

Chapter 6

The Bloated Isles

They sailed south to the Bloated Isles. Lusa explained he had family who worked for the caecean lord, and they would hopefully set them up with another ship. The Uncharted dry ship they had stolen was too unique. It would draw too much attention. It was too easily tracked. Besides, the dry ship was scheduled to be returned for another delivery of Jhaeros's precious human food. They'd hate to see the king go hungry.

The Bloated Isles were aptly named. Distended globs of rock rose up from the sea in a half-hazard spray of varying sizes. Entrances had been carved into the sheer sides of the islands, which Lusa said were doors to the hollowed out homes the caeceans made inside the rock. Supposedly, they were very homey dwellings, just the right humidity for the caecean Uncharted. Even when the skies were dark with storm clouds like this, their homes would be perfectly cozy.

He'd stopped going on about his home when the fog thinned

enough to see the first fire.

First, it was a ship, empty besides the flames consuming the mast. Then, as the islands became more grouped together, the buildings and docks caught the flames as well. Sivan got his first glimpse of Lusa's fellow caeceans when he spotted a family tossing buckets of water onto their dock.

The Bloated Isles were under attack.

The distant din of battle reached Sivan's ears, eliciting a cold shiver of dread mixed with a twinge of excitement. It had been so long since he'd seen the sun or had any measure of stimuli outside of Lusa's visits to his cell. The clang of swords still brought on a certain measure of nausea and fear within Sivan, but his weary spirit was grateful to feel *something* real again.

"Do you think it's Jhaeros? Has he come after us already?" Sivan's remaining hand instinctively went to where his swords would have been, but found nothing there.

"There's no way his troops could have reached here before us," Lusa said in a rush as he steered around a wall of flaming rock. "Besides, he cannot simply attack the Bloated Isles without incurring the wrath of Lord Kaerius. All trade goes through these islands. It would ruin the kingdom."

"Then who is attacking?" Sivan scanned the gray smoke which clung to the water and rocks. A great fortress was outlined in the haze, carved rock and spires cutting an imposing silhouette.

And then, the familiar dark profile of a ship crept out from the flame and smoke.

It stole Sivan's breath away, and it took him a moment to shout the words, "It's the Blackwater!"

"Well, I'll be damned," Lusa breathed, eyes catching on the pirate ship at the center of the chaos.

Palis came closer to the rail, looking out at the Blackwater.

Sivan swore he saw a shiver run through her. “I’m not getting anywhere near that ship,” she hissed. “Lusa! Turn around!”

“What?!” Sivan followed her as she went to yank the wheel from the Uncharted man. “Why?! They can help us, we just have to get closer—”

“That *ship*—” Palis stabbed at the Blackwater with a finger, “is not what it seems. I value my life and want nothing to do with it.”

Sivan looked to Lusa for help, but the man just shrugged helplessly.

“Lusa, you said you have family here—don’t you want to make sure they’re safe?” Sivan began to reason with him, seeing a vulnerability in the man’s face.

“Well, of course, but—”

The ship lurched as Palis pushed Lusa out of the way and yanked the wheel violently, turning them away from the Blackwater.

“I will jump out and swim there if I have to,” Sivan warned.

“Go ahead,” the siren woman sneered, all softness from her voice gone. “Can you even swim with one arm?”

Sivan still couldn’t swim with both arms, but he grit his teeth and stayed silent.

“Palis, head to the southern side. There are receiving docks we may be able to slip in through.” Lusa’s words were calm, guiding. He knew the woman would not listen to panicked pleas.

She took a long moment to glare at the Uncharted man, but did as he suggested. Her shoulders were still tense, but she began to visibly relax the further they got away from the pirate ship.

“Why are you afraid of the Blackwater?” Sivan asked, not trying to be confrontational, but unable to keep the frustration out of his voice. “It’s just a ship.”

Palis bared her sharp teeth in a humorless laugh. “And I am just a fish. No, that so-called ship has a fierce magic surrounding

it. I don't know what it is, but I know I want nothing to do with it."

Sivan remembered the impossible feats he'd seen the Blackwater do. Withstand cannon fire, travel underwater, even sprout feet and walk across land. He knew the Blackwater was powered by some type of magic. He also knew Hayes was forever chained to the ship. Yet he could not fathom being afraid of it in the same way Palis had been. The siren woman had been brave enough to betray her king, but getting close to a mere pirate ship had her turning tail.

Another loud blast echoed from within the fortress. Sivan swore he caught a sliver of green light through the billowing smoke.

It was the same shade as Black's magic, and his heart ached to see him.

If the Blackwater was here, it would serve to reason that Black was not on the ship but within the caecean lord's walls. Even if he were to make it to the Blackwater, all he'd likely find there would be Hayes.

He had to get inside and find Black.

