

Chapter 9

The Bloated Isles

Surprisingly, Sivan recovered in relative peace. He expected Black to come rushing in one day to cart him onto the Blackwater as they made their escape from the hoards of Jhaeros's army. But it never happened. He was still in the infirmary in the caecean lord's castle.

Although it was starting to feel more like a cell, with how Black was keeping him bedridden and his visitors limited. Other than Black, he'd only seen Eliza the one time and Brand had snuck in once. He assumed his fellow Grenaldian was not there by Black's consent since the old pirate seemed nervous the whole time.

"I had tae make sure ye were still alive," Brand had mumbled.

"Barely, but hasn't Black told you what happened?" Sivan watched him hesitate on his answer, considering his words.

"Not precisely...I listened in on tha sea witch tellin' Hayes abou' tha heart thing, but-"

“Wait, he didn’t tell Hayes himself?” Sivan balked, he thought Black would have at least told his second in command. It seemed like crucial information, that the captain was now operating without a heart.

Brand hesitated again. “He’s been...secretive abou’ this. I think he just wants ta protect ye.”

Sivan supposed there was logic in that. He weak right now, but that also made Black vulnerable with his heart in Sivan’s chest.

Brand had left quickly, leaving Sivan with a familiar sense of being caged. The company was much better this time, but he didn’t like what it implied.

The heavy door to the infirmary opened with a creak, and in walked Black pushing a cart draped in a fine white cloth. Silver platters with various steaming dishes clattered lightly on a silver tray.

“Good evening, my lord,” Black greeted him in his best attendant voice. The scraggly beard had been shaved, replaced with his near constant stubble.

Sivan exhaled through his nose, willing himself not to instinctively berate the man for slipping once again into this attendant role. “Black,” he returned, and struggled to sit upright. The pirate was at his side in an instant, helping him up and carefully arranging the pillows behind him for support.

“Thank you,” Sivan said.

“Of course, my lord.” Black smiled at him, eyes flickering with light.

At first, Sivan had allowed this pampering by Black because he did not have the heart to deny him after being parted for so long. But as the days went on, he found this was the only thing that brought that light to the man’s eyes. Sivan really *was* still in pain, but perhaps he exaggerated it a little in order to give the

pirate these small moments of joy from aiding him.

Black carefully placed the tray on the bed, balancing it on either side of the granite frame. The food smelled delicious, as always. And as always, Black had made too much.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to feed you?” Black asked at his side, voice hopeful.

Part of Sivan wanted to cave in to those pleading eyes, but he knew better. He’d let the pirate feed him the first few days, which had made him so happy, but caused Sivan immeasurable leagues of embarrassment.

“I am fine, Black. Let me at least do this myself. Otherwise I’ll never recover and you’ll be nothing more than my attendant.”

That shut him up. His sullen pout was overshadowed by the look of trying to figure out if he could live with that.

Sivan knew neither of them could.

He picked up a fork and ate a bite of the quiche. The crust was flaky and delicate, the flavors perfectly balanced despite the generous portion of...crab meat.

Besides the decadent portions, Black seemed to have a fixation on including crab in every meal. Sivan was growing a little sick of it, despite the fact that everything the pirate fed him was delicious. He wondered if Black was playing some strange game of culinary revenge on the caecean lord that speared Sivan.

The thought of caeceans reminded him yet again of the disappearance of his nurse. “Any word on Lusa and Palis?” He asked, watching Black’s expression carefully.

“I’m afraid we have not been able to locate them, my lord,” the pirate answered, his voice at least *sounding* genuine.

At first, Sivan had thought Lusa been busy taking care of his cousin, and Palis refused to get near the Blackwater, so it was possible she was avoiding anyone associated with it.

But...

The visit from Brand had kindled the unease Sivan was feeling around this whole situation. He was overjoyed to be reunited with the pirate, but something seemed off about him. Something Sivan could not figure out.

“That is a shame. We should really find them and give them a proper thank you. I would not be here without them.”

Black gave him a soft smile, placating but devoid of warmth. “We do not need them,” he said.

Sivan’s mouth hung open for a moment before he found his voice. “What are you saying, Black? Why haven’t I seen anyone from the Blackwater? Brand had to sneak in here—”

“You saw Brand?” Black’s expression darkened. “He should not have come in here.”

“Yes, I saw him!” Anger and fear rose in his throat in equal parts. “He is your *friend*, Black. He wanted to make sure I was even alive! What in the heavens is going on?”

Before Black could respond, the cart suddenly shook and clattered. The dessert dishes Black had left on there crashed to the floor, cream and berries spilling onto the floor.

