black scales dappling his arms and sliding him faster to the water. Then he felt the snap and pop of his legs as they fused together into a siren's tail. This was only the second time he'd transformed into a siren. The first was on the Spear a few years ago, and he'd avoided seawater ever since. It still hurt like hell, but it allowed him to inhale great gulps of seawater just as if he was breathing air.



Below the tar was a pocket of seawater. His *'mysterious accomplice'* had promised him as such, but he hadn't been entirely convinced until just now.

Nereus began swimming further down. It took him a few moments of flailing his tail wildly about before he got the hang of swimming with it. He felt powerful down here, limitless as the sea despite the tar enveloping this patch of it. The tar completely blocked out the sun, and even his enhanced siren vision did not let him see much.

With that thought, a string of luminescent green spots lit up out of the corner of his eye. Nereus turned to look at his own glowing tail. It lit up the pocket of seawater like any good oil lamp would do on the surface.

The light reflected against something metal below.

Upon noticing it, Nereus swam closer, and realized a great iron cell door was embedded into the ocean floor. The bars were as wide as his shoulders. Nereus could have swam between them freely if he had wished. Whatever was behind it had to have been massive. He approached the iron bars, laying one hand on them for a moment before he pulled back, hissing as it burned his fingertips. They were forged with iron kelp, the only thing that could hold back the strength of sirens, among other...more ancient things.

Something huge shifted behind the bars, startling Nereus. He brought his luminous tail closer to the cell door, and the light revealed pitch black scales, rows and rows of sharp teeth, and four golden eyes staring directly at the siren.

It was a leviathan.

It watched him carefully, eyes severe and judging him. Nereus did not know how the leviathan saw him. A savior? Its next meal? Or maybe he was so insignificant that the only reason it noticed him at all was because of the lights on his tail.

But then the caged, god-like being shuddered, shaking off centuries of sand and settlement. Golden lights appeared all over her skin, replicating the pattern on the siren's tail.

Nereus grinned, teeth sharper than they had been before.

He was going to let this thing out.

He collected magic in his hand, just as Eliza had taught him. It was so easy to do in this form, the magic just poured out of him as easy as a bathroom tap. He forced the ball of green magic forward, into the cell door. The iron bars absorbed his magic, but they couldn't withstand the sheer magnitude of it. Cracks of green light split through the iron bars, causing them to groan.

Nereus barely had time to swim out of the way before the leviathan burst through the compromised cell door. It bellowed as it escaped, quickly swimming up through the layer of sludge. The leviathan was even larger out of its cell, the length too great to understand while cramped up in that cage.

Finally the leviathan escaped, leaving a massive hole in the tar's surface. Dim light filtered down from above, the first trace of sun this pocket of ocean had seen in millennia.

Nereus followed the leviathan out, taking much longer to clear the distance than his freed fellow prisoner had. The force of the her escape pushed the majority of the tar out of the pit, allowing Nereus to swim to the surface close to the shore. Still, he struggled to clear the thick tar completely.

He heard the screams of the Uncharted guards when his head breeched the surface. Nereus wiped his eyes of tar and opened them, seeing the fire and destruction he'd unleashed. The leviathan was still dripping in tar, drowning whoever came close in it. It breathed golden flames over the prison, burning down the structure with ease. Somehow it knew to not harm the prisoners, only aiming for those armed with weapons.

Nereus's tar-slick face broke out into a smile, white fangs

contrasting against the sludge.

He emerged from the tar pit, dripping in black.

# Chapter 8

## *The Bloating Isles*

Once again, Sivan woke to an unfamiliar ceiling.

He was not at all concerned with said ceiling, however, for the throbbing in his chest was so great he immediately began writhing in pain. It made his vision turn dark, and he only vaguely registered the granite-carved room around him.

“Easy now, lay back down,” a woman’s familiar voice told him. Purple magic flashed before her hand pushed it into his chest. The pain subsided almost instantly.

Sivan gasped for air, squeezing his eyes shut as he recalibrated himself. His chest still ached, but he could feel his heart beating strong. Blood pulsed in his ears as his heart rate evened out.

