

Chapter 5

Varis

When Lusa shook Sivan's shoulder to wake him the next morning, he groaned in pain. Or, pretended to, as per the letter.

"Ohh, what's wrong with you now?!" Lusa sounded convincingly concerned and annoyed at the same time. He tugged on his patient's shoulder, and Sivan rolled off the bed with a heavy thud. The nurse left him to writhe on the ground and started pounding on the section of glass where Sivan knew he could see the guards.

One of them immediately entered the airlock and it began to drain. Lusa rushed back over to Sivan on the floor and whispered, "I'm going to put you in a sealed gurney, pretend to panic."

Sivan suspected he would not need to pretend. The thought of being constrained in an even smaller space than his cell made him queasy.

The guard entered the room, a fierce-looking silver spear

pointed at Sivan's prone form. "What did he do?" The Uncharted man had the nose and teeth of a shark, his gray skin spotted everywhere except the white of the large gills around his neck, now closed in the waterless cell.

"Nothing- he's sick, you oaf!" Lusa tipped the spear out of the way with one of his claws. The Uncharted guard glared at him, but the smaller orange man hurdled on, whether or not the guard liked it. "Stupid human biology is so fragile. He probably ruptured an internal organ—I'll need to do surgery to fix it. Help me load him onto this gurney."

With a small pop, the medical bag Lusa expanded into a surprisingly sturdy-looking gurney. Sivan continued to groan, clutching at his side to make Lusa's words believable.

Yet, the guard still glared at them. "You can do surgery here."

"I cannot!" Lusa sounded offended. "I don't have any of the tools I need here, and there's no time! It'd just be butchery if I did it here!"

"So? The king hasn't visited him in weeks. He's just thrown away another toy."

Sivan did not like the way the guard said that, as if Jhaeros's visits were little trysts and the two of them had been doing something far more explicit than merely having a meal together. He prayed that these rumors had stayed within the castle walls, and Black never heard a whisper of them.

"Are you sure?" Lusa countered. "The king is the one who sent me here to monitor his recovery. Maybe his majesty is simply waiting until the human recovers, which he will not be able to do if I can't *perform surgery* on him."

The guard seemed to waver, narrowing his eyes at Sivan, whimpering on the floor.

"Are you willing to take responsibility if he dies and the king is angry about it?"

That seemed to persuade the guard, as he bent down to pick Sivan up rather roughly and plopped him down on the gurney.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Lusa sounded pleased, and whatever response the guard had was muffled by the zip of a metal dome encasing Sivan on the gurney. He froze for a moment, but then remembered to panic. Sivan started banging on the lid of the gurney, shouting to be let out, and remembering to insert a pained howl or two in between.

“Serves him right,” the guard grumbled before the hiss of the airlock signaled the door opening. “Oh, it’s you. He won’t be eating today—whoa!”

The gurney lurched forward as Lusa quickly squeezed them into the airlock. The door shut behind them, cutting off the guard. Shortly after, Sivan was blinded with light as the top of the gurney zipped off him.

“Quickly, there’s not much time,” Palis said as a greeting. She was holding open the doors to the floating food trolley, beckoning for Sivan to climb inside. Water was quickly filling the airlock, so when Lusa hurried him off the gurney, his feet were instantly wet.

“Why can’t I stay in the gurney?” Sivan was a little apprehensive that he could fit in the smaller compartment his food usually arrived in.

“The gurney will automatically be shuttled to the med bay. You don’t want that, so into the trolley, come on!” Lusa barked at him.

Sivan did as he was told, and stopped asking questions. The water was rising faster now, and he did not want to drown before he’d even gotten out of his cell. Indeed, the trolley was cramped, but it remained airtight as the airlock filled completely. There was a necklace similar to the one Jhaeros had made him wear when he’d taken him to see the leviathans. The blood red jewel

at the center reminded Sivan it was a breathing device. A small piece of paper was affixed to the necklace. It read, in Palis's fine, slanting script: *'put this on.'*

The cart moved, and Sivan quickly put the necklace on. Either as a response to being out of the airlock, or as a response to the scant amount of air in the cart, the blood red jewel flickered to life and sealed Sivan's head with a bubble of air.

The cart paused, and Sivan could hear Lusa wheeling the gurney away, muffled by the weight of the sea around them. He could just barely make out the fabricated sounds of him panicking inside the dome of the gurney. The nurse must have used magic to sell the trick further. Palis waited a moment, sighed, then began leading the floating cart back the way she came. Sivan was a little relieved to know that the siren woman was as unsociable with other Uncharted as she was with him.