The receiving dock was left unattended. All guards had probably been called to deal with the pirates, so the dry ship made port without anyone noticing.

Sivan stepped off the ship cautiously. The dock may have appeared safe, but that did not mean danger lurked just out of view.

"Do you have a sword?" Sivan asked Lusa, partially for himself, partially for the unarmed Uncharted man.

"Why would I need that?" Lusa was completely sincere, and Sivan realized this man probably had no combat experience.

Palis roughly handed them both short swords. They were not particularly nice swords, but they would do the trick in the bind

they found themselves in. Lusa held his sword upright, perfectly perpendicular to the ground. Sivan suspected he had never held a sword in his life.

“Perhaps you should stay here...” he tried to suggest delicately.

Lusa’s expression turned sour, and he switched to holding the sword with both hands, like he was afraid Sivan would try to take it from him.

“Don’t try to talk him out of it. He’s going to get in the way regardless, so you will just have to deal with it,” Palis said as she tested the tension in her bow.

“I will not!” Lusa pouted. “I want to find my cousin. He’s part of the guard.”

“Lubin, was it?”

The Uncharted man nodded, gripping his sword tighter.

“You saved me from imprisonment, the least I can do is help you find him.” Sivan patted him on the shoulder. Lusa met his eyes in gratitude.

As they crept through the receiving dock, they passed barrels and cartons full of gold, silver, finery of all kinds. The only time Sivan had seen this much raw treasure had been on the Blackwater. “This Uncharted lord is certainly well paid, isn’t he?”

Lusa huffed out a bitter laugh. “Oh, Lord Kaerius always make sure he’s paid well. He loves his gold and will do anything for it. Even if it’s unsavory. I have a suspicion any ill story you’d heard about Uncharted before the war had our venerable caecean lord at the center.”

“He hoards gold like a gull with shells,” Palis spat, winding around the vessels filled with gold. She peered down the hallway leading away from the receiving dock and found it empty. “I will scout ahead,” she announced, barely looking back at them before

slinking down the hall at a rapid speed.

The chill of the floor hit Sivan once they left the wooden planks of the dock. No one thought to bring him shoes during their escape, so his bare feet had to deal with the cold granite of the fortress. In no way was Sivan truly dressed for battle. He still wore the silken slacks and shirt he'd been used to while imprisoned. He looked more ready for bed than for a fight with an Uncharted lord.

Still, Sivan's heart quickened at the metallic clang of swords distantly ringing through the halls. Ever since his first fight with Jhaeros, the sound of battle had made him as nauseous as the sea did, but now he was just grateful to feel anything other than the daily malaise of confinement.

And somewhere in the caecean fortress he would find Black. The thought of that hastened his pace, pulled him further along, past Lusa.

"Hold on!" Lusa called as Sivan dashed ahead. Yet Sivan did not slow down. He could not. He was so close to Black. His blood pulsed, as if it could sense the man nearby.

Sivan barreled into a long room, lined with rows of spears tipped with serrated seaglass. One of them flew at Sivan, barely missing his nose. A caecean guard with wild eyes had thrown it, and he now rushed at Sivan with a sharp hiss.

The caecean man lunged, pincers the size of Sivan's head aiming for his throat. Sivan ducked, the pincers snipping off a few strands of silver hair. His attacker crashed into a row of spears, the lot of them clattering to the ground and a few nicking his purple-gray skin in the process. Yet the man did not slow down for even a moment. Blood poured from his cuts, but he still rounded on Sivan with vicious speed.

"Lubin!"

Lusa was at the door to the armory, shock apparent on his

face. But his enraged cousin barely even looked at him before clashing with Sivan's shortsword. Lubin's pincers snapped at the metal, crunching the blade into jagged shards. He had another set of arms like Lusa had, and he used his free human hands to grab more seaglass spears from the walls. Sivan attempted to do the same with his right hand, but came back with nothing, forgetting he was now missing it.

All Sivan could do was dodge the spears and pincers as they jabbed at him. He used the remains of his sword to parry what blows he couldn't dodge, but the caecean man was relentless. His black eyes bulged from their sockets, boring into Sivan's nerves. Drool clung to the man's lip, making his sharp fangs glimmer with threat. He seemed feral, like the only thing he knew how to do was to kill.

This was the type of Uncharted Sivan had grown familiar with on the front lines of the war. He'd assumed, wrongly, that they were all bloodthirsty and mad with hate. Now he knew the hearts of Uncharted varied as much as his fellow humans. Most were kind, some were misguided. Very few were naturally this focused on bloodshed. Whatever Jhaeros did to make them like this was a crime worse than the war he started.

A flash of orange saved Sivan from a pincher through the gut. Lusa had jumped on his cousin, attempting to wrestle him into submission.

"Lubin, stop! This is Sivan, he is my patient! You do not get to kill him!"

