

# Chapter 24

*calloway cay*

If the portal had led them to safety, maybe Sivan would have been able to convince Black to run away with him. His own moral compass was directing him towards continuing the good fight in their hunt to find the corseque and end the war, but his heart was growing weary from years of loss. Sivan had finally been reunited with Nereus, was finally starting to understand his feelings for him, and all he wanted was to keep him safe by whatever means necessary.

Maybe they would have gone west, to the other side of the Great Sea that had not been touched by the war. Sivan had learned the common tongue of Belatore from a visiting merchant, and he had always wanted to visit the country he hoped was as vibrant as its language.

And maybe Black would begin to let go of his anger. Maybe over time Sivan would be able to coax the starry-eyed Nereus into showing himself again.

Unfortunately the portal had been intercepted by Eliza, and from the savage look on Black's face, this betrayal was another nail in the coffin of Nereus's battered innocence.

When they stepped out of the portal, Black was immediately hit with something and knocked into the wall. Their hands were ripped apart by the force, and Sivan was firmly held in place by two crystal golems.

They were in the entrance room they had appeared in when they first arrived at the Cay. Black howled against the wall, pain evident in his voice. A strange black net held him in place, sparking against the man where it touched his skin. It looked agonizing, and Sivan could even smell his burning flesh as it seared into him.

"Eliza! Let him go!" Sivan shouted, raking his eyes over the room to search for her. He found her, standing next to a fully uniformed Renalt.

"Renalt?"

"My lord, I've come to bring you—oh, heavens, what has he done to you?" Renalt stuttered, his face flushed with horror as he took in Sivan's appearance.

Sivan was then starkly aware of the blood dripping from the wrist Black had bitten down on. On top of that, the black handprint on his forearm was attracting attention right next to his obvious injury. Then, like a cruel recording of the previous day's events, the bruises and bite marks Black had made on his neck during their so-called sparring match were just beginning to bloom viciously on his skin. Even though Sivan did not hold any of these things against Black, from Renalt's perspective it looked like his lord had been wholly ravaged by the pirate.

The golems released Sivan, and Renalt stepped forward, looking like he wanted to embrace him. "Don't worry, I'm here to rescue you."

Instead, Sivan stood up straighter, reestablishing his status with a firm glare, and stopping the sailor in his tracks. "I don't need rescuing. I'm perfectly fine."

Black groaned in pain as he tried once again to thrash against the restraints, and it pulled at Sivan's heart. "Don't you fuckin' touch him, you traitor!"

Renalt just shot the pirate a dirty look, but there was a flash of a frown on Eliza's face when Black sobbed in pain. Sivan didn't miss it. She had betrayed them, and her and Black had been estranged for god knows how long, but Sivan knew Eliza had at one point considered Nereus a son.

"Eliza! You can't let them take him!" Sivan pleaded with her. "I don't know what my father told you in exchange for that pardon, but there won't be any mercy for Black. He will be executed."

The sea witch's face was cold now. Any cracks that appeared when Black was howling in pain had been sealed up by her own resolve. "That's about what the earl told me. That boy's been dead to me for years. An eye for an eye."

Sivan couldn't believe this. She had practically raised Nereus! And now she was selling him out without a second thought! Sivan growled and attempted to pull out a saber, but the golems reached out and held him back.

Renalt blinked away a flurry of anger and confusion at Sivan's stubborn defense of the pirate lord. "He's completely brainwashed you..."

More crystal golems retrieved Black from the wall, wrapping him in the black netting to keep him restrained. Then they carried him off to a large set of doors that opened to the Grenaldian ships waiting in the cay. Eliza waved a hand and a bundle of the thick black netting appeared next to her. She stepped over to Renalt and passed the bundle to him.

“Iron kelp,” she explained. “It’s the only thing that will restrain a siren.”

Renalt took the kelp and nodded at her in thanks. Then he turned to Sivan. “My lord, your father is waiting on a ship. Please allow me to bring you to him. Perhaps seeing him will break whatever spell this criminal has you under.”

Sivan ground his teeth, swallowing the urge to spit in this man’s face. He knew Renalt meant well, but he was doing far more harm than good in handing both of them over to Tristan Montgomery.

“Fine,” he spat. “Show me to my father. I have a few words I’d like to say to him.”



Sivan counted twelve ships as he was led out of Calloway’s castle. It seemed excessive, especially when there was a war going on. He knew Grenaldia had no ships to spare. Bile rose at the back of his throat at the thought of his father sacrificing sailors in order to go on this rescue mission. As always, the needs of the nobility outweighed the greater good.