Except that shouldn’t be right at all. The last thing he remembered was killing Kaerius and being stabbed in the heart himself.

“Am I dead?” He asked, panting.

“No, the Crimson Sea hasn’t taken you yet.”

Sivan opened his eyes and looked down at himself. He was still whole, except for his missing arm. But a red gash peeked out from under the bandages wrapped around his chest. He clutched at them, panicked and disoriented, but his movements were now woozy and slow.

“Just lie back down,” the woman tried to soothe him, but her tone was short. Sivan squinted, he couldn’t make her out; he didn’t have his glasses. He didn’t need to. He knew who she was.

Eliza took his hand and placed his glasses in them.

“Here.”

Sivan took them and placed them on his face. The world snapped back into clarity, and he saw Eliza scowling down at his chest. She prodded at his bloody bandages.

“These need to be redone,” she said, more to herself than to Sivan.

He didn’t know what to say. The last time he’d spoken to her was when she had betrayed both of them to the Grenaldian Royal Navy. Black almost died, yet here she was, like nothing had happened.

Eliza didn’t give him the opportunity to say anything at all, for she turned around wordlessly to pick out supplies from a granite cabinet carved into the wall. Her crystal leg clacked against the hard floor. Sivan was in some sort of medical room, although there were a fair number of rather gruesome looking steel devices he’d never seen before. He suspected they had something to do with how tough caecean skin was. He was in a bed framed by black granite. It was not particularly comfortable, but that may have had something to do with whatever was underneath those bandages wrapped around his chest.

Sivan tested all his fingers and toes and found them all working, save for his missing right arm. He automatically looked

to where it should have been, and found Black sleeping at his bedside.

His heart clenched again, sending an intense pain through his nerves.

Now that he saw Black close up, he realized how tired he looked. He was thinner, his hair a tangled mess of black strands and gold beads. He looked older, so much older, even though it had only been a few months since Sivan had last seen him. His facial hair had grown out, dark and thick and clearly had been trimmed halfheartedly with a knife or maybe even a sword at some point.

“Black...” Sivan breathed, reaching out with his phantom arm. He wanted to brush his hair back, feel his skin, know he was alive and real in front of him. But he was in too much pain to turn his body enough and get his left arm over.

Black was so close, yet still just outside his reach.

Eliza returned holding a large pair of scissors. Sivan’s first instinct was to shrink away, but once again the pain kept him from getting far. She began snipping his bandages off from the bottom.

“I don’t understand,” Sivan’s voice came out cracked, “I should be dead.”

“Yes, you should,” Eliza agreed. “You were fatally injured when you killed Lord Kaerius. He used Black’s sword to split your heart in two.”

She finished cutting off the bandages and pushed them away to reveal a large Y-incision on Sivan’s chest. Stitches held his chest together, the incisions still fresh and stained with his own blood.

“You died,” Eliza continued, cold as ever. “But Nereus wouldn’t have that.”

“I can imagine.”

Eliza's icy steel blue eyes fixed on him, a curiosity in them Sivan didn't appreciate. "Do you know sirens can live without their heart inside them? It's unfair, truly. They're nearly immortal, and their power knows no limit." She placed a hand over her own heart before going on. "Humans who practice magic have a set amount of power within them. Magic for us is really just exchanging power for our life-force. Every spell, every charm, every sigil...humans have to trade something so precious as their own life just to use it."

"Which is why the dark arts are forbidden. The approved spells by the royal mages don't require much of a sacrifice to use," Sivan said carefully, knowing he was only minimally versed on the topic.

"And what use are parlor tricks in a war?" Eliza snapped back. "But *sirens*...their life-force regenerates, and they have access to an endless pool of power for that reason. The so-called *dark arts*' are as natural to them as breathing. For those with the talent to master magic, this is the largest valley of inequality. We are limited by our humanity."

Sivan suddenly remembered the half dead siren he'd seen in Eliza's office on Calloway Cay.

There had been a great big hole where its heart should have been.

"The dead siren in your office—"

Eliza smiled, teeth too white, canines a little too sharp for someone who should have been merely human. "Oh, I see you met my husband."

