

Captain Armist

When all others from His Majesty's Elise were gone, Captain Armist labored. Other crews had come to carry off the casualties, but they didn't stay for docking chores. Many sailors weakened by swimming in the cold Forochet remained catatonic, and the other ships sent stretchers and boards. Non-shipmates carried silent people to the hospitals, but that done, they left. In Amber's Navy each ship was a country to herself.

Most of Elise's crew fled as soon as they landed, dropping belongings and scattering over the sides to scuttle up the docks and into the underbelly of Port Amber. Armist didn't know if she would see them again.

Armist remained. She tied off the anchor and set the bumpers, furled sails with winches, and climbed the rigging. Teams should do that together with one person holding the sails in position and another lashing them together. She tied the sails into tight cigarette bundles by inching along the booms on her stomach, rubbing her chest and stomach raw with salted cord. It was an eight man job, and it took her four hours. Twice she saw crews on His Majesty's Zoe watching her, but her rigging wasn't their problem.

She finished, dropped to the deck, and shut the hatches. MPs walked the docks, but things should be locked. Amber's blue skies betrayed nothing of storms, but she checked every hole. She sealed and secured crew quarters and stowage. She coiled lines and stripped rigging. She ate a dinner of bitterness and fury when the sun finally set and hours of work lay before her. The crew was long gone, the royals had left a mess and nothing else, and no one helped. Even Old Broke was gone who knows where. Armist seethed, and whispered quiet, terrible profanity in the hold. Somehow three tallow pots had fallen over and spilled grease across the wooden floor. It begged for a dropped candle to go up in flames. Armist mopped rendered fat in the dark because fire would kill her ship, and swore, and swore, and swore.

"And damned Bleys for leaving me this mess, and helping his worthless sister for taking my ship, and even dropping his bags of shit—" and only after saying that did Armist recall that Prince Bleys had indeed dropped a bag of shit. She still had it.

Captain Armist paused and considered that it couldn't actually be shit. It had to be something.

She'd finished mopping and stood in a passageway. The Elise was a bit different from other three masters with a ring passageway circling beneath the main deck, all compartments interior to that. In the passageway regular portholes on the starboard side let in moonlight. Armist could see even without fire well enough if she got right in the beam, so she did and rummaged around in her pockets looking for Bleys' little bag. She found it. It clinked. She poured nine gold rings onto her palm and admired them by moonlight.

Nine unremarkable rings lay in a small pile. They felt dry. She weighed them with a few lifts of her palm, and the rings didn't move. They didn't skitter or fall about on her palm. They felt heavy. They might be gold. They might be worth something.

Curiously Armist caught one ring with her middle finger against her palm and poured the rest back into the bag. She meant to examine it, but it fit naturally around her finger like it was sized. The Captain examined it anyway, holding her hand up to moonlight by the porthole.

It was a nice, simple, unremarkable little ring. The only interesting aspect of it was how well it fit her middle finger. It sat snugly on her first digit without being tight, and she pulled it up to her nail to make sure it wouldn't be stuck. It wasn't.

Armist wasn't sure what to do with it, so she let it slip back down to its natural position and put the bag back in her hip pocket.

Bleys had dropped the bag of rings.

Ah, the hell with him. He didn't need them. He wore too many rings for an unmarried man anyway.

Bleys needed a wife. That would straighten him out. A wife wouldn't put up with his nonsense, would keep that damned redheaded sister of his from disrespecting Armist's ship, was exactly what Bleys needed. He wasn't bad looking either. Some idiot would like a royal husband and put him sensible. Old Oberon had taken a few wives, but they'd been royal ninnies. Bleys needed someone level headed.

Armist went back to work, and the ship turned to under her hand. Ropes found their right coil, and mops gathered spillage like they drank it. Before midnight she'd put the Elise ready for harbor. Pleased, the captain examined her work from midships, judged it good, and found an MP.

"We had some bad luck out there. Crew's down, lots of casualties. Keep a sharp eye on her," ordered Armist.

The MP rolled his eyes and prepared to say something flat, but he stammered. The words tripped on his tongue. Instead he replied, "Yes, ma'am. I'll keep an eye on her myself."

And Armist nodded. That was how it should be.

Naval shipping moored on the east side of Amber Harbor, but by constraint ships docked on both sides of every pier. Old service members complained of this failing of standards as ships docked on the starboard side, but Armist had never sailed in a vessel with a steering oar instead of a rudder.

She mused that Amber still had one. They used it for river traffic, she thought.

Either way, docking vessels on both sides of a pier and often three or four per side resulted in great piles of cargo and equipment stacking up around the too-thin walkway. Even though the moon shone unblocked in a fine black sky swept with stars as seafoam glittered on black seas, shadows lurked in cargo piles and hid in line coils. A cluster of barrels emanated faint wispy darkness under the otherwise clean white moonlight, shadows that got in the cracks of the docks and pits in boards, and lay there underfoot. Armist paused to sniff the barrels. Pickled fish. Armist knew pickled fish well. She hurried away.

