

Chapter 8

Lissandry

Sivan felt much better the next day. He hadn't realized how sleep deprived he'd been until he was given the chance to sleep off the ship. He woke up refreshed, ready to get started on the translation he was here to do.

The bandage on his hand had gone loose. Sivan unraveled it, touching the red gash on his palm. It stung, the cut had reopened when he had started translating the seal. He remembered Black's gentle hands, but quickly shook the memory out of his head before it could go further.

Sivan got out of bed and found an unethically large bathroom attached to the back of the room. Inside was another change of clothes laid out for him, so he reluctantly climbed into the gilded clawfoot tub and bathed himself. There was no reason for a bathtub to be made of gold, yet here he was, soaking in one.

Ornate brocade and gilded everything decorated every filament of the lavish room he was sequestered to. The Grenaldian

nobility was not without its frivolous luxuries, but they tended to be a tad more understated than the gaudy detailing that the pirates were so fond of. Sivan's family home in Varis featured polished marble and sheer curtains. A little filagree here and there carved into the marble wasn't unheard of, but it was a far cry from the visual cacophony Sivan was now living in.

He changed into his new clothes, which were presumably another set stolen from a Grenaldian noble's wardrobe. White slacks, a low cut, light grey tunic embroidered with birds, and a black and gold brocade vest. Sivan stubbornly left the vest in the bathroom in an attempt to distance himself from the decadence of the room.

The sun was shining in through the large window, birds singing cheerily on a tree outside. It was a gorgeous day, so Sivan unlatched the window, letting the pleasant ocean breeze into the room as he took a seat at the mahogany table.

There was a precise knock at the door, and Sivan instinctively called out, "come in."

He felt an odd sense of *deja vu*, which was broken by the entrance of the massive pirate captain holding a silver tray.

"Good morning, my lord," Black greeted. It was far too cheerful and polite of an entrance, and the oddity of this was evidently reflected on Sivan's face as the pirate composed his face back into his usual neutral smirk.

"Good morning," Sivan said, crossing his arms to observe the odd scene that had walked into his room. "Are you serving me breakfast?"

"Indeed," Black replied, and he swooped over to set the tray on the ridiculous table. "How are you feeling?"

Sivan leaned back, watching as the pirate took plates from the tray and set them out before Sivan. "I am fine. I was merely sleep deprived."

“That’s good,” Black hummed.

He set the breakfast out in perfect order, arranging the cutlery as it would be presented in any noble’s home. Sivan couldn’t help finding it all strange. Black was a hardened pirate lord, notorious for being a ruthless monster and a greedy miscreant. Yet here he was, setting the table for his prisoner.

“Eat,” Black said. Sivan looked at the spread. Braised sausages over rice, a spicy smelling pot of chili with a soft boiled egg nestled inside, delicate pastries folded into neat and perfect flowers dripping with butter, fruit cut into intricate designs.

It was ridiculously lavish, even for a noble.

“You must pay your cook well,” Sivan mused, but went for the chili anyways.

“Very,” Black said with a chuckle. To Sivan’s surprise, he sat down at the table with him, but he made no move to share the meal with him. There was more than enough food for two, but there was only one set of cutlery.

Still, Sivan was hungry, so he put the first spoonful of chili in his mouth.

It was delicious. So delicious it almost brought tears to his eyes. Sivan hadn’t had breakfast chili in years. It had been a staple in the Northern Spear, but he hadn’t been able to find a proper reproduction until now.

“How does it taste?” Black asked, his dark green eyes genuinely curious despite the neutral smirk that his mouth was fixed with.

“It’s incredible. Please pass my compliments to the cook,” Sivan said politely. After the first night on the Blackwater, Sivan had learned not to criticize the food that the pirate gave him, but he did not have to lie in order to praise the merits of what he was eating.

“I will,” Black said, amusement glittering in his eyes.

Sivan didn't even care what kind of game the pirate was playing right now. The food was good, he was so hungry, and he was using all his willpower to not shovel the bowl of chili into his mouth like a starved animal.

He barely noticed when a glob of yolk from the egg dripped down, landing on his exposed collarbone and sliding down the deep opening of his tunic.

Sivan looked up to search for a napkin when he found one being offered to him by Black. The pirate refused to look at him, seemingly more interested in the open window. Although he had a faint blush along his ears, which Sivan found a bit odd.

He took the napkin and cleaned up the yolk on his chest. Now he remembered why the Grenaldian nobility's fashion from a decade ago always insisted on vests. The tunics underneath were mildly inappropriate.

"May I ask, why is the Captain of the Blackwater serving me breakfast and not one of his certainly capable crew?" Sivan asked, spearing a slice of fruit on his fork.

Black propped his chin up on a hand, the gold rings on his fingers glinting in the sunlight. "Because I don't trust you."

