

Chapter 2

The Spear

Once, Sivan used to dread sleep. It brought him terrible visions of the war, of his battalion dying before him, of being at the mercy of the siren king's unquestionable power.

Now, Sivan longed for sleep. The blissful embrace of unconsciousness was now accompanied by visions of his beloved.

"Would you care for more tea, my lord?"

Sivan opened his eyes at the sweet sound of Black's deep voice. Before him stood the pirate, dressed in his usual Blackwater-issued deep grays. A silver platter was delicately held up with one hand, a crystal pitcher of iced tea balanced effortlessly on top. It seemed a little odd; a pirate captain offering him tea as if he were a perfectly trained servant. The man's green eyes sparkled as he smiled at Sivan. It blinded him with his beauty, a far warmer and more welcome beauty than his brother's, the main character of Sivan's old nightmares.

"Put that down, Black. Come here," he replied and gestured

at the man to sit next to him on the chaise.

“Gladly.”

They were in the shaded courtyard he once used to relax in back on the Spear. The trellis arching over them was full and lush with greenery. Yet, through the small gaps in the vines, Sivan could tell that the Montgomery manor was not there.

Instead there was an ocean, still and blue. They were on an island of their own. A mere slice of the memories they shared.

A pleasant breeze caught the silver curtain of Sivan’s overgrown hair as Black sat next to him. He hadn’t thought to have it cut since he’d left Varis, so it was beginning to spill past his shoulders now, especially after months of-

“Your hair has grown quite long, my lord,” Black noted, as if reading his thoughts. His hand reached out to touch the silver locks, and at once Sivan leaned into the touch. His palm was warm and solid, a rock Sivan could cling to.

“Should I cut it?” He asked, his voice unintentionally wavering.

If Black noticed his tremor, he did not call it out, for which Sivan was grateful. He wanted to stay in this dream, in this fantasy, for as long as possible.

“If you wish to, I can find some shears and do it for you. Although...” Black’s fingers sifted through Sivan’s hair, so gentle he barely felt a snag, even though he knew it was badly in need of a brushing. “Although, I rather like it. It suits you.”

Sivan pursed his lips at him. “You’re flattering me.”

“Justly so,” Black laughed—a melodic sound that drew Sivan closer to him.

The pirate turned and pulled Sivan to his side. The movement felt as natural as breathing, as if they were bound together by gravity. Sivan let the man maneuver his body so they could lay on the chaise together. Black almost immediately

started playing with his hair, his fingernails occasionally grazing across his nape in a way that made Sivan's toes curl.

"Ah, that feels good." Sivan practically purred the words, so content he was in the man's arms.

He could hear Black's magnetic laughter once again, but felt it more deeply where his head was pillowed against his chest.

"You're usually the one playing with my hair," Black stated, amused.

"And the beads in your hair remind you of my eyes."

"The only gold I need."

Sivan would have lightly scolded the pirate for using such a shameless line, but he was currently too blissful to bother with it.

Besides, this was a dream, and he wanted to stay ignorantly happy for as long as he could.

Black's fingers withdrew from his silver locks and pulled Sivan just a fraction closer. "I miss you so dearly, my lord. How can I find my way back to you when you are out of my reach?"

Sivan's heart sank.

He'd been so lost in the comfort of this dream, he'd forgotten the guilt he thought he'd locked away. Sivan was good at doing that, at locking things away and never reexamining them until he was forced to confront them. Never before had his mind served up its own version of that. He'd had nightmares before, sure, but those were more like memories, cycling on repeat. This particular fear presented to him as a lovely, rose-tinted dream. Yet it only took a handful of words for said dream to turn into a manifestation of the hurt he'd surely wrought upon his dearest person.

Tears spilled onto Black's chest, staining the gray tunic a dark, wet color. "I'm sorry," Sivan choked out, surprised at how broken he sounded already.

Black sit up abruptly, carefully bringing Sivan up with him.

“My lord-?” He attempted to get the former lord to look up, but Sivan was past that now. “My lord, please don’t cry. No matter how far away you are, I will find you. I promise—”

But Sivan was gone. The bright sunshine filtering through the trellis turned into murky shadows. Dark shapes danced around the edges of his vision, pulling him away from the honeyed touch of the one he loved.

The one he’d abandoned. Again.