A high fence circumscribed the navy yard with guard towers. Armist played a mind game where she tried to guess which of the fourteen towers were manned, if any. One over the main gate was, she decided, for she smelled cigarette smoke, and the sailor who held a lantern to her face and asked her name in sleepy tones didn't smell of it. They usually had at least one more. She turned uphill towards City Amber, or informally Lower City Amber, and leaned forward against the hill. It didn't feel as steep as usual, for she was going home after a long voyage.

Half a mile from the yard she got mugged, and they didn't bother asking for her money first.

It was a blind, sudden happening nothing like she expected. Armist never expected to be mugged, but she wasn't foolish enough to think it couldn't happen. She just thought she'd see it coming, or at least know it was happening. She thought she'd react and the moments would be indelibly written in her mind. None of that occurred.

Fast footsteps came behind her, she moved to the side of the street to let them by, and pain blossomed in her sides. The knife wasn't that sharp. Hands groped her, took her wallet, took her dagger, and groped her chest and groin incidentally. Armist was falling. Her legs gave out, and she hit the cobblestones, smashing her knee. She didn't understand why she couldn't stand, because she hadn't been stabbed that bad. Hands held her down. They found her belt-knife, and the dagger she hid in her back. They found the bag of rings.

She called for help, and she couldn't breathe.

Someone would come along. The thieves worked fast, which meant they were scared, which meant they were scared of someone, and the city had many people. Someone would come along and help her, drive the thieves off. Amber was the perfect city at the center of the universe. The King and Princes of Amber ruled creation. They would save her.

No one did. The thieves left her bleeding in the gutter.

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Old Broke found her when morning had burned the darkness from the city but left Captain Armist bleeding in it.

LtA Dracken was stumbling home from a long night. Nearly half of his old unit had found him in a unlicensed bar, one which stayed open until the drunks stopped coming in, and served a peculiarly Amberite drink, black-eyed rye: rye whiskey in coffee. Dracken's dragoons had tried to drink him under the table to defeat 'his new navy blood.' He was tail-wagged, unable to sit down, too drunk to walk, and fallen out of the bar and up a hill on legs that should have dropped him. Driven by caffeine and alcohol, he could only fall in the direction of his house. Every pace went from step, drag to step, drag, crash as he fell from wall to wall.

Leaving the bar had wreaked some change on his mental state, and he was able to recognize Captain Armist, lying in a gutter where rainwater ran red below her and brown above. Passers by said nothing and kept going. Old Broke did not. He shouted, and half a dozen equally wrecked dragoons thought their old officer was being murdered. They came running. Near incompetent with drink, they hoisted and dragged her to a hospital.

Armist woke up stitched together in white muslin. Under a blanket she could feel the bed through the butt-notch in her gown. She was in more pain than she understood, and everything was gone. Her clothes were cut apart, her shoes were gone, and even the ring on her hand had vanished. Her organs hurt inside.

She dozed to escape the pain, but it came back, waves beating against the sides of her head. She dreamed she was the Elise, moored so her broadsides faced a storm, and waves beat her into the pier until the pillars of the dock stove in her hull. She was taking on water and dying. She woke up, and she was dying, and there was nothing the doctors could do. She fell asleep again, and sank into black waters under the blue of Amber Harbor.

She woke up again in agony, and again with a fever, and again when the fever broke. Three days after getting stabbed a nurse told her she was going to live. Armist didn't believe him until Old Broke came in and confirmed it himself.

"You got mugged," the Lieutenant Admiral said, heaving himself down on her visitor's chair and shifting his belly so it rested on his thighs. "As far as we can tell, they did it for your wallet. They took everything but your clothes, and the surgeon cut those open to get at you. You've still got your boots, but they're drenched in blood. I don't know if I'd wear them."

"And I'm going to live?" Armist asked again.

"Yes."

"Can I get a second opinion?"

"No." Dracken chuckled and sighed. "Think of it like free leave. You were transferred out of my command when we got back from that goat-rope, but I told Rear Admiral Harlmore about you. I'll even do the paperwork as a going away present."

"Thank you, sir," she said and let the bed hold her. After a moment she noticed something. "You told the Second Fleet?"

"Aye."

"Why did you tell them? Shouldn't the hospital do that?"

"They would, eventually, but I found you. It sounds like a coincidence, but I imagine it isn't much of one. Bering Hill is almost all naval officers anyway, so one of us was likely to find you. It happened to be me."

"Oh. Oh." She nodded. Bracing herself, she asked, "How did you find me?"

Dracken answered slowly. "You'd been there for a while. I was coming back, and people were detouring around you. I'd been drinking with a few men from my Army days, and they helped carry you here."

"They detoured around me? People? Civilians?" Armist couldn't believe him.

"Civilians." Dracken nodded. "Sailors. Some people I knew. No, I won't tell you who they are. Ever had a problem you could have avoided by being an asshole? You were that problem, Captain. Don't worry. We got you in."

"Bastards."

Dracken shrugged. "That's how it is. Sleep well, Captain. Get back on your feet."

