

# Chapter 29

## *Uncharted Waters*

The Uncharted sea stood still before the Blackwater. Sivan had expected they would have to weather the torment of hurricane winds and waves that tested the mettle of their ship. However, very little had changed the moment they crossed over into Uncharted waters. If anything, they were calmer than they had been in Grenaldian territory.

It felt unsettling in its stillness. There was no wind, but the Blackwater felt in no danger of stalling.

Sivan glanced surreptitiously towards Black, who was barking orders at crew members to prepare for the worst. He could tell the pirate captain was thinking the same thing he was: were the calm seas due to sheer luck or to Black's good mood?

They had been working on Black's control over his emotions and their effect on the weather, but the results were fairly inconsistent.

"Black! Can't you summon a little rain here? These calm wa-

ters are making me nervous,” Hayes shouted from the wheel.

The pirate captain looked towards the sky with trepidation. Then he looked at Sivan, and made a beeline for him.

“My lord, please scold me,” he requested, utterly without shame.

The few crew members within earshot choked on the still air, and Sivan felt embarrassment color his face. He felt the very strong urge to push Black off the ship, but his transformation into a siren would only make the effect he had on the weather more uncontrollable.

“Black,” Sivan said slowly, taking huge internal gulps from his rapidly depleting well of patience. “You don’t need me to put you in a foul mood to control this. Just try what we practiced before.”

It had taken them a few weeks to reach the coordinates the map had given them. So, when Black wasn’t screwing his brains out, Sivan attempted to coach him in meditation.

“Don’t forget to focus on your breathing,” he had told Black a few days ago as they were sitting in bed one morning.

The pirate frowned, a crease forming in the center of his brow as he squeezed his eyes shut. “How am I supposed to focus on controlling the weather if I’m also focusing on breathing?”

Sivan took his large hands, thumbs smoothing over the calloused pads of his palms. “That’s precisely the point. You’re not supposed to focus on the control. The change in weather comes from your unprocessed emotions. You need to learn how to feel them without letting them take over you.”

A green eye sparkled as the man stole a peek at Sivan. Then he leaned in quickly to kiss him. “I don’t mind them taking over me,” Black purred against his lips.

Sivan pushed him back gently with a finger to his lips. “You don’t mind when they’re positive.” He gestured to the window,

where the blazing hot sun filtered in from outside. “When they’re negative you cause hurricanes, Black.”

Black huffed, but sat back, closing his eyes and attempting once more to meditate.

Back in the present on the deck of the ship, the pirate captain also had closed his eyes. His breathing slowed, a tense shadow of calm crossing over his face.

Sivan had been schooled in the practice of meditation since he was a child. It was where he’d honed his ability to keep his expression tranquil and noble even when faced with the most foul of situations.

Black could never reach the level of internal restraint Sivan had accomplished. His emotions were too intense, too free. Secretly, Sivan wished the siren would never reach the level of control he himself had, simply because he enjoyed seeing Black express himself openly.

The air shifted, a single cloud formed overhead, and a pleasant, cool breeze wrapped around the deck of the ship. The crew cheered, and Sivan squeezed Black’s hand as a confirmation of his success.

The captain looked entirely too pleased with himself, and he preened as a handful of fellow pirates slapped him on the back. Hayes rolled her eyes while adjusting the wheel to the change of wind, but no longer complained about the weather.

The newfound breeze at their backs propelled them even faster to their destination. And the Blackwater maintained its pace for some time.

But, the further they travelled into Uncharted Territory, the more that feeling of uneasiness stirred within Sivan. He tried to write it off as the persistent anxiety that haunted him from his time in the war, but this unease was relentless.

The gray haze manifested so slowly none of them noticed it

until it started impairing their vision.

“What is this?” Sivan muttered, frowning when he realized the horizon had been utterly obscured by fog.

No one responded to his conjecture, but Sivan knew Black must have heard him. He’d muttered far too many things under his breath while in the throes of passion, and the pirate had heard every single one of them, to Sivan’s dismay.

“Black?”

Still no response, and Sivan now saw the far away look in his green eyes. He tugged on Black’s overcoat, forcing the man to look in his direction. Upon seeing his precious lord, all the pirate captain did was frown slightly. There was little recognition in his gaze, and Sivan could tell something was wrong.

In the midst of Sivan making this realization, the haze had thickened tenfold, utterly obscuring his ability to even see across the deck of the ship. The calm sea broke into disturbed, trembling waves that hit the Blackwater with impatient grit.

Other crew members now called out in alarm.

“Oy! Wha’ wrong wit ya?!”