"*Husband?*"

"I told you I remarried, didn't I? Calloway was his name, a siren lord of little renown." She stole a glimpse at the sleeping siren next to Sivan. "I wonder if sirens have a secret weakness for humans. It was so easy to win his heart."

Sivan didn't like the way she said that. Like he had schemed to do the same with Black.

"I saw you in that vision of the Spear you showed me," Sivan began carefully. "You looked like you were on death's door."

"I was. The magic I used that night took the last ounce of power I had in me. Nereus used his magic to keep my body from rotting, but it was just a stopgap." Eliza peered at him, her usually dull blue eyes burning eerily bright. "I had one choice: find a siren's heart to implant in my own chest, or die."

"No," Sivan breathed, now realizing what the huge Y-incision in his chest was.

"Nereus helped me subdue my siren husband and helped with the procedure. But of course we had to find some way to restrain Calloway so he wouldn't take back the heart I had stolen from him. And he would not have stopped there."

Sivan hadn't noticed, but since he met Eliza again on Calloway Cay, she had only ever worn high-collared shirts. She wore one now, and unbuttoned the top few buttons to pull back the fabric and reveal a similar Y-incision. This one had long been healed over, just pink scars against her pale skin.

"He would not have stopped until he ripped the heart out of me." Eliza took a moment to appreciate the haunted expression on Sivan's face before she continued. "Now I can use magic as freely as a siren would. I suppose you could now too, if you had the skill for it."

Sivan was shaking his head, praying it wasn't true, but knowing it had to be. It was the only way he could have survived that sword to his chest.

"Why?" he whispered.

She paused, frowning at Black. "Do you think he gave me a choice? He had already cut his own ribs open before he bothered asking me for help. I think he would have done it himself if he



could have.”

Black shifted in his sleep, his shirt falling open at the collar. It revealed a similar cut, and though it had already healed over, it remained jagged and uneven, like it had been made by Black himself.

“Trust me, this was not my preferred outcome. It leaves him vulnerable. If someone tries to kill you again, it will kill him as well.”

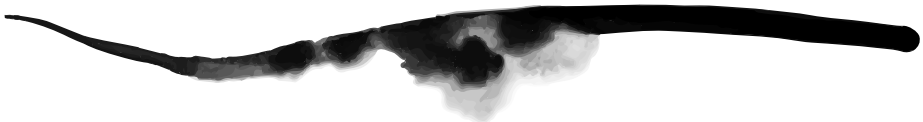
Rage bubbled up in Sivan at her words. “So *now* you care for him? It was not but a few months ago that you threw him to the wolves. You betrayed him by giving us to my father!”

Eliza fixed him with a stare, unfeeling and cold. “I did.”

If Sivan could have moved his arm he would have tried to slap her. Yet he was fixed to his cold granite bed, laid bare to her whims once again.

“Why?” Was all he could ask.

“Hm...it is easier if I show you,” she said, reaching out a hand to Sivan’s face. He flinched away instinctively, but her fingers found his temple despite his resistance.



Once again, Sivan was transported into Eliza’s memory. Except this time it felt more like he’d been blasted by a cannon into it. He stumbled into the vague seascape before him, the world going blurry.

When he regained his senses, the memory snapped back into clarity. He felt a little nauseous, but that could just as well be blamed on the fact that they were on a boat.

The boat wasn’t very big, naught more than a fisherman’s ship. Eliza stood at the tip of the forecastle deck, arms raised

wide as she cast a spell. Purple magic formed a bubble around the ship, keeping the fog of the *Quietus* at bay.

“Calloway, why can’t you just- I dunno, sea witch us to Estes’ tomb?” a familiar voice complained from the helm.

Sivan whipped around and laid eyes on a blue-skinned Uncharted woman. The tentacles that were usually wrapped around her arms were gripping the wheel along with one hand. The other hand was gripping a piece of paper so tight her knuckles turned as pale as the tentacles on her head.

It was Vivianne.

Sivan immediately recognized what he was seeing. Eliza had gone to Vivianne to get to Estes’ tomb before the *Blackwater* did. This was their journey there.

