

Chapter 10

The Bloating Isles

To Black's credit, he did relent and allow Sivan visitors after the incident with Lusa. Although it was never without Black as an observer, especially when the caecean nurse came to check Sivan's wounds. So there was little opportunity for Sivan to ask Lusa more about what he'd meant about Black.

But, Sivan was getting stronger. Much faster than he'd anticipated. He'd recently managed to get out of bed and walk around the infirmary, much to Black's dismay.

"What if you fall?!"

"What? Is the heart going to tumble out of my chest if I do?" Sivan had shot back with a laugh.

Black had made a noise like he thought that was a real possibility and scooped up an irate Sivan and put him back in bed.

Now, Sivan was alone in the infirmary. Black had left him to go make lunch, locking the door on his way out. Still no visitors

without his pirate protector.

But, that did not mean Sivan couldn't unlock it from the inside.

He carefully got out of bed, not wanting to actually fall and support Black's point. Sivan's body still ached at any large movement, but it had been two weeks since he'd woken up, and he was beginning to feel restless.

He slowly made it to the wardrobe he'd seen Black fill with clothes for him. It still primarily consisted of clothes Black had recovered from the Spear, but Sivan noticed several new garments in his size. He felt the fine woolen border to an unfamiliar jacket, the silver threads of embroidered waves flitting across his finger. Was it something Black had found here in the caecean lord's manor, or was it something he'd purchased for him during his absence?

Sivan swallowed the ache that welled up inside him at the second thought and took the jacket out of the wardrobe. He slipped it on and noted how it was a little large on his frame. At first, Sivan thought Black must have purchased the wrong size, but then he saw himself in the mirror. He was now a much thinner man than he remembered before his capture. Sivan had been fed properly during his underwater captivity, but he rarely felt the motivation to actually eat what he was served. He'd regained his appetite now that he had Black's cooking to contend with, but he had also nearly died. There was a tinge of pallor over his reflection in the mirror. Sivan could only guess what he had looked like two weeks prior.

He buttoned up the lower half of the jacket, and realized that it would have fit perfectly to his measurements pre capture. Which, of course Black would have memorized. Sivan flushed, remembering all the times the man had wrapped his hands around his waist while murmuring nonsense about how his

fingers could almost touch. It wasn't his fault the pirate's hands were so large.

Sivan slipped out of the infirmary and was greeted with another long granite hallway. Why was it that nobility seemed to revel in large stretches of nothing? They liked to take up space just for the sake of taking it up.

He wandered down the hallway, shivering a little at the chill of his bare feet on the cold granite floor. It was smooth as glass, polished to a sheen so perfect Sivan could see himself in it.

At the junction of another hallway, a caecean woman carrying bolts of fabric passed in front of Sivan.

"Oh, hello!" He greeted, trying to sound pleasant. Her black eyes widened substantially at the sight of him, and she almost dropped a bolt of purple velvet.

At that, she stepped back and bowed as deeply as she could over the fabric. She said something in Uncharted, then realizing her mistake, corrected to "may lorgh," in broken common tongue. And then she scurried off down the hallway.

"Well, that was weird." Sivan blinked a few times, cursing himself for never being able to master the Uncharted language. Yet she'd made an attempt to speak to him in the common tongue. She must have picked up the title from hearing Black use it over and over. Sivan felt bad for scaring her, and she'd been so polite call him by that even if it was no longer his title.

Still, she was the first sign of life he'd seen since leaving the infirmary, so he decided to see where she was headed, hoping to find someone who could direct him towards the Blackwater.

He followed the caecean woman to a more ornate hallway. There was a plush rug on the floor, and ornate carvings of wave-like filigree decorated the granite pillars that arched up into the high ceilings.

She joined a group of caeceans surrounded by more bolts

of fabric, open books of colors and swatches, vases, and marble statues of every variety. There were three more caeceans holding up their chosen fabric or statue and harassing one very flustered silver-haired pirate.

“Oi, like I keep tellin’ ye, I ain’t makin’ no fancy pants decisions. Ye’ll ‘ave te wait fer tha captain,” Brand said while attempting to back away.