He was led to the largest ship in the fleet. Crystal golems carried Black’s barely conscious body across the beach and loaded him onto the dinghy waiting for them. Sivan didn’t ask for permission and climbed on in to sit next to Black. He could feel Renalt’s stare, but willfully ignored it.

The small ship inched across the turbulent shallows, the dark storm clouds gathering pressure the further they got away from the Cay. Sivan frowned at the sky. It was heavy with rain, but something held the deluge back.

“My lord...” Black rasped out weakly. Sivan turned his attention to him immediately. “Does your arm still bleed?”

Sivan didn’t even bother to check the bite mark on his skin. “I’m fine, don’t strain yourself.” The iron kelp was still tightly wrapped around him, and Sivan could smell the acrid sear of flesh burning. Black looked ashen, his eyes miserable and dark. There wasn’t a hint of the light green that sparkled whenever he locked eyes with Sivan.

He brushed back a dark lock of hair and wiped off a few beads of sweat from the man’s shivering skin. This iron kelp was doing something brutal to Black, and Sivan wanted nothing more than to free him from it.

“Don’t even think about it,” a sailor warned when he noticed Sivan testing the strength of the kelp. He waved a spear in the lord’s face, the point wavering when the water rocked the boat.

Sivan glared down the tip of the spear, golden eyes warning the man not to challenge him.

But the spear was tipped out of Sivan’s face by Renalt’s hand. “Careful, the admiral will be livid if you injure his son.”

Of course he would be angry. The only value Sivan held to his father was that of a pretty face to win marriage prospects. He had only ever been as important as his best asset to his father. That hadn’t changed, even after his capture.

Black hissed when the dinghy jolted down a swell and jostled the kelp wrapped around his body. Sivan hovered over him again, worry wrecking his features.

“Black, please hold on. I’ll figure out a way out of here.”

The pirate looked like he wanted to say something, but he could only breathe shakily through pained groans. Sivan knew then that he would do anything to save this man from the guillotine. Even if it meant using his own future to barter with his father.

Sivan looked up and caught Renalt staring openly at the two of them. His upper lip was curled slightly, brows knitted upwards in disgust over Sivan's affection towards the criminal. Jealousy and hurt colored his eyes, and despite himself, Sivan felt a brief moment of shame.

Yet the moment was brief, and Renalt turned away just as quickly as he had been caught.

They were separated when they boarded the ship. Sivan had kept quietly reassuring Black before they took him away, but he wasn't sure if his words had reached him through the haze the iron kelp kept him in. They'd also taken away Sivan's twin sabers, further cutting off his connection to the pirate who had kept them safe for the last year.

Renalt led him to his father's cabin. Sivan stared at the tall man's back, ramrod straight with pride. He had helped Renalt out while he was facing the Belatoran crocodile, but he never asked the sailor to return the favor.

"How did you escape the Blackwater?" Sivan asked.

Renalt paused several feet from a door that probably opened to the waiting earl. "I didn't escape. Hayes let me go when we made port after you went overboard."

Sivan cocked an eyebrow. "She did? It seems unlikely the crew would just let you go."

"I'm not sure the crew knew. Hayes told me Black most likely took you to Calloway Cay. We just got lucky that the sea witch was up for negotiations."

It was a flimsy story, but Sivan didn't have the patience to suss out if he needed to add Hayes to the list of people who had betrayed them.

Renalt stepped to the door and opened it for him. "Admiral Montgomery is waiting for you, my lord."

Sivan raised his chin and walked through, Renalt following after.

His father looked to be in the same scene Sivan had last seen him in. Tristan Montgomery stood at a war table, frowning severely at the dwindling number of silver ships amongst the red ones. He looked up at his son passively, much as if he were still in his office back on Varis.

“I never thought you would be the one to stir up trouble like this, Sivan. I had to pull these ships out of the northern line to come get you.” His words were not harsh, but they were stern to a fault. This was much like his father had done most of his life. He had brought up Sivan kindly as long as he listened to every word he said.

“I never asked you to do that. I was doing perfectly fine on my own. I didn’t need a rescue.” Sivan glared at his father as the old man rubbed his temples, teeth grinding.

“Did that pirate even kidnap you? You’re making it sound like you went along willingly.”

Sivan knew not to answer that. There was so much more to his story with Black, and his father would not even begin to listen to it if he knew of his attachment to him and the Blackwater.

“Leave,” the earl barked at Renalt, haphazardly waving him off in the direction of the door. Renalt looked like he wanted to hear the answer to that question as well, but he obeyed the command and left them alone.