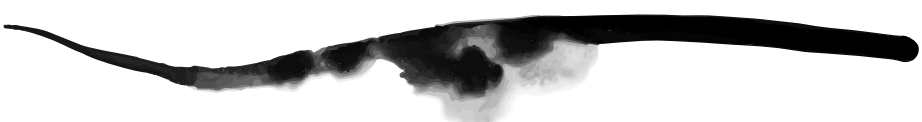
Sivan wasn’t sure how long he sat there in the dark. He couldn’t tell if he’d awoken from this dream or not, for he refused to open his eyes.

He didn’t deserve to.

This was the true prison Sivan found himself in. Not the comfortable underwater cage or the shared meals Jhaeros liked to subject him to sometimes. His own mind built a far more miserable existence for Sivan than any enemy could ever compete with. On one end, he desperately sought out the bliss that came with the escape of a pleasant dream with Black or a memory with Nereus. On the other end, the dreams more often than not turned into a reminder of the failures Sivan held within himself.

A stronger man would let go of those failures and try to learn from them. But Sivan had convinced himself that he was doomed to repeat them, time and time again.

His only solace was that Black was still alive. Sivan would break as many promises as he needed to keep that man safe.



Sivan jolted when he heard the hiss of the airlock draining of water. He hadn’t been asleep, but was sitting in bed listlessly,

debating if feeling the bliss of dream Black's touch was worth the guilt it always morphed into.

It took several moments for the small adjoining room to drain fully. Sivan expected the white-haired siren or some other servant or guard since it was early, but instead Jhaeros slinked into the room alone. This was a rare occasion. The king rarely visited Sivan without some kind of ruse for sharing a meal. It made Sivan uneasy. The siren's inky black hair was pulled back into a severe crest that cascaded down his back, a few silver beads tied into the locks. Sivan cursed the man for looking so much like his pirate brother, especially when Jhaeros's face wasn't pinched in anger.

He couldn't stop himself from flinching when the king threw something on the bed. Jhaeros hadn't stooped so low to physically hit him without provocation. He preferred to find the things Sivan was truly terrified of and use them to inflict the deeper scars.

"Put that on," Jhaeros ordered.

Sivan looked at the strange necklace that was on his bed. Silver metal looped over itself and around blood red jewels. It was pretty, in a sense, but Sivan knew better than to think Jhaeros had decided to start dressing him up in jewelry. The necklace had some other purpose.

"What is it?" Sivan asked, although he picked up the necklace obediently.

"A dowry for my bride," Jhaeros sneered.

He'd switched from calling Sivan by the Uncharted word to its translation in the common tongue. It still disturbed Sivan just as much. When he didn't react, Jhaeros huffed. The king looked like explaining this was more of a chore than fighting a war for a decade. "You're coming with me. If you'd like to drown, fine."

Sivan still didn't quite understand, but he put the necklace on

anyways. He'd only heard one thing in the siren's words: he was finally leaving this cell. The silver metal was ice cold on his skin, forcing an involuntary shiver out of him.

"Come." Jhaeros turned back to the still open airlock and motioned for him to follow.

Sivan got out of bed, his feet slapping against the tile now wet from the siren's entrance. He went into the airlock after the king, being extremely careful to not step on the white tail that curled around the room. The airlock was much bigger than it looked from Sivan's vantage from inside his cell. He still tried to stand as far away from the siren as possible. Although there appeared to be little escape from his presence since Jhaeros's blue-tipped tail slapped irritably at the floor in front of Sivan's feet.

Then the door behind them snapped shut, and the airlock started filling with water. Sivan had just exchanged one fear for the other.

"I...I thought you said I wouldn't drown." Sivan tried to sound like he wasn't already panicking, but the higher pitch of his voice betrayed him.

"Did I?" Jhaeros said with a mocking lilt. His blue eyes gleamed brighter when he glanced at Sivan, obviously delighted by the sound of fear in the human.

Sivan tried not to react as the water rose quickly past his knees and then his waist. He desperately did not want to give Jhaeros that satisfaction. His breath came in faster, his body trying to inhale as much precious air before it was too late. Yet when the water met his neckline and subsequently the necklace Jhaeros had made him wear, a strange thing happened. First, the red gem shimmered and came to life, pulsating with magic. Then, the silver loops unfurled and rose over Sivan's head. They wrapped around in thin, delicate lines, covering his head with the

outline of a sphere. The gem flashed again, and the gaps between the delicate lines filled with a translucent silver. Slowly, the silver faded, and Sivan was left with a clear globe of breathable air.