“Don’ look at me like tha-agh!”

“Captain! It’s the Quietus!”

The blood drained from Sivan’s face. He’d heard the occasional rumor from the rare Grenaldian sailor who’d somehow survived a mission to Uncharted waters, but he’d always thought they’d gone a little mad from their ordeal.

“Fuck!” Hayes’s stern voice clipped out into the fog. “This is some bad goddamn luck. Human crew! Stay sharp! The Quietus won’t affect you! Your Uncharted fellows are a lost cause for now.”

The truth of her words was evident in the glazed-over faces of the Uncharted around Sivan. The unease which had followed him over the surface of this territory now caught up with the rest

of the human crew. They all stepped back from the Uncharted crew members, leaving them where they collapsed, one by one.

Black somehow stood standing, but the sudden lurch of the ship as they hit a wave caused the remaining Uncharted crew to fall to the hard deck.

The human fraction of the crew struggled to keep up with Hayes's orders as she tried to keep the ship on course against the abrupt change of the sea. The Blackwater barreled through another wall of water, but the ship shuddered so much Sivan lost his footing and crashed into Black.

The pirate did not react at first, but once Sivan regained his bearing and Black got a good look at his face, he pushed the Grenaldian man back violently, a growl on his breath. The shock of it was crushing to Sivan. The pirate captain had been violent and unpredictable when they'd first reunited, but since Sivan had gotten to know him and learned of his true identity, he hadn't so much as felt a whisper of a threat from the undoubtedly dangerous man.

"Montgomery!" Hayes shouted over the growing din of Uncharted anger and confusion. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes! What is going on here, Hayes?!"

She grunted loudly as she kicked an affected Uncharted crew member in the chest, preventing them from taking over the wheel. "The *Quietus* will make them lose their minds! It'll be permanent if we don't get out of this fast!"

The dread in Sivan pierced him as he looked again at Black, growling at him, eyes vacant. The man he loved would soon be lost forever.

And, that was it.

Sivan was in love with him.

He'd known it in his heart for weeks, but this pressing danger finally made that fact crystal clear in his mind.

“What can I do?!”

“Get the captain! The only thing that can dispel the *Quietus* is a siren!”

Sivan nodded and turned back to Black. The man was focused on something Sivan could not see, a phantom terror brought on by the dreaded haze.

“Black, look at me.”

He did, but his expression did not soften as it usually did when they made eye contact. Sivan stepped forward, reaching out.

“You have to listen to me. You must focus on breaking this fog. If you don’t-“

His hand was slapped away, raw confusion and distrust on the siren’s face. “Who are you?” Black spat. “How dare you give me orders?!”

The pirate not recognizing him threw Sivan off. He wondered if this was what Black had felt like when Sivan had not recognized him in *Varis*. It hurt, and the guilt he’d been compartmentalizing resurfaced, ugly and sharp.

“Black, it’s me, Sivan.” Then, after a moment’s pause: “Lord Montgomery.”

The distrust darkened on Black’s face. “You’re not him. You’re an impostor.”

The *Quietus* thickened around them, cloying at Sivan’s senses even though it supposedly had no effect on his mind. Despite Black’s unforgiving expression, Sivan stepped into his space and held on fast to him. “Nereus,” he exhaled urgently in a way he knew would cut through the man’s defenses. Sure enough, Black’s hard expression broke, confusion mixing with disbelief. “It’s me, Nereus. Come back to me.”

For a moment Sivan thought he’d broken the *Quietus*’s effect on him. But the haze stubbornly grew thicker around them, and

the pirate captain shook Sivan off violently. He tried to hold on to the larger man, but a flash of green magic seared his hand.

Sivan's flesh burned where Black's magic had touched him. The dark handprint around his forearm burned worse. Pain lanced up his arm, but it was nothing compared to the hurt he saw in the pirate's eyes.

Black, who had remained standing even when all his fellow Uncharted had collapsed, dropped suddenly, knees landing heavy on the wet planks.

"Y-you can't be him," he nearly sobbed. "My lord left me here because he didn't want me. He wouldn't return for me after so long."

Sivan knew it was the effect of the Quietus that was making him say this. He'd read the legends, he knew how the Quietus preyed on the weakest memories and warped them in its victims' minds to get the most severe reaction from them.

He knew this, but it still carved into his heart like a hot knife.

The pain in his arm was growing worse, making the edges of Sivan's vision blurry with malice. He could not let himself pass out. There would be no bringing the man he loved back if the Quietus took him.

Heedless of the pain and the crackling green magic rolling off Black, Sivan knelt next to him, embracing him fully. The man thrashed, but Sivan held tight. He was unwilling to let him go.