The second the door shut, Sivan began grilling his father. “I understand you’ve been hunting Black for years, but you must hear me out-“

“I don’t have to listen to anything!” the earl spat, louder than he usually spoke. He straightened his back, crisped the hem of his sleeves, and composed himself.

Still, Sivan continued. It was strange, how the fear of disap-

proval he used to feel when his father chided him was gone. “Father, please. Black and I may have found a way to kill Jhaeros. It’s why he stole the Siren Seal.”

The Earl’s stern face didn’t falter, but did not stop Sivan from continuing.

“There is a map on the Blackwater. If we can get it we can find the Corseque of Estes. It’s—”

“I know what the Corseque of Estes is. It’s a fairy tale.”

“But what if it isn’t? What if it’s the only thing that can end this war?” Sivan stepped closer to the table, motioning to the dwindling Grenaldian forces.

His father was silent for a long moment, frowning deeply at the war table. Then he sighed. “This war ended long ago. We’ve only been limping on because they’ll kill us if we don’t.”

Sivan shook his head. “It’s like you’ve already surrendered.”

There was a long pause from the older man. Lines of weariness on his face were now more apparent to Sivan than they had ever been before. “We tried once.” His father breathed the words out like it was a shameful secret. “When the famine started taking its toll on Grenaldia we attempted to sit down with Jhaeros. To begin the negotiation of our surrender.”

Shock was evident on Sivan’s face. Surrendering was never an option he thought his father would consider. He thought the man would die before lowering himself to admitting defeat. “How long ago was that?”

“Three years ago. The Uncharted king took delight in refusing to accept our surrender. He said the point of the war was not to negotiate, but to cleanse the land of our kind.”

Sivan was stunned into silence. His father had always been a man of pure certitude. The earl never doubted his decisions, never wasted a moment to idleness. Hearing him admit that he had lost hope long ago was almost too much for Sivan.



“Then why not put a bet on a fairy tale? Even if this map doesn’t lead to the corseque, at least we’ll have a powerful ally on our side. Black has the same goals that we do.”

The earl plucked an obsidian ship off the table. “Grenaldia allied with a pirate...?” For a moment Sivan hoped this was the turning point for his father. But he tossed the ship back onto the table, where it landed amongst a sea of red ships. “Never.”

“Father, please listen to reason—“

“Reason?! The only reason I need to execute that monster is that he is a pirate! He’s committed countless capital crimes, the latest of which is the kidnapping of a noble.” The earl stomped around the war table and collapsed into a chair behind a writing desk. “It doesn’t matter what his goals are. Black will die once we make port.”

Sivan’s blood ran cold at the thought of Black being executed. He fell to his knees in front of his father, desperate to show his sincerity in the matter. “Please reconsider. Father, do you remember my attendant on the Spear? Nereus, the boy who saved me from drowning when I was young.”

A flicker of recognition flashed across the man’s eyes. “Yes...”

“We left him on that island after Jhaeros attacked. I kept going back to search for him, but I never considered he would have made it on his own. Black is Nereus. I’ve finally found him.”

His father remained silent, but he looked down at Sivan with such pity. He brushed back Sivan’s silver hair, the familiar hand warm and calloused against his cheek. “Oh, Sivan. I am sorry. It was never supposed to be this way.”

Sivan gripped his father’s hand. “Then don’t make it so. Let Black go. I’ve already translated the map. I have no doubt he can find the corseque on his own. I’ll come back with you and marry Prince Gregor, or, or anyone. It doesn’t matter. As long as...”

His father pulled his hand away, and Sivan’s words died on

his lips. "Prince Gregor has called off the engagement. After your kidnapping, Vhelta wants nothing to do with Grenaldia."

Sivan was at a loss. His only bargaining chip left was to give away his hand to someone he didn't want in order to gain favor in the war. But now he was worth nothing to his father, and Black would die because of it.

"You have your mother's empathy. Nereus died long ago and was replaced by a criminal. I cannot spare what is already dead."

"No."

"Black's crimes are too great. No amount of sentimentality can pardon him."

"No, father, please—"

But the earl was no longer interested in what Sivan had to say. He rose from his chair and left the cabin, locking the door behind him.

Once again, Sivan was locked in a cabin on a ship. Except now he was utterly alone.



The next few days were spent in a nervous and furious haze. Renalt would bring him food, try to make conversation, and Sivan would ignore both the meal and the man in favor of drafting endless notes for arguments to have with his father later.

