

## Among Shadows

Three hours from Forochet harbor the fleet still sailed through a dark tunnel, and the bright blue star dead ahead remained elusive.

Five princes of Amber gathered on the steerage of the Elise with two mortal officers, Lieutenant Admiral Dracken and Captain Armist, all facing princess Fiona. The eight ships used coal-fired cressets over their prows, great metal baskets on stubby pillars that could be overfed and burned like furnaces. The rest of the ship usually ran dark unless a particular need for navigation required lanterns or candles. Amber spared no expense, but her crews often spared themselves inconvenience. Now the Elise ran four lamps fueled by wax and paraffin on the steerage. They bathed the wheel in light, and Fiona, steering, stood at the center of a warm and rich glow. Crewmembers had piled coal in the cresset until the metal frame glowed dull orange.

The Elise ran with a skeleton crew. Those who had tried to swim Forochet Bay remained below. Their hands and feet didn't work; they couldn't stand or work the rigging. Many thrashed deliriously, and their comrades bundled them in blankets before tying them down. Those who had been onboard during the flight did not suffer physically, but they moved timidly and said little. Many worked with their heads down.

Amber reserved the rank of Lieutenant Admiral for infantrymen who transitioned to naval service. Knighted in the battle of Breggresh by Eric, a dead prince of Amber who had briefly been king, Dracken had lead the Fourth Regimental Dragoons until a lance shattered his pelvis. The bones healed wrong. He would never ride a horse without pain again and never well under any circumstances. He took his knighthood and hero pay, bought a ship, and joined Amber's navy as a privateer, receiving honors and rank from Gerard. He was short with a big gut, had a great bristly beard, and smoked a short cob pipe. His arms and shoulders stretched his jacket with muscle, but he stood on thin little legs. As always, his right foot pointed out. He walked with a left step, right drag, left step, right drag, and the sailors called him Old Broke.

Armist was a little taller than Dracken with hair pulled back and pinned under a three corner hat. The captain wore a purple jacket and blue breeches, red shirt, and saber. Her gloves and ruff were white. She steered the ship when she could get close to the wheel without this, that, or the other prince of Amber pushing her out of the way to steer themselves. Fiona had done it last, and that didn't feel better.

LtA Dracken had observed the red-haired princess take command but not intervened. Cpt Armist could not complain; Fiona outranked her. Armist stood on both feet with her weight even, watching, and swallowing bile.

"Well, sister?" asked Caine, in the group around Fiona as she steered. "We're still here."

"I noticed," she replied. "Maybe you should try swimming."

Fiona breathed deeply. All of them had discarded their winter clothing, and now the red-haired princess wore a four-paneled dress. The front and back were green, embroidered with red and amber threads, while the sides were a pale sheer silk. Bands of green circled her arms from shoulder to wrist, stitched onto more of the near translucent white. She looked at Benedict.

"Something is holding us back," she said. "The wind is constant and the sailing easy. What did you find out when you attempted to contact Random via trump?"

Benedict's face betrayed nothing. He looked the same as before, but wore a lighter jacket and had lost the cape. He wore a bandage around his left hand that did not seem to encumber him.

Benedict parried. "Thus far I have followed your advice and refrained."

She looked at him for only a moment, then her eyes snapped to Caine.

"I told him we were coming, and he asked what the hold-up was," Caine replied. Like Benedict he'd lost his cape and jacket. He wore a leather vest over white shirt and kept the tri-corner hat. "Since you're taking the long way around."

"This is why I hate boats," said Julian. He hadn't even removed his mail. Turning to Cpt Armist he said, "Take a sounding and see how fast the water is moving. Tell me if we're in a current."

"Yes, sir," she replied and turned to go. Julian snapped twice to hurry her to the prow.

Bleys spoke to Julian as if the diversion with the captain hadn't happened. "I don't know with your bloodline, but with ours, we'll arrive." He made a gesture between Fiona and himself.

Captain Armist did not see or hear the end of that exchange because she was choking on bile. She strode to the foredeck, realized the sounding line was below, and refused to go back past the Amberites to get it. While no one could see her, she glowered into the veil of shadow.

Armist knew what shadow was. Like all of Ambers naval officers who paid the least attention, she understood that the glorious city of Amber was one pole of existence and cast infinite shadows. All worlds, all creation, and all of space was merely shadows of amber. The cresset beside her burned with good anthracite coal, but the waves illuminated were not constant.