He waited as he was quite literally carted off to whatever the pair had planned for him, legs cramped in the tight space. Sivan had never wished for the open air of the Blackwater more, the only thing tying him down being Black's hand on his waist. This thought let him stay still until Palis opened the cart and water flooded in. She motioned for him to get out. They were in what appeared to be a storage room, cartons weighted down by bags of sand.

"Come here," Palis waved him over to a door slid partially open. Outside was a large hangar filled with strange-looking ships. They were fully enclosed, shaped like huge, finless whales. Thin gossamer pinions stuck to the side of the ships like dragonfly wings, vibrating slightly in the still water. "These are our vessels. I believe you humans call them "ships," but we do not breach the surface with these."

Sivan nodded, making a silent realization that these were how Jhaeros had transported his Uncharted legions. The Royal

Navy had assumed the Uncharted always swam to battle since they had never seen head nor tail of a ship on the horizon.

“Except for that one,” Palis said, pointing at a small black vessel, a yellow stripe painted down its middle. It was the only ship that had a stripe of such kind, the others painted solid hues of blue or green.

“That one is a dry vessel. The Caecean lord supplies Jhaeros with human food, since he can’t stomach the Uncharted fare the castle offers.” Lusa explained as he appeared from the other door to the storage space. He wore clothes that were far too large for him. Before Sivan could ask, the Uncharted man snapped his fingers, and with an orange flash he had transformed into a larger gray Uncharted woman with multiple ridges on her head which unfurled into horns. “I’ll be disguised as the captain of the ship. It’s supposed to depart today, so I’ll make a distraction and you can slip into the back loading dock.”

Without further explanation, Lusa strode out into the hangar. Palis motioned for Sivan to follow her, and they kept low to the ground while using the pallets of cartons scattered around the hangar for cover. As they approached the dry vessel, Sivan saw a pair of workers moving cartons of jewels and gold into the back. At the same time, Lusa, disguised as their captain, strode up to them. He barked at them in Uncharted, and they scrambled to get the last cartons inside the vessel. They hit the button to close the doors, and Palis cursed in Uncharted. “There’s no time, make a break for the doors while they’re distracted.”

Sivan ran as best he could underwater. The hangar’s floors had the same magic the rest of the castle did, so Sivan did not have to swim, but he certainly could not move very fast under the weight of the water around him.

Palis ended up pushing him the last bit of way, helping Sivan slip inside the vessel just as the doors closed. He waited a few

moments, floating amongst the heavy cartons weighed to the bottom of the ship with gold. The dry vessel's floors did not have the same magic the castle had. Sivan floated helplessly, along with a few stray pieces of gold.

Eventually, the ship lurched forward, and Sivan had to brace himself against the side for support. He heard some type of huge door open, and the ship jerked even harder.

Several hissing noises signaled the water in the compartment beginning to drain, all at once. The force of it surprised Sivan; he had to hold onto a carton full of gold to keep himself from getting swept up in the current. Yet he could not stop the vial of light in his open pocket from slipping out. He'd forgotten to close it back up after he'd used the pneumarium to read the letter with. With a curse, he let go of the carton to grab it, but the force of the water was too great, and the light slipped out into the ocean along with a handful of gold coins.

He'd lost Black's pneumarium. Again.

The water drained quickly, and Sivan collapsed on the ground with the dregs of what was left, splashing against the cartons. He tore off the magic necklace and heaved large breaths of air, panic clashing with nausea as the vessel moved through the ocean.

Sivan had escaped the siren king's capture, but he'd lost part of Black too. The part that had been entrusted to him. The part that had clinked against the side of his boat and sought him out in the vastness of the ocean. The part that had warmed his breast pocket and kindled what little hope remained in Sivan's heart.

He spent the rest of the journey in a fog, his heart empty and cold without the familiar weight against his chest. Gold coin stragglers bumped against him with the sloshing of the water, but they were poor replicas for the vial of light which had once done the same.



A cool split of raw moonlight cracked open the seal on Sivan's three months of underwater imprisonment. The doors to the compartment slid open with a creak. Palis looked down at him, her green siren tail curved underneath her. Sivan had seen her like this every day, seen her in his cell, no water to swim in. Yet for some reason, seeing her now, a siren, bathed in moonlight, *on a ship*, stabbed him with the utmost longing for his own siren. His Black.

It punched a dry sob out of him, quiet and choked.

"I lost it," he rasped, as if she would know what he was talking about.

