

# Chapter 14

## *The Blackwater*

The great plans Sivan had made to reconcile with Black were dashed when he woke up to find that the captain had vacated his cabin once again.

In fact, Sivan could not find the pirate at all. He questioned the crew, but they all refused to answer him. Whether it was out of resentment for Sivan or fear of Black's wrath, he did not know.

So Sivan waited in the captain's quarters for the man to return. The Siren Seal and the work he had done on the translations were on the long wooden table. His notes were neatly stacked, untouched by Sivan who only had the capacity to spread out papers into messes and never see them organized again. He should be working on the translation, but instead he was contemplating who had organized them for him.

It was likely one of the crew members. Surely Black wouldn't keep up with his attendant's duties now that he was a pirate lord.

Sivan instead daydreamed, tracing the patterns on the table with his finger. Without the decadent spread of food on the table, he could see that it was indeed a war table. It was similar to his father's, but the map was vastly outdated. It showed a coastline from two hundred years ago, before Grenaldia had secured its territory furthest north. His finger wandered to the deep knife wound Black had carved into the table the first night he was captured. Examining further, he could see other gauges and scars from likely similar gestures of intimidation.

This table was very old and very possibly quite rare, and here Black was using it as a cutting block. Sivan huffed, ire rising from the thought.

Black had successfully avoided him for two days at this point. Sivan's initial guilt over Nereus had slowly evolved into irritation. Surely Black had some strong feelings about the matter, but he had been doing fine conversing with Sivan before his identity had been revealed!

He resolutely did not think of how this roughly translated into Sivan actually missing the man's company.

He just didn't like to be ignored.

Standing up quickly, chair skidding on the wood floor, Sivan grabbed a gray leather cloak and headed back onto the deck.

The cloak had been something he had found in Black's room. It was clearly the captain's as it was far too big for Sivan, but he needed something to shield him from the constant deluge. The water had calmed somewhat, but the rain was unending. Occasional lightning would strike far too close to be comfortable, but so far the crew had managed to steer away from the charged clouds as they appeared.

Right now the wind was especially bad. Most of the sails had been lowered to keep the masts from splintering in such tremendous force. The ship was rocking quite badly, and Sivan gripped

the cloak around him tighter to steel himself. He had been sick quite a number of times since the storm had began. Just when he had thought he was regaining his sea legs, the boat would rattle in a way that had his stomach doing backflips.

The cloak smelled like Black. Seawater and musk and sandalwood. He wondered if the man was vain enough to actually use a cologne. He likely was. Still, the scent comforted him and let him continue making his way through the deck step by step.

The crew had learned to not try and hustle him back into the cabin. Sivan had not been locked anywhere since they left Lissandry, and he intended to keep it that way. He was always faster than the pirate who tried to stop him, and just like he had with Vivianne, would often steal their swords from their scabbards. Then Hayes would begrudgingly come over to tell them to break it up.

Sivan never tried the same thing with Hayes. For some reason the woman unnerved him even though she was human. Probably. He honestly wasn't sure who was human anymore after he'd seen Black turn into a siren.

There was a thump from below deck, and Sivan went to investigate. Immediately below was the gun deck. Cannons were bolted down to keep them from rolling. Cannonballs were lined up in rows behind them. Sivan walked past barrels filled with gunpowder, and he held his breath as he did so. That smell reminded him too much of war.

He went down another floor into the crew's quarters, walking through rows and rows of swaying hammocks. A few crew members were sleeping soundly, likely exhausted from a shift of trying to keep the ship sailing through the storm.

The rest of them had to be down another floor or two, judging by the noise coming from below. Sivan could hear jeers and laughter from the Blackwater crew, broken up intermittently

with low growls and ominous thuds. Every time a particularly loud thud happened the pirates seemed to cheer even louder.

He passed stores of food and water. A handful of sheep and chickens were kept in pens to one side. Sivan went down another set of stairs.

Excess supplies were kept in the hold, the very bottom of the ship. The spoils from the smuggler's ship lay down here as well. Luxury wares and buckets of gold were neatly tucked away amongst the supplies. It was evidence of someone who had skill in finding the perfect way to slot in odd, valuable items to get the most inside the ship.