The caeceans kept on him, one continuously asking him the same thing in Uncharted. One seemed to know common, and pressed into Brand, “He will not do. He has no sense for the visual harmony of the manor. We need to speak with the lord.”

“Well, I- uh- I can’t help ye tha--”

“Brand!” Sivan called, feeling sorry for the old man. If there was a caecean who spoke common, maybe he could help out.

Brand’s face went pale the moment he saw Sivan. When the caeceans saw him, they had the same wide eyes as the first woman he’d run into. Then they were on Sivan in an instant.

“My lord, what color scheme do you prefer for the great hall?” The caecean who knew common asked. He shoved a book full of colors into Sivan’s face for a moment before another caecean pushed him away.

“Bird or fish?” they asked, holding up statues of a bird and fish. They said something in Uncharted, and then repeated, “bird or fish?”

The statues were also pushed out of the way by bolts of heavy fabrics wielded by the third caecean, who was the woman he’d run into. She said absolutely nothing, her knowledge of the common tongue strictly limited to the ‘may lorgh’ she’d used before.

Both the statue and fabric caeceans were then pushed aside for the first caecean to return with his book. “I’ve selected these palettes to accentuate your skin and hair, although now that I’m

seeing you closer and not covered in blood, I may have to adjust them.”

Sivan balked at the onslaught of caeceans and decisions he was presented with. “Wh-what? Why do you want my opinion?”

The color swatch caecean blinked at him in return, confusion clear on his face. “Surely my lord wants to pick the colors for his own throne room?”

“*What?*” Sivan’s tone was sharper this time.

Their attention was drawn to a light cackle approaching them from within the great hall they were evidently next to.

“Oh, no. I can’t watch this any longer,” Lusa laughed. He came over to Sivan and pushed him back a step, putting himself between his patient and the eager caeceans. A few back and forth lines of *Uncharted* had the trio sighing and putting down their options before they walked away.

Lusa turned on Sivan with an amused glint in his eye. “What was that about?” Sivan asked him.

“Oh, I just told them not to bother my patient until you’re fully recovered.” Lusa eyed him, peering at his chest to get a look at the scar poking out of his collar. “Although, I must say I’m pleasantly surprised to see you out and about already.”

“I was getting restless,” Sivan huffed. “But that’s not what I meant. Why were they so eager to get my opinion? And what was that about a throne room?”

Lusa’s brows raised in surprise the same time his eyes curved further up in amusement. “Ohh, no one’s told you yet. Or should I say our dear *pirate captain* hasn’t told you, since he’s been the one keeping you captive in the infirmary.”

Sivan ignored the nurse’s comment about Black and returned to his questioning, although a nagging dread was forming in his stomach. “What haven’t I been told, Lusa?”

“You know, as much as I’ve learned about humans, the

strangest thing to me has been how they pass on their positions of power through lineage. How do you know if the next in line will be strong enough to be a good ruler? They were just given the title, they didn't earn it."

"Lusa, get to the point," Sivan snapped at him.

The man grinned, sharp teeth glinting. "Uncharted positions of power are passed down through conquest. Sometimes it's merely symbolic, but more often than not, rulers are succeeded by the same person who killed them."

There it was. The dread manifested.

Sivan pinched his brow. "So, because I killed Lord Kaerius..."

Lusa nodded. "*You* are now the lord of the Bloated Isles..." He stepped back and gave a smooth and practiced bow to Sivan. "...my lord."

Sivan felt the hall spin around him. "Great heavens — I need to sit down." He felt Lusa's hand guide him to a chair.

It was an uncomfortable chair.

Sivan opened his eyes and saw his faithful nurse had led him to the very throne centered in the back of the room the three caeceans were trying to decorate. There were swaths of deep purple curtains and banners in the process of being taken down. Green, silver, and gold taking their place. The color caecean's presumed palette for Sivan.

"I'm going to be sick," Sivan grumbled.

"Oh, come on, you look plenty well," Lusa laughed. "Of course, I'll have to give you a proper exam before allowing you to take on all that paperwork."

"*Paperwork?*" Sivan hissed.