An orange caecean claw snapped out of the fine white cloth covering the cart, and Lusa tumbled out gracelessly.

“You-!” Black hissed, and before Sivan could register what was happening, the pirate drew his sword and slashed at his poor nurse.

But instead of any cry of pain or the horrible wet noise of the black saber rending into flesh, a simple *‘tbunk’* ended the attack. Black’s sword had harmlessly bounced off the caecean man’s hard skin. The pirate look so surprised that it hadn’t worked that he was unprepared when one of Lusa’s claws grabbed his sword in a vice grip.

“Oh, you’ll have to try much harder than that if you want to kill me,” Lusa said before fiercely closing his claw on the sword,

causing it to snap in half.

Black looked furious, and threw his broken sword on the floor. The cacean man ignored him and pulled his medical bag out from under the cart.

“Who do you think you are?” Black seethed, green magic beginning to crackle around his fingers. At the same time, Sivan felt the same hot thread tugging on the siren heart inside his chest.

“I am his *nurse*,” Lusa snapped. “And you will not deny him medical attention any longer. So back off!”

The orange man slipped by the enraged siren and took his seat next to Sivan. Black raised his hand, magic gathering in his palm.

“Black, stop!” Sivan shouted sternly. The man’s face faltered, and for a brief moment he turned back into the pirate who cried whenever Sivan yelled at him. But after a moment, he turned away. Black picked up the pieces of his broken sword, and used the magic in his hands to fuse them back together before sheathing the blade.

Sivan let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

“Good evening, Mr. Montgomery,” Lusa said pleasantly. “I apologize for the lack of medical care in my absence. I was so *rudely* denied entry.”

“I’m so sorry, Lusa,” Sivan said to him before snapping his eyes back on the pirate. “Black, what have you been doing? I *told* you that Lusa can be trusted.”

Black crossed his arms over his chest, glaring down at the cacean nurse who was ignoring him as he sifted through his medical bag. “You don’t need more medical care. I’m taking care of you.”

Sivan pushed up his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose, groaning in frustration. “You aren’t a *nurse*, Black. And Lusa

saved my life. You should treat him with more respect.”

Black huffed, still glowering.

“What on earth is that?” Lusa asked, eyes fixed on the shadowy hand Sivan had used to push up his glasses.

“Oh, um. Siren magic, I guess?” He held the hand out for the nurse to inspect, but Lusa kept his own hands firmly on his medical bag.

“...I can’t examine your wound like that,” Lusa said after a long moment. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but kept it to himself for once.

“Ah, right-” Sivan looked toward Black pleadingly. He half expected the now surly man to throw a tantrum over this, but he snapped his fingers and the thread of hot magic running from Sivan’s shadow hand to his heart snapped. He gasped when it happened, not realizing that the hot vein of magic had been there at all.

Lusa glanced at him, the same look of holding something back crossing over his face. “Thank you,” the nurse said to Black, who stormed off to the other side of the infirmary to pout. He plopped down in a chair, glare sharp even from across the room. Lusa refocused on Sivan’s arm, peeling off the old bandages. Sivan hissed as pain flooded his senses. Whatever magic that had given him the shadowy arm had also dulled his sense of pain in the physical part of his arm.

“When was the last time these were changed?” Lusa asked, angry. “Your wound is inflamed.”

Sivan looked down and saw that the stump that the nurse had so carefully been taking of care during his imprisonment was now angry and red. The stitches that were so close to being taken out before were now biting into his skin. Lusa silently snipped out the stitches, and Sivan had to bite back a scream with each one he pulled out. “You’re lucky the wound didn’t reopen,” Lusa

mumbled as he worked.

After the stitches were taken out, Lusa cleansed his arm with a liquid that burned almost as much as the stitches had. But he then followed it up with a white cream that began to soothe the pain.

“I thought you said you didn’t know how to treat human infections,” Sivan said.

“It’s not infected, just irritated. But it very well could have gotten infected.” Lusa huffed out a breath, irritation in his voice as he chided them. “Why has this gone untreated? Just throwing siren magic over it to numb the pain isn’t going to make it better.”

Sivan hesitated, glancing at Black, who was glaring at the floor. “Um, there were more...pressing wounds.” His left hand subconsciously went to his chest; Lusa’s eyes followed him there.

“...Palis says Kaerius speared you through the heart,” Lusa started. “I assumed she was mistaken, since your pirate captain wouldn’t be guarding a corpse like a madman, right?”