There were a handful of cells made out of iron bars. They looked uncomfortable and damp, and the cold water they were sailing through turned the bottom hold into an inhospitable ice-box. Sivan was very glad he had not been jailed down here.

One of the cell doors was open. An open padlock swung on the latch, suggesting it had been recently opened.

Beyond the cells were the pirates. They formed a circle around some spectacle Sivan could not see. It was probably some kind of fight if he remembered the Blackwater's crew chosen form of entertainment on Lissandry. He thought this was an odd place to be having a fight, but then again it was one of the only dry places in the ship.

Was it Black? Was he fighting the jelly Uncharted man again?

There was a distinct rattling growl, and Sivan knew it had not come from a human or Uncharted.

He weaved through the crowd, pushing past pirates who were trying to get a better view. A few recognized Sivan and moved out of the way, giving him odd looks of dread upon realizing who it was.

Sivan broke through the throng of jeering pirates and saw a

bloodied man facing a Belatoran crocodile. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of the thing. Jhaeros had used a menagerie of exotic and ferocious beasts in the war. The yellow snake Sivan had faced on the Spear had been the start of it. The Siren king would find a new creature and destroy its mind with whatever dark magic he possessed. When he was done with it, the animal would thirst for violence and attack anything it was set upon.

This creature was likely one of those Jhaeros had finished playing with. After the battle was over the beasts were cast aside to fend on their own in a strange land, so they more often than not ended up on some Grenaldian island or coast where they would terrorize the local population.

This crocodile was long and fat, evidently well fed in the bowels of the Blackwater. It was pure white, its ridges flecked with rust. It was plated with thick scales, hard as steel. All six of its eyes were pure black, evidence of Jhaeros's corruption. Its long snout tapered into a great horn at the tip, and it was currently opening its mouth to hiss at its opponent with large white teeth. A few of them were already stained with blood.

The man who faced the creature darted back at the warning. He was holding a sword, but it had been bent badly from fighting the crocodile. He had deep copper skin, dark gray hair, and when he turned to evade the creature's lunge, Sivan recognized him as Renalt.

He gasped, making the connection that the man who had tried to rescue him must have been captured during the attack on Lissandry. Renalt looked battered, his eyes sunken from exhaustion, his skin sallow and marred with cuts in various stages of healing. This was obviously not the first time he had fought something down here, and he was nearing the end of his stamina.

Renalt aimed for one of the Belatoran beast's many eyes with his sword, but it glanced off the creature's impenetrable scales.

The beast turned its head and took hold of the sword with its jaws. It tossed the sword out of Renalt's reach, and the crowd of pirates cheered.

Sivan was horrified by their sheer joy watching the weakened man fight an animal that knew only rage. Sure, Renalt had been exposed as a spy and had lost them their capital, but submitting him to such torture for their entertainment was cruel.

It made them no better than Jhaeros.

The man who seemed to be enjoying this display the most was sitting in a brocade upholstered chair, legs propped up on a stool. It was Black, pirate lord and master, and his emerald eyes were stained a shade of pitch in their amusement. He was grinning, sharp teeth glinting in the dim light of the hold. Sivan did not feel fear or resentment when he saw Black like this now. Knowing who he really was, Sivan was crushed by disappointment. How had the innocent boy who had attended him all those years ago turn into a man so consumed by hatred?

"Black!" Sivan snapped as he pushed through the inner circle of pirates and stepped into the ring. "Stop this now!"

The pirate captain's face went blank upon seeing him. Sivan had hoped there would have been traces of remorse or at least surprise, but the man's face was unreadable.

The other pirates booed him loudly, upset their show had been interrupted. The crocodile continued to hiss and growl, approaching Renalt inch by inch. Black's face remained blank.

"Finish it," the pirate lord said, and his crew cheered, causing the crocodile to go in for the killing blow.

Fast as he could, Sivan picked up the battered sword from the ground. He rushed between Renalt and the beast and slashed precisely, cutting across two of the six black eyes. The crocodile roared in pain, thrashing and knocking down a few observing pirates in the process.