“The *Quietus*,” Eliza made a short gesture with her hands without breaking the spell, “is an ancient and powerful magic. I cannot break the fog. I can only protect us from it within a limited range. You don’t want to go mad, do you?”

The ship jerked harshly as Vivianne yanked the wheel to the right, just barely steering them away from a broken ship impaled on a huge rock. She swore something in Uncharted and glared at the piece of paper in her hand. Sivan got closer and realized it was the map he’d translated. Or, at least a copy of it. Vivianne must have made a copy of it for the brief period she’d been captain of the *Blackwater*.

“I’m goin’ mad already, trying to get us through this labyrinth.”

Eliza ignored her and focused again on repelling the *Quietus* back, but subtly pushed back the fog further so Vivianne could see. Of course this wasn’t the *Blackwater*, and they did not have Hayes’s bizarre ability to make the ship grow feet and dance across the rocks surrounding the tomb.

After a few more sharp turns and curses from Vivianne, the

Quietus parted to reveal the tomb of Estes. The snow-white beach, the crystal staircase, and the door to the tomb, still sealed. It had been broken when the Blackwater had found it, and Sivan suspected he was about to witness that happen firsthand.

Sure enough, Eliza cracked open the stone door to the tomb with a flash of purple light, and Vivianne bounded inside the tomb before the dust had even settled.

Another Uncharted curse rang out from inside, but this time it bubbled with glee. Sivan followed the sea witch into the tomb and found the treasure the Blackwater crew had so sorely missed. Estes' tomb had been lit by a cold light when Sivan had been there. Now the walls were bathed in a warm light reflected off the sheer mass of gold that lay within. There was so much of it. So much, Sivan doubted if it would have all fit inside the Blackwater's hold in one trip. He wondered how exactly the two women had been able to smuggle it out of Uncharted territory with one tiny ship.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Vivianne crooned to the piles gold and silver. The Uncharted woman looked like she had fallen in love, her black eyes going starry while reflecting the glittering hoard.

"Remember, half of this is mine," Eliza snapped at her as she strode past. Vivianne barely registered the words as she began rolling around in a pile of gold coins.

The sea witch made a beeline for the stone casket surrounded by dark water. Crystal shards of seaglass grew in front of her over the surface, forming a path for her to walk on. She approached the skeletal remains of Estes slowly, as if she expected some kind of trap. When none came, Eliza pulled out an iron dagger. She grimaced as she used it to pierce her chest, right into her heart.

Or, Sivan knew, into the heart of the siren she stole it from.

There was a channel carved into the dagger, and it began to

fill with blood once Eliza had reached the heart. Once it filled, she pulled it out and held it over the casket. All it took was a few drops of siren blood for the skeletal hand of the long dead siren king to shudder and release his corseque.

Eliza wiped the dagger off and tucked it away, groaning quietly in pain. She looked like some of the life had been sucked out of her, like doing that had cost her much more than any spell. She then pulled out a salve, hands shaking as she applied it to the wound on her chest. She muttered a spell in a language Sivan did not recognize. His best guess was that it was a form of the dark speech necromancers used. Such a language was not taught to even the highest echelon of scholar in Varis.

Color returned to Eliza's face slowly. The wound closed up, and she put away the salve to pluck the corseque out of the casket.

"Can that thing really kill sirens?" Vivianne asked from the shore. She was trying on different tiaras from a pile she had found.

"Supposedly. I'm not keen on finding out," Eliza snapped back.

"No? You don't want to kill the scary Uncharted king like the rest of the Blackwater crew?"

"See, the thing about this is—" Eliza swung the corseque through the air, testing its weight. "This weapon can kill any siren, not just the king. As strong as Nereus— your former captain, Black— As strong as he thinks he is, he is no match for the king, even with this. I've seen what Jhaeros can do. It would be so easy for him to snatch this weapon from Nereus and kill him instead."

She held the corseque with one hand while the other collected shards of sea glass with her magic. It began melding together, taking the same shape of the weapon bit by bit.

“I will not leave something like that up to chance,” Eliza bit out as the sea glass finished replicating the corseque. She lay it back in the casket, the skeletal hand of Estes grasping it once again.