Sivan couldn't stop a light laugh from escaping. "You don't trust *me*? I'm not the one stealing priceless artifacts and kidnapping people."

"No, you aren't," Black said, a conflicted shadow crossing over his face. "But men who steal and kidnap are easy to understand. I know what they're going to do next. But you...you have a fortress built around you. If anyone is going to catch me off guard it's going to be the man I can't see coming."

Sivan was not convinced Black was reading him correctly at all. "Maybe I was that man once. Do you know what the Grenaldian sailors used to call me? *The Two-Headed Viper*."

"An accurate title," Black teased, amusement glittering in his

eyes once more.

"It is not," Sivan insisted. "Vipers are deadly fast and lethally poisonous. All I ever did was be a faster target than the low level Uncharted dregs. And I've never poisoned anyone."

Black grinned, sharp teeth glinting. "It's never too late to start."

"Preposterous," Sivan scoffed. "Anyways, I'm not that anymore. I'm about as dangerous as a marmot."

"A marmot?" Black laughed. His laugh was a low and pleasant sound. "Now you're making me feel inferior. You were certainly fast enough in Varis. Your swords nearly got my throat, even sliced off a lock of hair." He held up the strand of hair which remained notably shorter than the rest. "That's no easy feat for a marmot."

Sivan couldn't decide if he was being made fun of or not, so he merely readjusted his posture and speared another slice of fruit with his fork. "So then, tell me, why is it they call you Black? Surely it can't be the name you were born with, and it seems too coincidental for your surname to be the color of your ship."

"Ah, it is not my real name, no," Black admitted. "I had been taken prisoner early on in the war."

"Prisoner? By Grenaldia?" Sivan was surprised, for the fact that there had never been a record of Black being captured even once had always irked his father.

"No, by Uncharted," Black explained.

Sivan frowned. "But Uncharted don't take prisoners."

Black grinned, a dangerous light dancing in his eyes. "Not anymore. There was an island just outside of the Devil's Whip that the Uncharted forces tried turning into a prison."

"I'd heard rumors of that, but I thought they were just tall tales," Sivan said quietly.

“That place was anything but a rumor to me,” Black said, his tone growing dark for a brief moment. “Anyway, the island had huge tar pits, and they would use the prisoners to sift the pits.”

“For what?” Sivan was interested now.

“Who knows,” Black muttered. “Jhaeros was searching for something in the pits, but we never found it. After five months of sifting through tar I tried raising a rebellion. It did not go to plan, and the overseers threw me into a pit.”

“What? And you didn’t die?” Sivan was astonished. Tar pits were very toxic. Humans and animals would stumble into the edge of one, get stuck in the thick muck and perish slowly. Being thrown right into one was assumedly deadly.

“Miraculously, no,” Black chuckled. “I crawled out of it, dripping in tar. I don’t remember much after that. I know the overseers met the pits as I did, but unlike me they are still in there.”

“I see,” Sivan breathed. “And that’s why they call you Black?”

“My early crew were fellow inmates who escaped with me that day. They started calling me it since I *‘walked out of those pits dripping in black.’*”

“Are they still with you?”

“Some of them.” A shadow crossed over the pirate’s face. “Hayes and Brand. Mostly everyone else has fallen in battle.”

“I see,” Sivan said quietly. He too knew what it was like to have a crewmate fall in front of your eyes. “Anyways, I’m here to translate, yes? After I eat I’ll get to work on it.”

The shadow over Black’s face faded, and he extended a hand towards Sivan’s right hand, the one with the cut on his palm. “Give me your hand.”

Sivan blinked, confused by the request. Yet he complied, obediently raising his hand so the pirate could take it. He gently examined the scar, frowning as he did so. It had hurt when Sivan

poked at it earlier, but he didn't feel any stinging when Black did the same.

"You can't write with this hand."

Sivan blinked again, further thrown off by the pirate's words, his brow furrowing by a fraction. "That didn't stop me the other day."

"Yes, and it reopened because of it. You can wait to translate it until after it's healed," Black said. His hand was warm, and he traced a thumb along the curve of Sivan's palm. It was a deeply distracting sensation, and it almost made Sivan skip over the strangeness of the pirate's concern.

"Why does it matter?" Sivan asked, trying to catch any change of expression on the man's face.

Black looked up at him, his near-pitch eyes gazing back at Sivan in an inscrutable flash of worry. "It matters," he said quietly. His hand squeezed around Sivan's wrist for a moment, making the captured lord's heart race.


Sivan was so caught off guard by the intimate gesture he pulled his hand back, desperate to escape the touch of the man who was making his face heat up. "F-fine, but I can just write with my other hand."

"You can do that?" Black looked genuinely surprised, as if he had a right to know everything about Sivan even though they had only known each other for a few days.