As a child, Armist had played games with clouds and waves, spotting patterns in them. Clouds were easy. Waves were hard, but she'd done a lot of sailing at night since then. Now the patterns of foam and breaker in rays of coalfire became horses and riders, castles, people, and crowds. She saw armies and the ships of the wee sea people. That was, Armist understood, shadow. But Amber cast shadows of such power that the images were not phantasms in the mind, but real places, real worlds, filled with real people who did real things. Such was Amber. The daughters and sons of the king before Random, Oberon, could walk between shadows as easily as she walked on land, or lead navies through worlds with the force of their will. Such were the scions of Amber.

She also knew that there was another pole, opposite Amber and across from it, separated by all of Creation. It was the Courts of Chaos, and she'd never been there. Dracken had. Old Broke had gone there, broken, as a waggoneer. He was a Lieutenant Admiral, and he'd driven a wagon to be with the force. Armist thought of Dracken somewhat like an expired wad of dip, cast to the waves, but she had a respect for the sheer bloody-mindedness of the man.

Most of the Amberites' conversation she had followed. Fiona and Bleys knew something and did something, for they traversed shadow unlike anyone else. Armist had gone shadow-sailing before with Gerard in command, and knew that it was a process of slow, gradual changes until they arrived at a new world. Getting anywhere usually took days. This was different. It was supposed to be brutally fast, and the royals were complaining because it had taken three hours. Armist wanted to stab someone.

She could go back, past the royals, and get the sounding line. The hatch down wasn't on the steerage, but the Elise wasn't a vast ship. They'd see her go, and wonder why she hadn't sounded yet. Someone would say something. Julian... would... snap—

Or she could signal another ship and have them take the sounding. If anyone asked, she was confirming.

Armist lit a pair of ship's candles and flagged the Vi beside her.

Ship's candles were long pine branches dipped in kitchen tallow. The navy used red pines that grew on Kolvir because they carried a thick sap that burned clean. Cookie dipped them in his lard pots, and they gave a distinctive white light envelope around an orange core. A basket of them lived underneath the cresset.

She flagged the Vi and told them what she wanted, but signalmen on the Ashe and Jinx replied as well. Armist remembered the fear. They were probably waiting for instructions. After a moment she passed orders to the whole of the small fleet and waited for soundings.

When she got her answers she made the other vessels confirm them, and that done, reported results to the royals and Dracken.

"His Majesty's Vi reports twelve knots of back current," said Armist, climbing the stairs.

"That's nice," said Julian, but Caine observed, "That's a lot."

Armist continued, speaking to Caine. "The Jinx reports sixteen. Ashe found fourteen, and Caitlyn reported eight and eighteen."

Everyone had been arguing about something, but they paused.

Armist pointed. "That's the Caitlyn, holding firm off the starboard bow. She's reported eight and eighteen knots. That's the Ashe, in formation ahead of her. Fourteen. Jinx is behind her reporting sixteen knots, and Vi leads at twelve. The Sej, Diana hang in position outside. They hold firm off port. Notice how close they ride in formation. Sej reports twenty six knots of back current, and Diana reports three. Morgana lies dead astern, and she reports eleven." One by one she pointed out ships while she spoke.

"What did you get?" asked Julian.

She looked him dead in the eye. "Different numbers each time. I was going below to get the better sounding line and repeat."

"Then go!" and he snapped again. But this time Armist smiled.

When she returned to the prow Gerard was there to watch. He was one of Armist's favorite princes. Gerard didn't say much. One of his arms was thickly wrapped with gauze, but he stood with arms crossed by the figurehead, observing with his mouth closed.

The sounding line was twenty fathoms of cord, knotted at each fathom. On the end was a stoppered bottle. She threw it forward and took in the cord, counting. She got nine knots.

"Again," said Gerard.

She'd expected that and did so. Ten knots.

Caine arrived and said, "Do the full ship."

The full ship was more accurate. Instead of throwing the bottle, she dropped it and let it play out. She counted time for the bottle to bob from the front to the rear and got thirteen knots.

Caine opened his mouth but before he could talk, she handed him the bottle. He noticed. He looked sideways at her, and Armist didn't meet his gaze, but he took the bottle.

Caine got fourteen knots. Gerard got three by forward toss. Bleys arrived and tested it himself, and the current outpaced the ship, rushing forward and nearly snatching the cord from his hands.

Caine checked a wind vane on a dipped cord. The cord had been immersed in a Golden Circle wax, slowly at the very edge and very quickly where the vane was tied off. It resisted spinning gradually. By watching how well the vane spun, they could tell the wind speed, relative to the ship.

"Eight knots forward," he announced. He glanced at Armist. She was already signaling the others. All reported eight knots.

Dracken looked out at the rest of the small armada and announced, "We're not splitting up," just to hear it said.