Palis was quiet for a long moment. She noticed where Sivan was clutching, not just his heart, but his breast pocket, where the small vial of light should have been. Sivan had never shown her the vial, but she knew the terms of Sivan's capture. "The pneumarium?"

Sivan nodded, golden eyes distant. "It slipped out, while the ship drained of water."

The siren woman hummed, nodding her acknowledgment. "Well, it should be safe then."

"What?"

Her steel eyes almost glowed a pale blue in the moonlight. "I have never made a pneumarium, but I know how to. Did you know that when sirens make one—when they shave off part of their soul and bottle it up—it's advised to set them out to sea."

Sivan held his breath, remembering how he'd watched Black do that very thing when he'd made his pneumarium. Looking back while knowing that the vial of light contained part of his

soul—it seemed insane that the man would cast away such a vulnerable part of himself into the great unknown of the ocean.

Palis gestured behind her, at the great expanse of moon-soaked water that yawned before them like a mirror of the night sky. “Sirens know best how vast and deep the ocean is. So much of it is entirely empty, or populated with nothing but unthinking seagrass. A pneumarium is tiny, clear, and almost impossible to find once it’s in the ocean.”

“But I found it.” The words fell out of Sivan’s mouth, not really comprehending what Palis was telling him.

“Indeed.” Her moonlit eyes glinted down at him, assessing him another time. “Very rarely, the fragment of soul will seek out the object of its desire. He is in love with you, yes?”

Sivan wasn’t sure anymore; he’d gone back on his word and abandoned Black when he needed him. But at the time, yes, he was sure the man had loved him. So Sivan nodded.

“Then it would make sense that it sought you out if you happened to be nearby. Regardless, pneumariums cast into the sea do not get found. It may seem mad to you, but sirens understand the colossus of the ocean and how easy it is to get lost in it. There is no safer place for it, so perhaps you should be thankful you lost it.”

With that, she turned and slithered away, leaving Sivan alone with the ocean.

It took some time for him to center himself. The soft rocking of the ship made him queasy, and the night air bit into him like a shark. Palis’s words had comforted him in some regard, knowing Black’s pneumarium was not in immediate danger. But he once again felt guilty for having failed Black, and it added just enough weight to his burden to unsteady him.

Sivan left the compartment and inhaled the sharp, cold breeze coming off the ocean. It helped snap him back to his

senses, giving him a clear enough mind to remember what had happened. He'd escaped. He was free of Jhaeros, of the stagnant air that filled his underwater cell, of the months of fear and isolation. The long stretch of ocean horizon was a welcome sight for once. To Sivan, it confirmed he was above the surface. He needed more than the night air on his face to tell that now. The perspective of it grounded him and pushed down the faint nausea that still came with being on a ship.

The compartment opened to a thin walkway guarded by a rail that had not been in there when Sivan entered. In fact, the entire vessel had changed.

The yellow stripe that divided the middle of the enclosed ship had split open; Sivan could see each half of the dome just under the surface of the water, hugging the ship like a lover. The walkway circled the perimeter of the ship, a few staircases leading up to a higher deck. Sivan followed the nearest one, and spotted Lusa sitting in front of a wheel, surrounded by numerous brightly colored levers.

The Uncharted man looked frustrated. He tugged on random levers while mumbling something about dry ships being needlessly complicated.

"You're going to break it," Palis said coolly, watching Lusa from the side.

"I'm not going to break it—oops!" Lusa tugged on a purple lever, and the whole ship shuddered for a moment.

When nothing else happened, he laughed sheepishly and folded his human hands behind his back, leaving both clawed hands on the wheel.

"I was just trying to get it to go faster. The sooner we get to the Bloated Isles, the better."

"Is that where you're taking me?" Sivan finally piped up.

Lusa looked delighted, almost surprised to see him. "Oh,

good, you survived!”

Sivan blinked. “Was there any chance I wouldn’t have?”

“Well, uh, I wasn’t entirely sure if I had actually drained the shipping compartment or not. These damn levers. Those breathing talismans only work within the castle borders, you know.”

Sivan chose not to analyze how close he had come to drowning. He was grateful enough to be out of that cell. “Well, thank you...for rescuing me. You didn’t have to risk your own safety like that, but I am forever in your debt.” He bowed deeply, fumbling for a moment as his missing arm was not there to complete the gesture.

“We did not do it for you,” Palis corrected. “We did it in protest of what Jhaeros was doing to you. Is it common for humans to treat other humans that way?”