Sivan knew he had to put this thing down quickly. The mangled sword would do nothing against the crocodile's armored body. Even if he had a sturdier and newer weapon it likely would not do much. But Sivan had read about the Belatoran crocodile before. Although its scales were thick and impenetrable, it had a rather thin skull and a small brain.

He darted toward the crocodile. Black stood up to intervene. Sivan brought the hilt of the sword down on the beast's head hard. The blow rattled the creature, and it staggered one way then another before it collapsed, unconscious but not dead.

Sivan panted, regaining his composure despite the anger and disappointment that still boiled inside him. The pirates had gone silent. No doubt they were shocked, seeing the *high and mighty lord* knock out the seemingly unstoppable beast with two hits.

He was a war hero, after all. Now they would have to respect that even if they didn't want to.

"What is wrong with you?!" Sivan shouted at Black directly now that the crocodile was on the floor. "I understand pirates don't care about common ethics, but I expected more from *you!*"

*This* finally broke Black's blank expression. His eyes grew wide, brows knit upwards as if he were in sudden pain.

Still, Sivan't couldn't stop himself from spitting out a final blow. "You disappoint me."

He shook his head, turned around, grabbed Renalt by the arm and marched him out of the hold.

Once they were out of sight of the crowd of pirates, Sivan relaxed his hold on the man. He feared hurting him more than he already had been. They continued to make their way up the floors of the ship, ignoring pointed stares from the crew.

"You shouldn't have done that, my lord," Renalt rasped weakly. "They'll seek retribution on you. I'm not worth—"

"Quiet," Sivan said firmly. "Black would not harm me, and

the crew knows to keep their distance because of it.”

“How do you know that?” the taller man asked.

Sivan sighed. “I’m his prize. He won’t damage me no matter what I do.”

Renalt stopped, taking Sivan’s hands in his own. “Let’s take this opportunity to escape, my lord. I saw some dinghies up top before they locked me down there.”

“Escape to where?” Sivan retorted, although he kept his expression sympathetic since the man looked so hopeful. “We would not survive this storm, and we are leagues away from the Royal Navy at this point. It’s suicide.”

“But- Isn’t it also suicide to remain on this ship full of lunatics?”

“Perhaps,” Sivan said quietly. “But I believe Black can be reasoned with when he’s not in this mood. If I can find a way to break him out of it I might be able to make a plea for your release.”

Renalt’s hands tightened around his. “And what about yours, my lord?”

“That might not be in the cards for me just yet.” Sivan smiled at him sadly. Now that he knew Black was Nereus, he felt an obligation to at least try to steer him back on the right path.

He’d abandoned Nereus once. He wasn’t about to do it again anytime soon.

They were interrupted by the crowd of pirates from the hold rushing up the stairs and through the decks. The Blackwater crew had just been cheering for Renalt’s death, but they now ignored both unattended prisoners as they dashed past them.

“What’s going on?” Sivan asked aloud.

Jules, the green jelly Uncharted man who had fearlessly dueled Black on Lissandry happened to hear him and answered, “It’s — It’s Black. He’s...turning into...I don’t know! Just stay



away from the hold!”

Sivan’s stomach turned, although it wasn’t from fear. He should be afraid, considering how distressed the pirates running out of the hold looked. He tried to take a step back down the stairs, but Renalt stopped him.

“Forgive me, my lord, but are you mad? If all these pirates would run from their own captain why would you go back down there?” Renalt pleaded with him, confusion in his amber eyes at Sivan’s reluctance to leave the dangerous pirate captain alone.

“But-“ Sivan started, but was cut off by Brand walking up the stairs and clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“He be right. Th’ captain be beyond reason now. No sense in goin’ down to face him now.” The older pirate said, his expression serious but not as terrified as the others.

“But, Brand- we have to help him,” Sivan whispered, failing to hide his concern for Black from Renalt.

Brand’s face hardened at Sivan. The man heard what Sivan had said to Black down there. He knew Sivan had started whatever was going on down there. “There be nothin’ we can do for him now. Best to wait out th’ storm somewhere safe.”

The boat rocked harshly, tossing several pirates across the floor. The wind outside picked up, and Sivan could hear the Blackwater groan and splinter at the sudden increased intensity of the storm.

Where was safe in a storm like this?