Except those arguments never happened. The earl would come to check on him and fetch something from his desk, but he pointedly left before Sivan could steer him into a meaningful conversation. Even if Sivan had succeeded in bringing up the topic of Black, he doubted he would have been able to keep a level head about the matter. His nights were bookended by

worrying thoughts over Black's fate and nightmares induced by those same thoughts. Sivan was losing his focus, and he was running out of time.

"We should arrive in Lissandry by tomorrow morning," the earl announced. He was rifling through a mess of papers on his desk, equally as untidy as Sivan was with his paperwork.

Sivan managed to maintain his calm veneer even though dread roiled through his gut. He was picking at his food, obstinately refusing to eat. Anything he put in his mouth tasted bland and inconsequential, and he wasn't sure if it was because of his high level of stress or if he had spent too long eating Black's meals and nothing could compare to it.

It crossed Sivan's mind that he may never be able to eat the pirate's cooking again if tomorrow happened without someone intervening.

He pushed his meal away, the sight of it causing him more grief that it should have. His father was still pretending Sivan wasn't there. Much as the rest of his life, Sivan had become an ornamental fixture for the Earl. Before Black, he would have resigned himself to sitting back and doing as he was told. Before Black, he wouldn't have put hope in a mythical weapon that probably didn't exist. Before Black, Sivan was fractured and resigned to a life of loss. But the man had made him whole again and infused him with a hope he'd long forgotten.

"Father, what do you intend to do with me when we return to Varis?"

The earl looked up, his steel gray eyes finally landing on his son. All other conversation topics had failed, but naturally, the man was more than willing to give an answer when it came to Sivan's usefulness. "I'll start looking for new marriage prospects for you. Hopefully one with better manners."

Renalt, standing guard at the door, flinched, and his spear hit

the frame of the door with a loud thwack. Twin sabers at his side rattled against each other, drawing even more attention to Renalt. Sivan narrowed his eyes slightly at the man, but he continued staring directly ahead.

“And if I refuse?” Sivan asked his father.

One of his eyes twitched, but he didn’t change his expression. “You don’t have a say in the matter.”

“Of course I don’t. When have I ever had a say in the matter?” Sivan knew he was starting to sound like a petulant child, but his father always treated him like it regardless if it was justified.

The earl rubbed his temple, the lines around his eyes multiplying when he squeezed them shut. “Well...do you have someone in mind? I’m not even sure I can secure favor in the war with your hand now that everyone in Varis knows about you absconding with a pirate.”

“I’ll find someone myself.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and I guarantee I’ll get you a better favor than rations,” Sivan said firmly. He had no plans to actually make this happen, but he would say anything at this point.

Tristan Montgomery leaned back from his desk, giving Sivan his full attention. “And what do you want in return?”

Sivan inhaled. “Just let me see Black.”

His father flipped over a stack of papers, sending them flying to the floor. “Absolutely not!”

“Just-just for a few minutes. I need to speak to him one last time.”

Shaking his head, the earl stood up from his desk. “No! Just where does your loyalty lie, Sivan? Is it with Grenaldia or is it with this criminal?”

Sivan glared at him, resolute golden eyes giving his father the

only answer he needed.

“Unbelievable,” he hissed under his breath. “You best wash off this infatuation with danger you’ve devoted yourself to. You’ve already made my job infinitely more difficult with this whole debacle. You’ll be lucky to wed someone even close to your status now!”

These words meant little to Sivan. All he understood was that he’d failed. He’d never see Black alive again, and it tore him apart. He put his head down on the table and listened miserably as his father stormed out of the cabin, slamming the door shut behind him.

Sivan sat there for a few moments. That had to have been his last real chance to convince his father. Tears welled up in his eyes, threatening to overflow into full sobs.

A hand touched his arm, and Sivan jolted, not realizing there was still someone in the room. Tiny droplets of tears scattered from his eyes as he sat up to see who it was.

It was Renalt, a faint blush on his cheeks. “My lord, are you okay? Can I assist at all?”

Sivan blinked, rubbing tears off his cheeks. “I’m — I’m fine. It’s not like you can help me see Black, right?”

A shadow of hurt crossed the man’s face. “No, I cannot. I truly do not know where he is being held. I arrived at the Cay on a different ship.”

“Then why are you on this one now?”

Renalt hesitated, wavering on how much he wanted to reveal to his lord. “I requested to protect you personally after we captured Black. It would ruin me if I saw hurt come to you again.”

“Oh,” Sivan breathed, a wave of realization washing over him. He’d understood Renalt was a fan of him from his war hero days, but he hadn’t realized it went further than that. From the man’s earnest expression, it went much further than that.