The lines from the necklace still remained, although they were so thin now they did not interfere with Sivan's vision.

The water rose above his head, over the sphere, and made its way up to the ceiling of the airlock. Sivan was speechless. He'd seen Eliza's sea glass golems and had thought those were magnificent. Siren magic was on a whole other level. It was elegant, but so deadly.

Jhaeros had lost interest in him now that he was no longer frightened. Sivan touched the blood red gem at the base of the sphere and was awed when he realized it pulsed with light every time he took a breath.

With the airlock now completely filled, the door to the ocean opened, and a new fear gripped Sivan.

He might be able to breathe underwater now, but he couldn't imagine himself swimming all the way down here. Jhaeros slithered out of the airlock, his white tail unwinding behind him. There was no way Sivan would be able to keep up with him.

Lasting fear was not in the cards for Sivan today, as he then realized his feet were still firmly planted on the ground. The weight of the water hadn't lifted him up off the floor as it usually did in his cell. His hair fanned out around him in the weightless water, but this floor acted as a magnet for his weight. Sivan took a step forward and found that he could actually walk on this floor with relative ease. He still felt the pressure of being this far under the surface, but whatever power that bewitched the castle also kept him from floating away. He watched as the white-haired siren who had come into Sivan's cell swam effortlessly to the walkway and landed firmly on the path. She then slid towards them, her movements as natural as if she were on land.

“The Undying Sea is ready, my liege.” The woman bowed to Jhaeros gracefully. It was the first time Sivan had heard her speak. Her voice was even and, surprisingly, gentle.

Jhaeros waved at her to step aside and brushed past her. “Very good, that will be all.”

She bowed again, and for one brief moment she met eyes with Sivan. She looked like she was going to say something to him but stopped herself, turning away. Sivan lingered behind the king as he watched the siren woman push off the pathway with a flick of her green tail and resume swimming.

“What do you know of the Undying Sea?” Jhaeros asked.

Sivan took a moment to catch up before answering. “I know it was the home of the old gods.” His knowledge of the old gods was limited to the sparse few pages dedicated to them in the Royal Library.

“Indeed,” Jhaeros chuckled. “The old gods lived in a perfect world, free of death, free of suffering. It was called the Undying Sea. But then, land was created, and the life that grew on it was cursed, doomed to die.”

They approached a great stone door carved with lines of intricate text. Once close enough, Sivan recognized the text as sirenath. His grasp on the language was not great enough to instantly translate it. He still needed a lexicon to decipher the archaic texts Jhaeros brought to him.

But one word stood out amongst the rest.

‘Leviathan.’

Jhaeros opened the doors with a surge of red magic. They creaked heavily against the weight of the ocean.

“This palace was once the home of the old gods. They used this prison to cage their own deviants.”

The king stepped inside, the terrible white light inside the room glaring around his silhouette.

“It still works just as well as it used to.”

Sivan’s eyes adjusted to the harsh light of the huge chamber. A long walkway traced the center, allowing for spectators to see the captives below. Along each side of the walkway were massive cells, filled with great beasts similar to the one Sivan had seen in Eliza’s memory. The rattle of chains melded with the guttural cries of the leviathans held inside, creating a terrible cacophony that made Sivan’s gut churn.

They ranged in colors, in shape, in size. Some closely resembled the white salamander Eliza had seen, others had snouts like dogs and teeth like sharks. Some had no faces at all. Yet they all exuded a pressure of immeasurable power, which bore down on Sivan, even from his position above.

Chains kept the leviathans bound to the floor. Sivan could tell they had been held prisoner like that for a long time by the many deep scars around the cuffs.

“What have you done, Jhaeros?” Sivan’s voice was weak, too horrified by what he was seeing. “These are divine beings.”

The king sneered at him. “There’s nothing divine about them.” He shot a hand out at the nearest cell and struck a leviathan with a bolt of red magic. It roared in pain and shrunk back further into its cell. “They’re as simple as any other beast, and they can be tamed.”

“Tamed?”