"Nereus-!"

Black stopped thrashing for a moment, enough for Sivan to rush out his hushed promise.

"Nothing can forgive my abandonment of you. But what I promised you before remains true: I will never leave you again..."

The fog ensnared Sivan's breath, preventing him from speaking further. For the first time since the Quietus set in, Sivan

feared for his own life. He'd been so wrought with concern for Black's sanity he'd completely disregarded his own well-being.

After a long moment with his lungs burning and green magic snapping around him, Sivan was finally granted reprieve. The pain from Black's touch dissolved into warmth, instantly soothing his skin.

"My lord...?" the siren before him rasped out, raw dismay in his voice.

The green flashes of magic transformed into a widening dome around them, pushing out the *Quietus* with force. In another few seconds it had cleared the ship of the haze entirely, dissipating it with a finite snap of green light.

"My lord!" Black sobbed, crushing Sivan to his body tightly. "I hurt you. I do not deserve to live—"

Sivan sagged into his embrace. The pain and fog were gone, but the real relief he felt was from knowing he hadn't lost this man to the oblivion of the *Quietus*.

The tumultuous waters the haze brought with it abated after Black had broken the spell, but the ship still shuddered occasionally. Hayes's brow was slick with sweat, and her olive skin was ashen. The woman's connection with the *Blackwater* was stronger than anyone else's. Sivan suspected the reason she never left the ship was because she could not bear to let it leave her sight. The *Blackwater* certainly was no ordinary vessel. The ship could travel beneath the waves, and cannon fire rolled off it like raindrops. The ship was enchanted by magic, but Hayes may have been enchanted by the ship itself.

"Black," Sivan patted the man's face, bringing him back out of his self-pity. "I am okay, but please look at Hayes. She does not look well."

The pirate captain straightened at this and hastened to dry his tears. "You're right, my lord."



Black composed himself and crossed the deck to face her. She glowered back at him, gripping the wheel of the ship tightly, wood handles cracking beneath her fists.

“Don’t even say it, Black.”

“Hayes, let me take over for now. Rest before—”

“No!” she snapped, with more ferocity than she should have been able to muster in this state. “I told you if we ever enter these godforsaken waters again I would not leave the helm. I will not, so don’t say it.”

Black looked at her for a long moment, the two of them remembering some understanding they’d come to long ago.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Hayes breathed, standing taller.

The captain nodded, and turned away from her. Sivan looked between the both of them, hands flexing with frustration. He huffed and followed Black across the deck.

“Black! This isn’t a good idea— You don’t understand what we’re going to sail through next. Hayes looks like she could collapse at any moment!”

Black stopped at the rail, placing a hand on the polished wood. “Hayes knows what we’re getting into. She’s the only one who can sail us through these waters, even if they take a toll on her.”

These stubborn pirates were going to be the death of Sivan. He glanced back at the woman at the helm, her sickly face fixed ahead on their destination. Her strength would have been admirable, had it not been the deciding factor of the whole crew’s safety.

“At least let me talk her through the safe passages I translated from the sirenath map,” Sivan pleaded quietly, so Hayes could not hear. “I think I can direct her through the worst of it.”

The man puffed out an endeared chuckle. “You may try, my

lord, but it would be rather pointless. Hayes will not listen.”

Sivan sighed when he realized Black was right.

“You know, the sailors who spin tales about me being a dreaded pirate lord do love to compare me to a hurricane. But I am a mere drizzly day compared to that woman. We could not be in better hands.”

His words were tested as they approached the islands. Or rather, as they approached the smattering of oddly-shaped, jagged rocks the coordinates had led them to. Unease floated through the ship as the crew realized what they were about to sail through. Something grazed the bottom of the ship, causing a grinding moan to rattle the Blackwater. Sivan looked over the side and saw the barest hint of a rock under the surface of the ship’s wake.

Yet Hayes did not even flinch as she steered the ship through the field of shallow waters and sharp rocks. She kept her firm grip on the wheel, her eyes fixed on the prize ahead.

As they approached the oddly shaped rocks, Sivan finally realized that they weren’t rocks at all.

“They’re ships...” Sivan gasped, horror plain in his golden eyes.

This was a graveyard of ancient ships. Some were just masts, rotting and broken. Others maintained the barest scraps of what once were magnificent sails.

“That they are. They’ve made quite a maze for us,” Black agreed, a frown on his face. He offered his arm to Sivan. “You may want to hold onto me, my lord.”

Sivan narrowed his eyes at the pirate suspiciously, but found himself gripping the well-muscled forearm when the Blackwater suddenly lurched again.