“May I sit?” Renalt motioned to the chair next to Sivan. The motion once again alerted Sivan to the pair of twin sabers strapped to his belt. He narrowed his eyes at them, now recognizing the swords as the two that had been taken away from him.

Unable to find a good reason to refuse him, Sivan nodded awkwardly. His devoted guard moved the chair closer and sat down, the sides of their knees touching. He placed a hand over Sivan’s own resting on the arm of the chair.

“My lord, please forgive me for being so forward, but I could not help but overhear your conversation with the admiral just now.”

A different kind of dread crept over Sivan. It was a stifling fear of what Renalt was going to say next.

“I understand your engagement has fallen through. And, as selfish as it may be of me, I was quite relieved to hear it.”

“Relieved,” Sivan repeated, unable to fully process the man’s words.

Renalt nodded earnestly. “Yes, relieved. You see...I have been an admirer of yours since the Spear.”

“The Spear,” Sivan repeated again, once again not making sense of the man’s explanation.

“Yes, I...I was stationed at the Spear for a time. I often saw you by your father’s side.”

“Ah.” Suddenly Renalt’s face seemed very familiar to him. More familiar than the memories of knowing him for the last few weeks. “You were the one who dragged me onto my father’s ship when the Uncharted attacked.”

“Yes, that...that was me,” he said, abashed, like he was a little proud of that fact.

In truth, Sivan’s opinion of him dropped instantly. Sure, he had most likely saved Sivan’s life, but he had forced Sivan to abandon the one person he ever considered a true friend.

“Regardless, I never voiced my feelings for you because the war broke out afterwards. But, by the time I had heard you were honorably discharged it was too late. You were already engaged to the Vheltan prince, and there was no way for me to compete with royalty.”

Sivan felt a little pulse of indignation that he was ostensibly a prize to be competed for.

“But now...well, I’ve never had a chance to reveal my lineage to you, but my aunt is in fact a baroness of Yeverney. My mother is Grenaldian, but I’m still close to my father’s noble side. I could persuade my aunt to assist Grenaldia in some way. She is at least sympathetic to our fight.”

Sivan pulled away his hand, a tentative revulsion building in his gut. This was only reaffirming his father’s view of him as a token to be traded in for wartime relief. “What precisely are you saying...?”

Renalt’s hand twitched in the direction of Sivan’s, like he wanted to snatch it back up again. “I’m offering my hand in marriage, if you’ll have it.”

His eyes were the same steel gray as Sivan’s father, but where the Earl’s eyes were cold and hard, Renalt’s eyes were full of hope and earnest warmth. Sivan could never love him the way Renalt wanted him to, but he wasn’t sure how to turn the man down without breaking him entirely. This sailor had taken him away from Black not once but twice, but Sivan could not discount that he had done it with the intent to save his life.

Sivan’s reluctance to answer was evident to Renalt, and he darted his hopeful eyes away. “Anyways, please think about it.” He stood up, bowing to Sivan properly. “And thank you for listening to my offer, my lord. Please know I meant everything I said.”

Renalt left the room hastily, clearly uncomfortable with his

lack of an answer. Sivan let out a long sigh after the door closed, folding his forearms on the table and collapsing on top of them. He'd spent the last few weeks on a pirate ship, but these last few days on a Grenaldian war ship had been more draining than the entirety of his time on the Blackwater.

The black handprint on his wrist pulsed slightly, and Sivan opened his eyes to frown at it. This had happened a few times since he and Black were separated, but nothing had happened beyond that. This wasn't like the time on the Blackwater when the pirate had willfully avoided him for days on end after Sivan found out he was a siren. Black was somewhere on the ship, likely still bound with the iron kelp that ate into his flesh. Just the thought of Black suffering like that wrung Sivan's heart until it hurt.

He traced the edges of the black handprint, wondering if Black could sense where he was. The mark was warm to the touch, far warmer than the rest of his skin. Sivan overlay his own hand over it, lining up their fingers. Black's hand was so much larger than his own. It wrapped around the entirety of his wrist and down his forearm easily. Sivan's hand just barely encircled his own wrist. The warmth of the mark and the contrast in size to his own hand comforted him in some way. It was his only tangible connection to Black while they were in confinement.

"Black..." he whispered to the mark. "If you can hear me, please...please don't give up. They're making port tomorrow. They're going to execute you-" Sivan's voice broke, and a quiet sob wrenched out of his body. "I won't let it happen. I swear, Nereus. I won't let them take you from me again."