"Oodles, my lord. Unfortunately, this title you've come into is not one most Uncharted want. Kaerius was strong, but there were very few attempts on his life since the Bloated Isles is the

premier trading port for all of Uncharted territory. Which comes with a fair amount of work and very little prestige.”

Sivan glanced at the gilded arms of the throne he now sat upon. “This must be a profitable position to hold. No one wanted it?”

Lusa looked at him pityingly, his amused smirk dulling a bit. “Most Uncharted don’t value wealth the same way humans do. So, although the isles make a pretty penny for the lord as a port, none but Kaerius were willing to put up with the work.”

“Can I opt out?” Sivan groaned. He was trying to end a war, he didn’t need *more* responsibility.

“Absolutely not,” Lusa sing-songed.

“Great, great, great.” He was a lord again. Before, he had very little duty as the third child of the earl aside from marrying whoever was chosen for him. Of course, Sivan had been educated in the ways of lordship just as his sisters had been. So he had some idea of what was expected. Although, there was sure to be some great twist on the whole situation as was the Uncharted’s apparent custom.

“Hold on,” Sivan breathed, realizing something. “Does that mean I work for Jhaeros now? Is that why he hasn’t sent the hoards after us?”

Lusa nodded, pleased Sivan made the connection. As if he was a proud teacher. “Indeed. Jhaeros won’t dare make an attempt to capture or assassinate you as long as you sit on the Bloated Isles throne. Too much of the Uncharted economy relies on the port. It would be chaos for the realm if the port were out of operation. One of the most affected would be Jhaeros himself, since his entire precious human diet comes from here. Who else would deliver bread to the bottom of the ocean?”

Right, Lusa had said as much when they hijacked the dry ship. “Lusa,” Sivan started, narrowing his eyes at the sunny

caecean man, practically swimming in amusement. “Did you plan this? It’s *very* convenient that we chose the linchpin of the Uncharted empire the same night the Blackwater made their move.”

Lusa laughed, though his smile did not reach his eyes this time. “Oh, I am not clever enough to pull off something like that. I merely reasoned that if we were to find refuge, this would be the best place to do it. I certainly didn’t expect you to drive a seaglass spear into the reigning lord’s head.”

“*Indeed*,” Sivan muttered. He did in fact think Lusa was *plenty* clever enough to pull off exactly that. To the point that, maybe not Sivan, but *someone* killing Kaerius and inheriting his throne was what the entire escape plan had been counting on.

In the end, it didn’t matter. Sivan had regained his status as a noble. Albeit not of Grenaldian nobility, or even of the human kind. And he was not entirely pleased about it. He already had his hands full trying to recover and end this war. Now, he had the added responsibility of an Uncharted lord...not that Sivan fully understood what that was.

Sivan’s shadowy arm slipped when he tried to rest it on the arm of the throne. He fully took in the ornately carved seaglass seat for the first time, realizing just how large the throne was. Of course, it had to be big enough to fit the behemoth that was Kaerius.

“This throne is too big for me,” he mumbled absently to himself, still a little stunned by the whole situation.

“Not to fear, my lord,” an elderly caecean in glasses reassured him as he approached with yet another book of what Sivan feared was more color swatches. “You’ll grow into it.”

Sivan blinked at him, not comprehending. “Sorry? I’m pretty sure I’m done growing. Humans never get as large as Kaerius did.”

The elderly caecean frowned for a moment. “Caeceans don’t either...but the Bloated Isles throne bestows upon it great power. You will grow, just as all our other lords have.”

A nagging sense of horror toyed at Sivan. He looked at Lusa, who was suppressing a cackle. “But I won’t, because I’m human, right?”

Lusa swallowed his laughter enough to shrug with all four arms before leaning against a pillar to watch the scene with that damn amused grin.

“*I won’t because I’m human, right?*” Sivan asked his nurse again, his nagging horror growing.

“My lord, do you want the throne gilded in silver or gold?” The elderly caecean man continued, heedless of Sivan’s distress. He opened his book, which was apparently a ledger. “I must know how much to pull from the treasury so we may order it.”

“Sorry, what? What need would there be to *gild* the throne? It seems unnecessary, it’s fine as it is,” Sivan replied.