"Yes," Sivan said, flexing his left hand as if to show that it worked just as well as the other. "I wielded two blades during the war. My left works just as well as my right now."

Black propped his chin back up on his hand, the neutral smirk returning to his face with a hint of mischief. "Ah. I imagine that's quite handy, isn't it?"

Sivan refused to examine the innuendo the pirate had delivered that sentence with.



Days later, Sivan was still hard at work translating. He was seated once again at the ridiculous glass landscape table. It was extraordinarily beautiful, but it was the only table in the room, and Sivan found it extraordinarily distracting while he was trying to work. Currently, he had covered the surface of the table in various parchments scribbled with different translations of the Siren Seal. The seal was clean now, Sivan had made Black fetch him proper cleaning supplies and brushes so he could try to preserve the used artifact as best he could.

Looking over his work, Sivan was pleased to see that he had made great progress with the translation. It wasn't complete, and it would most likely never be truly perfect, but Black's Uncharted translation had significantly helped him jumpstart the process of unlocking the dead language.

He was almost sad that he would not be able to finish translating it before the Royal Navy arrived.

It had been nearly a week since they'd arrived in Lissandry. If Renalt's information had been correct, the earliest the Royal Navy could get here would be tonight. He had hoped he would have had another opportunity to speak to Renalt, to find out if he had any updates on the rescue operation, but Black had kept Sivan's room persistently guarded. If Black himself did not sit outside the room, either Brand or one of his other trusted cronies would be standing watch.

There was a careful knock on the door, and it opened without Sivan saying anything. He looked up to find Brand entering the room, carrying a tray with a plate of food and a pitcher of water.

Sivan hated himself for being disappointed that it was not Black. He had grown used to the pirate's presence during his

meals. Every time he would watch Sivan eat, asking him how he liked it. Sivan thought the first couple of meals had been a fluke, a twisted peace offering in order to convince him to translate the seal. Evidently the captain ate this well every day, and he insisted on sharing it with Sivan. Brand merely stepped in from time to time in order to keep an eye on him while Black did the things a pirate lord was actually supposed to do.

“Evenin’!” Brand chimed cheerily, sweeping across the room and placing the tray on the table, away from Sivan’s work. “How’s th’ translatin’ be?”

Brand poured him a glass of water, and Sivan took it when it was offered to him. “Fine, fine. I do wish I had the map I’m supposed to translate. It would help a great deal if I could compare it to what I have now.”

The pirate shook his head. “Th’ captain don’t keep tha’ map on Lissandry. If me had to make a guess, it most likely be on the hoard island.”

Sivan raised his eyebrows. “You don’t know where it is? How do you know even Black has it?”

Brand grinned. “Th’ captain ain’t let us down yet.” He then took the cover off the tray and placed it in front of Sivan. The corner of a note stuck underneath a plate on the tray caught the Grenaldian noble’s attention, but he ignored it for now in the presence of the pirate.

The food was decadent, as usual. Sivan wasn’t even particularly hungry, but his mouth salivated at the smell. Whoever was cooking these meals had a gift.

“Oh, th’ captain asked me ta invite ye tonight.”

“Invite?” Sivan said, stopping himself from taking a bite from the spoonful of orzo halfway to his mouth. “Invite to what?”

Brand smiled. “We be havin’ a party.”

“A party? Is that not what I’ve been hearing every night?”

“Nah, that’s nothin!” Brand laughed. “This is a real party. At the Grand Tavern.”

“I think I’ll stay here, thank you. It doesn’t seem appropriate for a prisoner to join in,” Sivan muttered as he set the spoon back down.

“Fair enough,” Brand nodded, his tone sympathetic. He picked up the tray and turned toward the door. “Th’ captain will be real disappointed, though.” Sivan stiffened, but didn’t say anything. Brand sighed and left Sivan to his dinner.

He had almost asked Brand why Black would be disappointed. He wondered if the pirate crew had more insight to Black’s motivations, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask any of them. Sivan felt that by saying it out loud, his shameful interest in the pirate would worsen.

After the door had closed behind Brand, Sivan set his fork down and tugged out the note from under the plate. Unfolding it, he read what it said:

‘They will arrive tonight. Be ready. -R.’

Despite the vague wording, Sivan knew exactly what the note meant. The Royal Navy would arrive at Lissandry that night. Sivan’s time with the pirates would soon be at an end. Then he would be put on a ship and returned to Varis, where he would be married, if his arranged fiancé was even still waiting for him.

It was then that Sivan had realized that he hadn’t once thought of his arranged marriage since he had been captured. He had been so focused on trying to not get killed or be seduced that his problems from a few days ago had seemed like they were from another lifetime. He had been imprisoned, he had been threatened, he had been nearly killed during his time on the Blackwater, but not once had he felt the staggering morose haze that plagued him in Varis.