But Lusa's words fell on deaf ears. Lubin barely slowed down despite his cousin weighing him down. "Silver hair," Lubin hissed, "kill them all!" His eyes were still set on Sivan, his Grenaldian hair a spark to the Uncharted man's rage. He shook off Lusa and rounded on Sivan once more.

A familiar battle cry rang out as an older Grenaldian pirate

tackled Lubin with all his might.

“Brand!” Sivan cried, instantly recognizing the man. Brand knocked back Lusa’s cousin so hard he flew into the wall of spears. Lubin’s head collided with a rack, a resounding crack reverberating through the armory. The caecean man collapsed to the floor amid spears, unconscious.

Brand panted, looking at Sivan with pure shock on his eyes. “Great gods above, wha’ are ye doin’ ‘ere?”

Sivan huffed out an exhausted laugh, delighted to see the man, but at a complete loss where to start explaining. It ended up not mattering, since Brand spotted Lusa and immediately pointed his sword at him.

“Na’ ta worry, me lord, I be protectin’ ye in Black’s stead,” Brand announced. Neither Sivan nor Lusa had time to say anything before the old Grenaldian pirate swung his sword at him. The sword struck Lusa in the shoulder, but the caecean man barely flinched as the weapon bounced off him with an odd ‘clunk.’

He grinned at Brand with not quite as many fangs as Lubin, but just as sharp. “I’m afraid your human-forged sword won’t do much against me. We caeceans have natural armor, making us particularly hard to injure,” Lusa said, almost preening. “I’m guessing you’ve already experienced that, based off the number of dents in your sword.”

Sivan sighed in relief, realizing his nurse was not hurt. It’d been so long since he’d faced caeceans in battle, he’d forgotten how brutal they were to fight against. He had one or two scars thanks to Lusa’s tough-skinned kin.

“Brand, please-“ Sivan stepped out in front of Lusa, putting himself between the pirate’s sword and his nurse. “This is Lusa, he helped me escape from Jhaeros.”

Brand looked between the two of them before deciding either

that Lusa was no threat, or that it would be useless to fight him and dent his sword further. He lowered his sword and hugged Sivan tightly, much to the younger man's surprise.

"Oh, it do be good to see ye. I cannae tell yeh how mighty glad tha captain will be ta see ye." Brand's words were honest and vibrated in his chest. Sivan was taken back by the sudden affection, but realized it was probably partly due to the relief Brand felt that his captain's mood might improve and thus the weather.

Sivan patted the older man's back before stepping back and asked, "Why is the Blackwater here, Brand?"

"We be tryin' ta save ya from tha' siren king. Tha captain 'eard Jhaeros received food from a dry ship an' reckoned we could sneak into tha castle tha way."

Lusa barked out a laugh. "That's a good idea, isn't it?"

"That's how they smuggled me out of the castle," Sivan explained with a grin.

Brand laughed, but his expression quickly turned more serious. "Aye, tha's wha' we were thinkin' as well, but our infiltration of these accursed islands went a tad sour."

A loud explosion rang out through the halls, shaking the whole fortress.

Sivan had to brace himself on a wall of spears. "A tad?"

"Aye, migh' be more than a tad," Brand said a little sheepishly. "Best find tha captain an' retreat. No point in fightin' fer those dry ships now tha' yer 'ere."

"I'm staying here to look after Lubin," Lusa announced, kneeling down next to his unconscious cousin.

"Okay," Sivan nodded and grabbed a seaglass spear and took off with Brand down the hallway.

The halls continued to be a monolith of granite, although the further they got into the fortress, the more intricate details

started to appear in the stone. They ran until they reached a triple fork. Brand and Sivan looked at each other, hoping the other would know which way to go.

“I was sent ta find tha’ docks, I ‘ave no idea where tha’ crew be fightin’.”

Sivan exhaled heavily, trying to catch his breath. “Damn.”

Brand gave him a cheeky look. “Out o’ shape, me lord?”

“Oh, shut up,” Sivan waved him off. “It’s not like I had the opportunity to fight in my cell.”

Brand’s expression fell, and that’s when Sivan realized the other Grenaldian man had noticed his missing arm. Sivan had waved him off with it, or at least had tried to with his phantom limb.

“Ah, yes...” Sivan trailed off, going quiet. He had already experienced abject dismissal when he’d returned from the war injured. This was an even more obvious disability.

“Well, let’s take this ‘ere path,” Brand pointed towards the center hallway. “Battle sounds loudest down ‘ere. Black will be ‘appy ta see ya, might even turn tha tide of it.”

Sivan smiled, grateful Brand did not dwell on his arm. But they did not get very far down their chosen path before Palis turned out from a corner in front of them. She was covered in the black blood of the Uncharted.

“Palis!” Sivan called, waving her down.