So Jhaeros had been right. Eliza had taken the real corseque and put a replica in its place. She’d sold Black to the Royal Navy in order to keep him from getting to the weapon first. In order to protect him. Sivan could not make sense of her logic. She’d put him in just as much danger by handing him over for execution.

The memory shimmered and darkened, sending Sivan back to his own mind in a rush.



He opened his eyes and caught Eliza gazing at Black, still sleeping at his bedside.

“You may not believe me, but I do care for the boy,” she said softly.

Sivan huffed. “You’ve tried to kill him. Multiple times.”

“He’s a siren, none of it would have stuck. But the Corseque of Estes...that one would. I could not let it fall into the hands of someone who would use it against him. I had to get the the tomb first, so I needed something to preoccupy Nereus with.”

“*Preoccupy?* He was nearly *executed* after you turned him over to my father. I don’t care how hard sirens are to kill. A beheading would have ended it there.”

Eliza puffed out a laugh as she buttoned her shirt back up, covering the Y-shaped scar on her chest. “I’ve seen sirens get ripped into pieces and still somehow survive. He was never in any real danger.”

“You don’t know that,” Sivan bit out. He wished he wasn’t

so weak right then so he could berate her further. Just because Black was a siren didn't mean he should suffer so much.

"Perhaps," she hummed while standing up. Her steel eyes glinted at him as she continued, "but I suspected you would do something stupid to save him from that fate. You were my insurance."

Sivan sighed, mentally exhausted trying to follow this woman's strange and brutal method of mothering. Still, this implied she trusted Sivan. At least enough to impart him with some responsibility over Nereus.

"You will not abandon him again," Eliza cut through his exasperation like a knife. "I don't care what the circumstances are. Your life is inexorably tied to his now."

Sivan felt Black shift next to him, the siren in question rousing from his sleep.

"I will not give you another chance," Eliza warned before turning to leave, the sound of her crystal leg clacking against the floor echoing through the room.

Sivan pushed down the weight of her warning to focus his attention on Black. Finally, finally, his green eyes opened slowly, still heavy with sleep. They were dark, almost as dark as when Sivan had first seen him emerge from the shadows in Varis.

"My lord?" His voice was deep, gravelly from sleep and strained with emotion. "I must still be dreaming."

"This is no dream," Sivan said, smiling. He reached his left arm across to touch Black's face. It hurt, even with the pain numbing magic Eliza had pushed into him. But he had to touch him. He had to feel that the pirate was real.

For a brief moment, he feared that this was all some elaborate trick Jhaeros had come up with to psychologically torture him. But when Black leaned forward into his hand, Sivan felt the familiar scratch of his facial hair.

This Black was real. Sivan finally had his pirate back.

Realization struck those verdant eyes with a spark, and tears immediately began to well and overflow onto Sivan's hand.

"My lord!" Black sobbed and surged forward to embrace him. Embrace was a generous term, since he was being so careful to not jostle Sivan too much with his injuries.

"Black-" Sivan caught on his name, as if even his voice didn't want to let him go. He wanted to tug the man on top of him fully. He wanted to feel the weight of him, the warmth. But there was no strength left in his arm, so he could only weakly clutch at his side. He felt the collar of his shirt grow wet with Black's tears. They were cold, but Sivan could not bring himself to care.

Then he was being kissed, on his lips, his cheeks, his nose, anywhere Black could find skin. A quiet laugh bubbled up from Sivan, the pure happiness he felt at having the man shower affections over him again was making him giddy. He hadn't felt like this in months, even in the dreams. Nothing could compare to the real thing.

"I am going to lock you away so you can never escape me again," Black murmured softly. His words implied such a dark threat, but the sheer tenderness in his tone tempered it.

"I'm not going anywhere." Sivan smiled, brushing their noses together before laying his head back on his pillow. "I don't think I could, even if I wanted to."

Black pulled back, a unreadable expression on his face. He lightly touched the edges of the Y-incision on Sivan's chest.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like someone stabbed me in the chest," Sivan answered with a laugh, wincing when it caused him pain. "This is going to be quite the recovery, isn't it?"