Sivan balked for a moment. Besides the amputation, the physical treatment during his imprisonment had been relatively humane. Of course, Jhaeros’s psychological treatment had been another matter, but overall, Sivan knew he could have had it a lot worse. Then he remembered the memories Black had forced out of his brother. The way Jhaeros had been locked in darkness and bled for a woman’s insane quest for youth.

“Unfortunately, it is rather common. Sometimes it’s worse than that.”

Palis shook her head, disgust clear on her face. “I can’t comprehend why someone would do that to their own kind.”

“Is it better to not take prisoners? Just kill them instead?” The words fell out of Sivan’s mouth. He knew the Uncharted did not take prisoners, at least not ones that made it back to tell the tale.

“Sometimes death is better than that kind of existence,” a quiet voice spoke from behind the wheel.

Sivan was surprised to find that it had been from Lusa, and that a serious aura had gripped the usually upbeat man. Quiet filled the space between them. Palis pinned him with another icy glare.

“I understand the only contact you’ve had with Uncharted has been through the war until recently, but you must have concluded by now that the raving beasts you crossed swords with on the battlefield are far different from even those on that pirate ship, yes?” Her usually soft tone was clipped, her patience with Sivan having completely dried up.

“Of course,” Sivan nodded.

“I have a big family,” Lusa said, still facing the wheel. “Lots of siblings, even more cousins.” He paused, taking in a breath. “There was a draft when the war started. Anyone able to hold a weapon was called to service. My cousin, Lubin, was the only one who returned alive. He came back...different.”

“War changes the best of us,” Sivan tried to say delicately, but it only made Lusa turn around to continue, impassioned.

“No, not like that. Before he left, Lubin wouldn’t hurt a shrimp. You’ve seen the legions Jhaeros commands. Stark raving mad, thirsty for blood and carnage. Indiscriminate killing machines. Jhaeros does something to them. I’ve seen it—it’s why I enrolled in the royal medical academy, to see what he does. He shocks their brains with something from the leviathans. It changes the chemistry of their very beings.”

“You know, there hasn’t been war in Uncharted territory in centuries,” Palis pointed out, more-so to let Lusa regain himself. “Of course the odd squabble here or there, but all-out war has always been viewed as a fruitless effort that ends in only pointless bloodshed.”

“All of this,” Lusa pointed out at the ocean, as if it could encapsulate the terrible war that had been raging for nine years.

“All of this is Jhaeros’s fault. He’s been destroying more than human lives. And I want to stop him.”

“As do I,” Sivan said as he met Lusa’s gaze, finding it crackling with the same fire that drove himself at the beginning of the war. “And I know for certain that the only thing that will stop Jhaeros is his death.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?” Palis asked, her tone cold.

Sivan fell silent for a moment. Estes’s Tomb had failed them. It had all been for nothing. Yet he knew Black would not let something like this stop him. He knew the man would find another way.

He had his faith in Nereus, if nothing else.

“We have to find the real Corseque of Estes,” Sivan said.

“The real what?” Lusa scoffed. “I thought that was a myth.”

“It’s not. We found Estes’s Tomb,” Sivan frowned, remembering that awful day.

“You found the first siren king’s tomb?” Palis’s voice was urgent, unbelieving.

“Yes, we used a sirenath map I translated. It took us through The Quietus.”

Palis hissed, the thought of the baneful fog a threat even through words alone. “You sailed a ship through that?”

Sivan remembered the fantastical way Hayes had given the Blackwater feet to crawl over the treacherous rocks. And how the ship had surfaced just before Black’s execution on Lissandry. “The Blackwater is a special ship. But the corseque we found there was a fake.”

“And it can really kill Jhaeros?” Lusa asked, incredulous.

Palis narrowed her steel eyes at the deck. “The Corseque of Estes was given to the first siren king by the old god Narwyn. It was meant as revenge against his fellow gods who cursed his

beloved land dwellers with mortality. That weapon was forged with the sole purpose of killing their own offspring, the siren.”

Sivan remembered Jhaeros’s little tale from when he’d been shown the leviathans. *‘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.’*

“If you really found Estes’s Tomb, the consequence must be real.” Palis crossed her arms, having made up her mind that Sivan was probably telling the truth.

“Yes...but if you want to help me kill the king, we need to find the Blackwater. The people on that ship will know how to find it. I’m certain of it.”

“I’ll help in any way I can.” Lusa sounded doubtful, but the fire was still in his eyes.

Palis hummed in agreement. “Me as well.”

Sivan nodded, feeling hope once again.