This time there was no grinding noise. Hayes was turning the wheel frantically, somehow getting the ship to turn at an impossi-

ble angle to avoid the decaying skeleton of a ship.

On she went like that, maneuvering the Blackwater with a speed and accuracy Sivan would have thought simply impossible. He observed the wreckages as they sailed past them. Some of them were unrecognizable as being from any one country. A few were of Uncharted make, even fewer were Grenaldian. Only the warships were left even remotely identifiable out of the Grenaldian wrecks.

“I see it!” Brand shouted, pointing out an island creeping out from the distant fog. The island wasn’t large. One could only pick it out of the wreckage of ships and rocks due to its unnatural white sheen and the ghostly aura it gave off.

“The tomb of Estes...” Black murmured, awe in his voice.

Sivan squeezed his arm. They’d found it at last.

Hayes laughed victoriously in a ragged huff. She turned the wheel viciously, her dark eyes gleaming. She’d set her eyes on the tomb, and steered the Blackwater into a direct course.

There were still rocks and broken ships between them and the white island, but that did not stop Hayes. She only paused to take the topmost prongs of the wheel in her hands and pull down, forcing the wheel to turn ninety degrees towards her. With the wheel parallel to the water, the ship gave another mighty lurch.

A few pirates rushed over to the rail, looking over.

“She’s got feet! The Blackwater’s walking!”

The rest of the crew crowded over to get a look. Sure enough, tentacle-like legs had grown from hull of the ship. It crawled over the rocks nimbly, allowing Hayes to commit to the straight line she’d made to the white island.

Sivan held fast to Black’s arm. The Blackwater’s movement over the debris shook the ship and its passengers in a way none were used to. Sivan was forced to use the pirate captain’s greater

weight to stop himself from flying halfway across the deck.

The larger man recognized his struggle and snaked his arm around Sivan's waist, pulling the former lord securely against him.

"Be careful, my lord," he purred in Sivan's ear.

"Quiet," Sivan bit back. He refused to indulge the man during such a time.

The Blackwater swiftly made it over the rocks and wreckage, landing with a splash in front of Estes' tomb. The crew settled with the ship, everyone regaining their footing one by one.

Other than Black, the only one who hadn't been completely bowled over by the experience was Hayes. She pushed in the prongs of the wheel and turned it back into its natural upright position. Her expression wasn't as wild as it had been while she was steering, but she seemed more than satisfied with the ship's unearthly performance.

"Where exactly did you two find the Blackwater?" Sivan asked Black.

"Hmm," Black hesitated, stealing a thoughtful glance at Hayes. "It's more like the ship found us."

The answer was cryptic, but Sivan knew there were more pressing matters at hand than discovering the story behind his words. "Well, I've never seen a ship quite like her."

"Thank the gods for that!" Black laughed. He kissed the top of Sivan's head before letting go of his waist. The crew had already started weighing anchor and preparing the dinghies. An excited murmur thrummed between the pirates. They had finally made it to the fabled island. The one that would make them rich beyond their wildest dreams and give Black and Sivan the means to end this war. Their motives were different, but they shared in the thrill of the moment.

Black helped Sivan into the first dinghy. A firm clack of boots

stopped in front of them, Hayes staring them down.

“Bring me back the corseque,” she said to Black alone.

“Aye-aye, you’ve brought me this far.” He saluted lazily at her.

It took Sivan a moment to realize she wasn’t coming with them. “Hayes, surely you’re coming with us. This place is a fortress. The Blackwater will be fine without you for awhile.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, amused, like that was the silliest thing he could have asked. “I don’t care about going in that tomb. I just want what’s in it.”

Black pressed a hand to Sivan’s back, encouraging him to sit down in the small boat. “Come, my lord, you won’t convince her.”

Sivan’s mouth slanted into a small frown, but followed the man into the dinghy. The boat lowered slowly into the water, and Brand along with a few other pirates grabbed oars to start rowing.

Sivan leaned in to ask Black quietly: “Does she ever leave the ship?”

Black smiled sadly at him. “No, she doesn’t.”

“...*can* she leave the ship?”

He didn’t respond, but ever so slightly shook his head, affirming that Sivan was right in his suspicions.

Whatever spell the Blackwater held over Hayes kept her bound to it. She was forever cursed to sail under its barracuda flag.

They approached the shore of the white island. Its sandy beach almost looked like snow against the dark ocean. An inlet directed them into the island, steering them towards a great crystal staircase. At the top of the stairs was the entrance to the tomb.

It was already broken open.