She took one look at Brand next to him and notched an arrow at him with her bow. “Who’s this?”

Sivan kept waving his arms, trying to get her to settle down. “Don’t shoot! This is a friend. From the Blackwater.”

“Another pirate?” she hissed, her glare obvious, but lowered her bow. “Your *friends* are very foolish for taking on caeceans without proper weapons.”

“We were nae lookin’ fer a battle necessarily...” Brand tried

to explain, but Palis merely turned back the way she came.

“Follow me if you want to save your captain. He’s fighting Lord Kaerius and losing.”

Sivan started running without another thought. Black was in danger, and he had to find him. That’s all he needed to know to push past the burn in his chest.

Palis stopped them when they reached a balcony. A few dead caeceans lay on the floor, the siren woman’s arrows run through their heads. She slithered behind a large pillar and motioned for Sivan and Brand to look over the edge of the railing.

Black was below, covered in his own blood. He grasped at his gut, holding back a gush of blood as his body struggled to heal. His blade made of pitch was in his other hand, gripped loosely, as if he realized that it was not useful in this fight.

Sivan’s breath punched out of him at the sight of the man. He wanted to jump over the rail, wanted to run to his side and hold him tight and protect him from harm. Palis held him back with a firm grip.

“Don’t,” she hissed, “Kaerius will kill you in an instant. It’s a wonder that pirate has lasted this long.”

“Well, well, I expected more from the *mighty* pirate lord of the Blackwater,” a booming voice cut through the great hall. Sivan then took in the rest of the room, realizing just what Black was facing. This Lord Kaerius was a huge beast, more closely resembling a massive crab than the caeceans he ruled over. Pincers the size of carriages, with human arms of varying sizes running up and down under his shell. His face was similar to a caecean with black eyes and dusting of scales, but the top half of his face was shoved through the top of his shell like it’d been forced there by the gods.

Kaerius was perched atop a pile of gold and jewels, his crustaceous clawed feet repeatedly slipping and relying on his

longer human arms to keep him upright on the hoard. In fact, the entire hall was covered in treasure, far outweighing any trove he'd seen on the Blackwater, Lissandry, or even in the halls of Grenaldian royalty.

A flash of purple magic directed Sivan's attention towards Eliza, who was fending off caecean guards at the entrance to the room. Her magic was certainly doing more than Brand's sword, but she was barely keeping them at bay by herself. Only Eliza and Black remained standing, the other pirates they had come with lay at their feet, most of them dead, a few still choking on their own blood.

"I truly thought your fame gave you more credit, but I guess I shouldn't have expected much from humans. You're all weak. Soft as butter," Kaerius continued to taunt, even as Black picked himself up and thrust his sword at him once more. The caecean lord stopped the sword with one of his massive pincers.

"Good thing you can afford to say such rich things, although it's not much coming from a lowborn crab," Black taunted back, and Sivan wanted to hit him for how stupid he was for mocking someone who was clearly beating him. "You know, the other Uncharted lords say you're just Jhaeros's delivery boy."

The giant crab lord bellowed wetly, and snapped Black's sword out of his hands. The pirate did not let go of his sword in time and was snatched up by the other pincer. He squeezed, and a terrible cracking sound came from Black's chest.

Sivan gasped and was no longer able to just stand there and do nothing. He motioned at Palis's bow, notched but pointed at the ground. "Palis! Shoot him! Shoot Kaerius!"

Her hand twitched, but she did not aim her bow like Sivan wanted. "No. I will help you take down Jhaeros, but I will not kill Lord Kaerius. That responsibility is not in my nature."

"What?!" Sivan snapped. Responsibility? What about all the

Uncharted guards she had just shot down? Black was going to die, and Sivan was helpless to stop it.

“Maybe I’ll fillet you and feed you to your brother,” Kaerius purred as he continued cracking Black’s ribs. Green magic tried sparking from his hands, but petered out before coalescing into anything useful. Sivan couldn’t take it. He couldn’t watch Black suffer like this. Had he been in a reasonable mind he would have remembered that sirens were impossible to kill, but Black’s cries of pain were all Sivan could register.

So he took his seaglass spear and ran closer to Kaerius.

Sivan leapt over the railing, right over the caecean lord’s head, spear pointed down, right into the top of his bulging face.

Kaerius looked up just as Sivan’s spear drove right between his eyes. With a squelch, the seaglass buried itself right into the lord’s brain.

He bellowed in agony, immediately dropping Black. Sivan was so relieved he did not notice the giant pincer swinging up towards him.

The pincer that still held Black’s sword.

The sword pierced Sivan’s chest and split his heart in two.

A rattling breath punched out of him, and he instantly lost control of his body. Sivan went limp and tumbled off the now dead caecean lord. The gold of the great hall glittered quickly past his vision as his world went dark.

He heard one last agonized howl.

“My lord!!”