It almost made him want to stay with the pirates.

Almost.

It did make him realize that he couldn't live like a half dead man for the rest of his life. The second he returned home he would tell his father that he could not marry the Vheltn prince. He needed to find some way to do good again, even if he couldn't use his swords.

Sivan ate his dinner, resolve bolstering with every bite. The food was delicious, as always. The orzo practically melted in his mouth, and the grilled fish was sumptuous and full of flavor, just how he liked it. He wondered how the Blackwater's cook always got his tastes right. Sivan's affinity for highly flavorful food was born from his time on the Northern Spear. The stretch of islands nestled inside the Devil's Whip was known for its robust cuisine and a taste that was usually too intense for the common Grenaldian noble's palate. But Sivan had grown to love it, and he had always missed the food from his youth once the war started.

Sivan was about to ask Black if the cook was from an island in the Devil's Whip when he realized the pirate was not with him as usual.

This bothered him so much he put his utensils down, glasses slipping down his nose as he frowned at his hands. The wound on his hand had finally started to heal once he'd listened to Black and switched to writing with his uninjured hand. He'd only been writing with his other out of habit. The warmth of the pirate's fingers against his wrist had left Sivan's skin feeling tingly, even now, days later. He closed his hand, hiding the scar on his palm from himself.

Why was Black so affectionate towards him? Was it merely how the pirate captain was, to be this flirty and warm with anyone he captured? It certainly seemed possible given the man's fabled reputation, but for some reason Sivan doubted it nonethe-

less.

Black had known who Sivan was when he had invaded Varis. He had a reason to do this other than the fact that Sivan knew Oltinish. Black had promised Sivan that he would tell him the truth behind this, but so far he hadn't done so.

Sivan stood up and straightened his vest. Today it was a dark silver one with platinum filigree, yet another set of outdated Grenaldian finery Black gave him to play dress-up in. There must be a reason even for that.

He walked over to the window, looking out over the still night covering Lissandry. On the other side of the island the glow from a great fire was just visible. Sivan figured that was where the party was taking place. If he were smart, and Sivan liked to think that he was, he would stay put until the Royal Navy arrived. If Renalt tried to fetch him from his room and he was not there it could make the impending rescue mission more complicated.

Besides, Sivan didn't have any particular drive to join the pirates in their merriment. Other than the few who had been tasked with keeping an eye on him, Sivan had not met the majority of the crew. He didn't know if they were as dangerous as Black or as unnerving as Hayes.

Another light caught his eye from down below. Along the coast of the island, below the outcropping the manor stood on, a small white glow cast a silhouette of a man standing along the shore. Sivan was too far away to see the man in great detail, but from the odd light he was holding Sivan thought he looked like the pirate lord. The man appeared to put the light inside of something, a bottle Sivan guessed. Then he bent over and gently tossed the bottle into the ocean. The light travelled unnaturally fast against the tide, and was soon well on its way to whatever destination it held.

Without the small light, the man along the shore was even less visible. He seemed to recede into the darkness, and Sivan was reminded of how Black had emerged from the same shadows during their first meeting. His gut told him that this man was Black, and his heart burned to ask the pirate to stop playing games and just tell him the truth.

He strode towards the door and opened it swiftly, announcing to Brand, “I’ve changed my mind. I’d like to attend—”

However, instead of the grizzled old Grenaldian, the blue tentacled quartermaster sat guarding his door.

“Ah, the fancy lord wants to go to the party,” Vivianne teased, grinning at him with razor sharp teeth.

Sivan had to use every ounce of willpower to not retreat back into the room. He knew this woman was here to guard him, but seeing an Uncharted person up close still activated the part of his brain that had been trained to respond with either fear or violence.

Somehow he managed to push it down and stood even straighter, his head high. “Brand said the captain had invited me.”

“Indeed he has.” Vivianne’s eyes brimmed with amusement even though Sivan had a hard time reading the emotions on Uncharted faces due to their unnaturally large black irises, which made their entire eyes appear like slits of pitch. She stood up suddenly, and Sivan reflexively flinched back against the door that had closed behind him. “Oh, calm down, I’m not gonna hurt ya. The captain would have my head.”

Sivan nodded, but could not unclench his jaw around the Uncharted woman. He began mentally preparing himself to see even more of her kind soon, as he was certain the so-called celebration the pirates were having would include all of the Blackwater crew plus her sister ships.

Vivianne took a step towards the stairs and motioned at Sivan to follow. "Come on, I'll take you to Black."

That made Sivan follow her without hesitation. Before the Royal Navy arrived to rescue him, he needed to find out what secrets the captain of the Blackwater was hiding.