Black hummed, now somber. "I'll re-dress this," he said and turned away to grab fresh bandages.

“Black...Eliza told me what you did to save me. With your heart.”

The pirate stopped, his shoulders going stiff.

“...there wouldn't have been a use for it if you had died. I would have found that damned corseque only to to end my own life.”

“Black- You—” Sivan turned his words over in his mouth before continuing, “you mustn't think like that. I shouldn't be the only thing you live for in this world.”

The pirate snapped back around. His now dark eyes fixed on Sivan in a way that sent a thin, cold shiver down his nape. “Not all of us can believe someone was dead and get on with their life for nine years—”

As soon as the words left Black's mouth his face fell, eyes turning back to a watery green. Sivan could tell he regretted it instantly. They were glass-like words said in the heat of the moment, sharp and brittle.

Still, they cut Sivan deeply. He had not yet forgiven himself for those nine years.

Evidently, so hadn't Black.

The silence between them was thick and murky as the pirate mutely wrapped clean bandages around his chest. Black was holding Sivan up halfway off the bed as he did this, letting the injured man rest his weight against him.

“I didn't mean it,” Black whispered.

“I know,” Sivan returned, just as quiet.

He finished wrapping his chest, the Y-incision disappearing beneath white gauze. Sivan was gently laid back down, the pirate going so far as to even support his neck like a newborn babe.

“I just-” Black started, face downcast, no longer meeting Sivan's eyes. “It wasn't even a choice for me, giving you my heart. It has always been yours to begin with.”



Sivan felt his heart skip a beat, and he had no clue whether it was his own response or Black's. He supposed it didn't matter, the feelings were the same.

"Black-" Sivan started, voice strained with emotion. He stretched out the fingers of his left hand, gesturing for Black's own. The pirate took his hand in both of his own large ones, bringing it up to press a kiss against Sivan's knuckles. "My heart is yours as well. Even if it's been speared by a caecean lord."

Black smiled against his hand, beard tickling his fingers.

"I am sorry for going with Jhaeros, but-" Sivan started. "I suppose I possess the same kind of unreasonable love you have. It begs me to throw myself into danger if it means saving your life."

The pirate kissed his knuckles again before allowing Sivan to press his palm against his pale cheek. "I need to know..." He paused, tracing the outline of scar tissue above Sivan's missing arm. "Was he very cruel to you, my brother?"

Sivan considered lying, but the evidence of Jhaeros's cruelty lay right before them, right where Sivan's arm should have been. "He liked to toy with me emotionally, but I was treated very well physically until the day he sensed you in my dream. He left me alone after that."

Black's brows knit into a grimace of anger. "I was still connected to you when he did this. I felt it happen."

"Black..."

"He will pay," Black's eyes opened, staring dark and unseeing ahead of him.

Sivan's fingers tapped against the pirate's face, snapping his attention back on him. "I don't need him to pay. I just want the war to end."

Black nodded, although there was still a darkness in his eyes Sivan could not forget. The man stroked a finger along his

right shoulder, ending where his arm had been cut off. Sivan felt another skip of his heart and a pull of something hot snaked through his veins towards Black's fingers. "This, at least, I can help with." Shadowy tendrils emerged from Sivan's skin and wrapped themselves around the stump of his arm. They twisted and elongated, and he felt a twitch of that same hot thread connected to his heart. Sivan gasped quietly when the tendrils formed into a hand, shadowy and semi translucent. But he could instantly move it, the fingers obeying his will effortlessly.

Black took his hand and pressed it against the other side of his face. Sivan gasped again when he felt the same warmth his other hand felt. He could even feel the scratchiness of Black's beard as it scraped against his shadow palm lightly.

It was silly, that something as simple as regaining touch could break Sivan so easily. But still, tears started rolling down his cheeks. The weight of everything Sivan had gone through in the last few months had suddenly crashed into him. He sobbed, and Black held him. He was so warm, so real. Being able to feel the man's warmth was something Sivan had thought he'd lost forever.

But he'd found him again, and he wasn't going to let go this time.

No matter what.