Jhaeros grinned, baring his sharp teeth. He signaled with his hand, and the leviathan he had struck came limping back to the front of the cell. It had the head of a drake, horns and teeth pitch black against a milky blue. Its body was more serpentine than a drake’s, the length of it unfurling into tattered fins. Jhaeros reached out his hand, and the leviathan slowly tapped the tip of its snout against it.

The king had these gods *trained*.

Jhaeros stroked the leviathan's nose, his touch careless against the backdrop of sharpened teeth. "I've been saving them for Varis, you know. I think your father has earned it. Unfortunately..."

He slapped the creature's snout away, and it quickly slinked back into the corner.

"These things die shortly after walking on land."

Jhaeros turned to Sivan, expression placid.

"Truthfully, I don't care about the little reckless invasion that started this war. I don't even really care about your shore-hogging Grenaldia."

Rage simmered to the surface of Sivan's throat. "Then why the hell is this war happening?"

"I'm going to make a better world."

That sentence barely registered in Sivan's mind. It was so preposterous he couldn't form a coherent thought around it.

"You look at me like I'm mad. Maybe I am, to a human. For humans, death is a certainty. Suffering is a certainty. Human nature makes sure of that." He waved his hand, and a plane of red light formed in front of them. A wistful expression crossed the king's face. "I have seen a vision of what could be, and it is beautiful."

The red plane quickly evolved into a portrait of Jhaeros's so-called beautiful vision. Sivan first recognized Varis, the familiar skyline instantly giving it away, even though the city lay completely underwater. In the foreground, the fishermen of the docks greeted Uncharted like old friends. The creatures who had once been their enemies now brought them nets filled with bountiful harvests.

The ashen visage Sivan had seen the last time he was on the Varis docks was gone. In its stead was the the Varis of old, the capital he knew from his childhood. Yet it was more, with

Uncharted and humans living in peace.

“Life on our world was not meant for land. It never was,” Jhaeros continued, somber now. “The old gods failed to stop it and thus doomed us to mortality. Death walks hand in hand with humans, who obsess over the ownership of land to the point of war.” The vision changed once again, Varis reverting back to the grim wartime shadow Sivan had last seen it as. “They pick fights over sand and dirt, ignorant that in doing so they are embracing death.”

Sian pulled his attention away from the red vision. It seemed idyllic, but it was nothing more than a fantasy Jhaeros was trying to sell him.

“What are you getting at?”

The king turned to him, blue eyes glimmering unnaturally bright. “I’m going to raze the land back into the sea.”

“What?” Sivan sucked in a breath, the sinking feeling in his gut solidifying into genuine dread.

Jhaeros gestured at the leviathans once more. As he did, a line of leviathans appeared on the horizon in the red vision. “Legend has it that these leviathans are decedents of the old gods. They retain some of that divine power. I will use them to pull the blood-soaked land of this world into the ocean. To purify it.”

The leviathans in the vision descended upon Varis. Terrible beams of power crackled from the maws of the divine beasts and ripped into the land like a sharpened blade through flesh. Sivan had no problem seeing the result: Grenaldia would be leveled into the ocean, and then the rest of the world would not be far after.

“Once I have turned the world back into the Undying Sea, the only life left will be immortal, as nature intended.”

Sivan felt sick. The bridge they were on was sturdy, but

Sivan felt like it was buckling beneath them. "This is insanity," he said quietly.

Jhaeros laughed, humorless and biting. "Only a mortal would think so! I don't care if the world views me as mad. The end justifies the means."

Sivan knew there was no use attempt in trying to persuade the siren king out of this idea. The way he spoke about it was so certain. He had no chance in cracking the man's resolution. Yet there had to be a reason Jhaeros was taking the time to tell him this. There was something missing in this plan of his.

"Why are you telling me this? Surely you have better things to do than demoralize me further."

Blue eyes turned down upon him. "Indeed, I do."

Sivan paused, looking again over the many leviathans imprisoned below. "You said they can't walk on land without dying."

"I did say that." Jhaeros turned away from him, his shoulders stiff.

Something clicked in Sivan's mind.

"You need the Corseque of Estes, don't you?"

The king's pause affirmed Sivan's guess. "The sirenath translations you've provided us with have revealed some crucial information. The Corseque is the key to fully controlling the leviathans. If I have that, I can command them onto land without it poisoning them."