Sivan wasn’t sure about that. Black wasn’t taking him being *injured* well, he could only imagine the madness that would have taken him over had he really died. He glanced towards Black again, who gave him nothing. Sivan wasn’t sure if he should be telling everyone about this, but he trusted Lusa, and the caecean nurse was stubborn enough to find out one way or another.

“Well, you’re both right, in a way,” Sivan said as he tugged down the buttons of his shirt to reveal the red scar of the Y-incision. It had healed over preternaturally fast, Black explained that it was because it was so close to his heart, and the siren organ would bleed out some of its powers here and there.

Lusa looked down at him with wide, frowning eyes. He darted his attention towards Black, who’s shirt was low cut enough to reveal the edges of the same red Y-incision.

“Ohh,” Lusa breathed, his eyes settling on the siren sharply.

“You *cut out your heart*.” He said it clipped syllables, each one more derisive than the next.

Black’s whole body seemed to seethe with barely contained outrage. “So? What do you know of it?” He asked darkly, daring the caecean man to actually answer.

Lusa smiled, tilting his head to the side. “Oh, I’ve been friends with a poorly tempered siren for years. I’m not afraid of one without a heart.” He said it as if Black were beneath him, as if this made him less of a siren.

The pirate just scowled at Lusa, glaring at him as if he’d been the one who had stabbed Sivan.

“Can you both please calm down? All this anger is bad for my recovery,” Sivan pleaded, exhaustion creeping into him through the tense air.

Lusa turned back to him, closing up his medical bag. As he did, he leaned in, speaking quietly, just to Sivan, although Black could surely hear him. “I am happy you survived, but you must be careful around him now. He exchanged more than his heart when he saved you.”

Sivan watched Lusa leave without another word. He had no idea what the nurse meant, but a pit of dread formed in his gut, right beneath the heart that Black had given him.

“Black, come here.” Sivan’s words were tight, commanding. It was the tone he’d been taught to use by his etiquette tutors, to address servants who had done something wrong. He hated that he used it, but he knew his former attendant would know to take it seriously.

Yet all that he got in response was a cold stare from stormy green eyes. It took a moment for Sivan to recover, for the chill that ran through him at having Black look at him like that was neither expected or pleasant. He suspected this was the Black that fueled the tall tales about the *dreaded demon pirate lord, Captain*

Black.'

"Nereus," Sivan tried again, softer.

This time, Black closed his eyes, sighing, and peeled himself off from the chair. He was at Sivan's bedside in a few strides, and, without saying anything, took hold of his right arm. Pale fingers brushed along the outer edges of Sivan's shoulder, down to the barrier of his inflamed stump. Skipping over the injury, Black conjured another shadowy right arm for him. Once again, He felt the hot strings of magic flicker alive from his chest. Sivan flexed the shadowy fingers a few times, allowing the reformed limb to adjust its response to his command.

Black began to pull away, but stopped when Sivan's shadowy hand grabbed his arm.

"Black," Sivan switched back to his pirate name, his tone softer. "What is going on? Have you been barring anyone from seeing me?"

There was a long pause from the pirate before he muttered, "am I not allowed to protect what is mine?"

"What?" Sivan gasped, not sure if he'd heard him right. The pirate's words from before echoed in his mind: *'I am going to lock you away so you can never escape me again.'*

"I mean-" Black turned towards him, placing a gentle hand on Sivan's shadowy one. "You are extremely vulnerable right now. I am merely being cautious."

Sivan could feel the warmth of the man's hand, reassuring and heavy on his own. It soothed him, made him realize this was the same Black he'd come to love, in spite of Lusa's words of warning.

"I understand. I am in no position to defend myself. But that is all the more reason to *rely* on our allies."

Black made a sour face. "The caecean nurse is not my ally."

"Then what of Brand? He had to sneak in here too," Sivan

shot back.

The pirate's sour face shifted into a pout. He knew Sivan was right. "...perhaps I have been a little overprotective."

That was all Sivan was getting out of the man for now. If he berated him further, Black would stop listening to him. He didn't want to push the topic of his own safety right after the pirate almost lost him for good.

Sivan picked up the fork and motioned for the pirate to take it. "I am a little tired after that. Perhaps you should feed me once more."

The embarrassment Sivan felt at being fed paled in comparison to the contentment he felt when Black's face lit up with a grin. He settled in next to Sivan's bed and started to feed him.

He knew Sivan was indulging him, yet the man's face was still soft with contentment. It calmed Sivan's own nerves, seeing Black like this.

Yet the dark in his eyes did not fully recede. Lusa's words echoed in his mind, leaving a lingering sense of dread.

'He exchanged more than his heart when he saved you.'