This was an insurmountable truth. The small fleet stayed in formation.

As one they returned to the steerage where Fiona still clung to the wheel. She'd found the best light on the vessel, noted Armist to her herself, and the red-headed princess was making use of it. She didn't gloat, though. When the others told her about their speed, Fiona started shooting glances quickly between her brothers, saying nothing.

If that didn't mean they were probably going to die, Armist would have been pleased. But if they did die in this shadow of Fiona's making, the captain intended to gloat first.

"Bring everyone together," said Princess Fiona, holding the wheel with her fingertips. It never wavered. The wind stayed strong, but the wheel handled like a ship becalmed. "Then run lines from vessel to vessel, until we are all connected."

"In a column, rank, or gaggle?" asked Benedict.

"It doesn't matter."

"It'll matter if we don't want their sails fouling our wind," said Caine to himself, loud enough the others could hear. They didn't respond. Gerard, Benedict, and Caine went to the fore and took ship's candles. Caine signaled while the other two talked.

Armist noticed Gerard had bandaged his hand as well and wondered how that had happened.

Julian remained with Fiona and Bleys on the bridge, but the two red-heads ignored him.

"Like the black road," said Fiona quietly.

"If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, that's not possible," said Bleys, and Fiona finally snapped.

Her loose grip on the wheel tightened as she snatched wood, and her face twisted. "Then why don't you get out and push!" she yelled.

Julian visibly startled. Bleys did as well. The conversation at the front of the ship stopped, and the Amberites and Dracken, who'd gone ahead with them, looked back.

No one said anything. Fiona turned back to the wheel, and Bleys stepped behind her. Julian watched them coldly.

The other ships fell in around the Elise in a cluster and ropes flew between them. Soon they were lashed together, and the forward four, Amberites and Dracken, crossed over to explain matters. There was little to explain.

Fiona and Bleys stayed quiet and suddenly Armist noticed both of them straining. Fiona's makeup ran with perspiration, and Bleys started heavy mouth-breathing. He smiled, but his grin twisted as Fiona's hands clawed the wheel. The wind died and came back, and the roar of passing water rose until speech was all but impossible.

Fiona wasn't glowing; that bitch sweated like a pig, thought Armist. Her gown stuck to her back, and under her arms the sheer silk turned transparent. It hugged her breasts and curves like mist.

The captain looked up to see Julian staring ahead, eyes bent on the star before them.

The water shook and trembled. The boats lurched, and their ropes creaked. Deck and plank groaned, and the masts themselves complained. Sails ached. The main-mast braces, great steel angle-fixtures that bolted the towering mast to the deck bend at their corners and the deck bulged.

A filigree of red lines spread from the Elise, wrapped her sisters, and dove under the sea. Armist knew the lines. They reminded her of something she couldn't quite put her finger on, and tasted the memory on her tongue. She was sweating too. The blue star danced like it stood on the other side of steam.

Then the darkness broke, and the world ripped. The red tracing under the water shot out in all directions and broke. The sea itself ruptured, and they were falling, falling, and—

—splashed into the sea of Amber, not half a nautical mile from Amber Harbor. The sky was blue, the sun shone, clouds floated, and gulls came to investigate the new arrivals.

Fiona sagged against the wheel and said nothing, and Bleys stretched like his body was in agony. He trudged down the short ladder from the steerage to face his Majesty's Caitlyn, lashed to their port where his brothers and Dracken stood.

"See? We were basically here anyway, but if my dear brothers have a lack of patience, we are happy to oblige!" Bleys bowed like an actor on stage and stalked to the front of the ship. Sweat glued his clothes to him. His white shirt was transparent, and his pants stuck to his legs and buttocks like a soggy skin. He dropped something behind him.

"You. Captain. Steer," said Fiona, and she tottered off as well.

"Ma'am—" but Fiona was gone. Like Bleys, she'd sweated through her gown, and now the green straps connecting front and back were visible around her hips. The silk was thin as tissue, caught by those modesty straps against her skin. Armist hoped they chaffed like mad.

She bent over, picked up the small bag Bleys had let fall, and felt a number of small round things. They were hollow coins or about that size. Julian left the steerage after Fiona, and Armist thought about how imperiously Fiona had acted. She'd left the wheel unattended. She'd disrespected the ship, the navy, and Armist's service.

Drinking deep of her fury the captain shoved the bag in one of her pockets to give to the Amberite later and took the wheel. For a moment she felt better. This was where she should be. It was what she deserved.

The other vessels unlashd themselves and sailed free, one by one entering port under a fair sky with a following wind.