Sivan shook his head. "Well, if you forgot, you destroyed the corseque."

Jhaeros turned around to face him, his expression serious. "I want you to help bring my brother over to my side."

Sivan blinked, struck by the unexpected request. "What?"

The siren waved his hands with a flourish, and a shaft of red light appeared. It morphed into the corseque Jhaeros had

destroyed.

“The corseque you found in Estes’ tomb was a fake. A very good fake, at that. One only a very powerful witch could have made.”

“You think Eliza knows where the real corseque is?” Sivan hazarded. “We did not part with her on good terms.”

“It appears that is always how their goodbyes’ go,” Jhaeros chuckled. “Nereus has been spotted with the sea witch recently. It appears they have reconciled in your absence.”

Sivan closed his eyes for a moment. He was uneasy at hearing this, but at the same time was relieved Black still had someone by his side. “Even if they do know where the weapon is, they will not hand it over so easily.”

“No, they will not.” Jhaeros spun the magic replica lazily. “But if I offer *you* in exchange for the corseque, I have no doubt my brother would happily fetch it for me.”

Sivan’s heart both sank and warmed at the same time, because he knew this was true.

“But the problem remains that the corseque is the only weapon that can truly kill a siren. There is little stopping my brother from using it to kill me and take you anyways. Killing me was your initial purpose for finding it anyways, was it not?”

Sivan didn’t answer. Black might play nice if it meant rescuing him, but there was no way Sivan himself would allow such an exchange to take place. He would not be part of an exchange that would end the world.

Jhaeros sighed, and the red corseque dissipated. “Besides, even if a trade were to work out, it would still leave him in danger once I set loose the leviathans. I’ve given you little reason to believe that I love my brother, but he is still my blood and I would prefer if he lived.” Jhaeros opened his arms wide, as if to welcome Sivan. “Clearly, the only answer is to bring my brother

over to my side. I always meant for him to join me, but he is rather stubborn over his love of humans.”

A pale hand gripped Sivan’s chin, forcing him to look up into those terrible blue eyes. “What do you say? Help me bring my brother over to our side, and I will ensure the two of you can be together in my new kingdom.”

An image was pushed into his mind. Black dressed in the same cold regalia his brother wore, proudly standing in his siren form against the backdrop of the same palace Sivan called prison. Yet Sivan was next to Black, somehow breathing and seeming just as natural in the water as the siren next to him. They were happy despite knowing the rest of the mortal world had been razed to the sea.

Another fantasy.

Sivan jerked back, shaking the vision out of his head.

“Never,” he spat. “I will never help you bring Nereus to your side. I am not so selfish.”

For a moment the siren king seemed genuinely surprised. But the shocked look on his face only lingered for a second before a cruel laugh echoed throughout the prison.

“Oh, the irony of men never fails to amuse me. Tell me, do you even care at all for my brother?”

Sivan refused to dignify that question with an answer. Why else was he here other than to protect Black—to protect Nereus?

Jhaeros hummed dismissively. “No, of course not. This is the second time you’ve abandoned Nereus. Naturally, you would deny my brother his only salvation now.”

Something snapped in Sivan. He had learned to be diplomatic with the Uncharted king. There was little purpose in antagonizing Jhaeros when Sivan was surrounded by his followers at all times.

“You speak as if I am the only one who has abandoned

Nereus. Before I took him in he'd been living as a stray amongst the street urchins. Starving, beaten, filthy."

Jhaeros actually shrank back slightly at Sivan's words.

"He clearly didn't belong there. He hadn't grown up with the local urchins, so they ostracized him. Nereus had already been abandoned when I found him. No doubt abandoned by *you*."

The king slapped him across the face, sending Sivan staggering backwards. He wiped blood off his lip and looked up at Jhaeros. Sivan had seen the siren angry before. But this...this was different. The man looked like he was a feral dog, backed into a corner.

It was the same desperate look Nereus had when he was an orphan, begging for fruit on the street.

Jhaeros turned away, his shoulders tense. He shouted something in Uncharted, and pair of guards entered the prison to take Sivan away. He went willingly, not bothering to put up a fight with the guards who grabbed his arms just a little too tight.

Before leaving, Sivan took one last glance back at the siren king.

He remained frozen, alone.