The old caecean frowned again, looking at Sivan for a long moment, as if no lord had ever said this to him before. “But what are we to do with the funds?”

“There’s a *throne gilding fund?*”

“Of course.”

“Then, I don’t know, use it to buy resources for the isles. Or, perhaps there’s a public project that needs some kind of boost,” Sivan said, trying to remember what on earth he ever did as a lord other than fight and be sold off for marriage.

“I will...ask,” the elderly caecean responded slowly, closing the ledger.

“Lusa mentioned there was paperwork, I’m assuming there’s an unattended stack of documents growing larger each day I’m in the infirmary. Where is it?”

The elderly caecean looked at him for another long moment,

presumably still figuring out if this new lord was all there in the head. “I should hope they’re in the infirmary. Your consort has been taking them to you to review, yes?”

Sivan felt his jaw click. “My *consort*?”

A dark figure carrying a large silver tray caught Sivan’s attention.

“Black!”

The man jumped, the contents of the tray jostling so much a bowl of soup tipped over, the fine porcelain bowl shattering on the floor with a crash. Black had taken to delivering all Sivan’s meals on trays instead of the traitorous dining cart that had helped Lusa sneak in. “M-my lord?” he asked, shock making his voice higher than usual.

“You’ve been keeping something from me, haven’t you?” Sivan narrowed his eyes at him from atop his lordly throne.

Black’s eyes grew wider at the sight of Sivan on the throne, out of bed. It only took a second for his expression to grow serious, outrage evident on his face. “You should be in bed, my lord.” He set the tray down on a side table, nearly knocking over the vase on top of it, and stormed across the great hall.

Three caecean guards were suddenly in front of Sivan, pointing their serrated seaglass spears at the pirate. Black was taken off guard for a moment, but that did not stop him from practically growling at them. Green magic sparked around him. The guards, to their credit, did not flinch.

“Stop it, all of you!” Sivan shouted. The guards backed off immediately, taking their places next to Sivan. He hadn’t even noticed they were there before.

Black took longer to cool down. He was clearly considering if he could kill the guards without hitting Sivan. But the magic dissipated, and Black remained where he was in the center of the hall.

“Everyone out. I have to talk to my *consort*,” Sivan ordered, using his best commanding lord voice.

The room cleared out except for Black, who stepped up to the throne and bowed mockingly. “You sound like your father.”

Sivan’s jaw clicked again. “I *sound like* someone who has been lied to and kept borderline captive for two weeks! What in the heavens is going on, Black?”

The man stood straight and ignored his question. “I never lied to you. I was merely keeping the burdens of a lordship away from you so you wouldn’t be taxed further. And *captive* is a strong word. I was just ensuring you would not be bothered while you recovered.”

“Well, I’m bothered now,” Sivan huffed. He leaned over his lap and tried to rub out the oncoming headache from his temple with his thumbs. “I didn’t want to inherit my father’s estate when I actually *was* a lord. Yet here I am, caeceans and all.” A moment passed before Sivan heard Black’s boots clacking across the hall. Warm hands gently took his hands away from his face, and he was met with Black kneeling before him.

“This burden is not yours to bear alone. I will help you, just as I always have.” The man’s voice was liquid soft, pulling Sivan away from anger and frustration. Yet Black’s eyes were still cold, untouched by the tender tone.

“You do too much. Have you really been doing all my paperwork on top of caring for me?” Sivan murmured.

Black smiled and once again ignored the question. “It’s nothing I can’t handle. Now, please come back to bed, my lord. You should be resting.”

Sivan relented, letting the pirate help him from the throne. Black stooped, attempting to pick him up, but Sivan batted him away. “I can walk on my own. I’m sure I’ve already made a terrible first impression on my subjects.”

Black made a disapproving sound, but settled on giving Sivan his arm to take for support.

“Will you at least bring the paperwork to me in bed? I am growing mad while stuck there, at least it will give me something to do.”

The pirate made a quieter disapproving sound, but did not reject Sivan outright. “I shall if it will stop you from getting out of bed.”

“Isn’t that your job, *consort?*”

Black’s chuckle rumbled through his chest. Sivan could feel it through the bicep he had his shadowy hand hooked around.