Armist thanked him, and the LtA rose to shuffle out. Before he could leave, she called, "Why you, sir? Why weren't you home with your wife? Why were you drinking with Army-men after a float?"

Dracken paused in the doorway, and his face hardened. Under his beard she could see him grind his teeth. "We're not together," he said. "She left after Breggresh when we had a problem she couldn't get over. Go to sleep, Captain. My problems aren't yours."

He left and shut the door on her reply.

#

In a warehouse in Helene District a man and woman emerged naked from a warm but wet pile of blankets. Their names were Obrecht and Tatianna, and neither had been born in Amber.

For a while Obrecht sat on the edge of the crates on which they'd built their nest. He rested his heels on a either side of an X-shaped pair of struts that reinforced the crate wall, leaning over to put his elbows on his thighs. When he leaned forward his stomach made rolls, but hunched shoulders brought out dock-handler muscles. He was a thick man. The thinness of his youth had gone long ago, taken by long days of moving cargo in and out of the navy yard. The same lean that made his stomach bulge stretched his back, long muscles reaching over ribs and knotted up behind his arms as he ran a hand through his hair. He looked back at the woman.

Tatianna had slithered out the other side and wrapped herself in a sheet. They'd kicked it to the ground previously, and she tied it about herself like a toga. Her hair fell in a disheveled mess, an unruly river of glossy black on umber skin. Walking around the crate-bed and sitting down beside him, Tatianna stretched herself against his back. She slipped halfway out of the sheet, and it fell around her lap. Her body conformed to him, and she stroked his chest. Obrecht rubbed the top of her head with his chin.

Outside the warehouse the sun peaked, and holes in the ceiling cast spears of daylight. Inside the warehouse the air was musty. Piles of sawdust lay on otherwise bare rock, sometimes letting motes fly free to wander through the shafts of daylight. The crate they'd made a bed was one of many. Some fully boxed their contents, but most were just frames. Uncured animal hides and rough woodworking spilled out of frame boxes; barrels that smelled of salt or vinegar sat on round ends in the corner. The front door was locked from outside, but a small hole in the rear wall spilled more daylight, tinged green and accompanied by creeping mulberry leaves. Two huge boxes of a rare alfalfa looked monstrously heavy, but either Obrecht or Tatianna could move them alone. Those boxes were pushed open like barn doors before the hole in the wall, and leather pull handles hung on the sides that would face the wall.

In the blanket nest, Tatianna played with Obrecht's skin. "How are you?" she asked.

"Good, good. Hungry?"

"Soon. Not yet."

"That's fine."

Obrecht waited, and she lay on his side. He felt her breathing, the subtle pressure of her collar bones and arms, the warmth of her breasts. She was still slightly aroused, and her nipples touched him enough to remind him they were there. He put a hand through her toga and felt her wet thighs. Pride rose within him.

"We should check the take," he said.

"It hasn't been a week," she replied.

"Yes, but the heat didn't appear. No one cared."

"If you want to," said Tatianna and continued stroking his flesh. She sounded sleepy.

"I'm serious. No one cared. I thought for sure they'd say something about a captain taking it in the naval district. Those are all old salt-squid anyway. But no one cared. They didn't even pick her up when they walked past. We can check the take."

She didn't say anything, and for a while he sat content, hand on her legs. Her skin upwards of her knee was smooth as velvet. But the take lay hidden under a stone, and suddenly he rose, letting her slump back into bed in a spill of black hair. He admired her briefly, his woman, eyeing the way her robe fell down below her stomach and fit the notches of her hips. Her breasts spread under gravity as had her legs, beautiful legs, that emerged from clean sheets onto soiled blankets and—

"Ah," groaned Obrecht, and he stumbled away naked, taking mincing steps on cold flagstones.

Tatianna smiled and waited, and let air dry sweat from her skin.

He moved to a far part of the warehouse where sawdust covered the floor under cases of manufactured shingles. Eight shingles on one wooden pole, twenty poles in a stack, four poles wide to a case, and these bound within a crate framework, not a box, the shingles snowed a light sawdust as he pushed the boxes aside.

This darker area had a better roof, and no beams of sunlight found a way through. Underneath the boxes small heavy flagstones fit together like puzzle pieces, but repeated falls of sawdust filled in the cracks until the stones resembled carpet. Obrecht worked angles from the walls and rafters, calculated position with his hands, before finding the spot. Only there he kicked away sawdust, and it vanished into the rest without a mark. One stone lay just like the others. He worked it out with his fingertips, took out a burlap sack, and let the stone thunk back into place. He returned to the naked woman.

Her indolence didn't vanish, but she did roll up on one elbow and pulled the sheet to her shoulders. It rode up below, exposing skin from thigh to the curve of her hip. Obrecht noticed as well and leered, but sat down on the edge of the bed in space she had left. Instead of laying against him, she slithered around behind to see their take on his lap. With something like annoyance, she worked the sheet around to fit like a toga.

Obrecht took out Armist's wallet, and counted blue and green royal bills of Amber. He gave half to Tatianna. Either of two knives he offered her, but she declined so he put them both back in the bag. Rummaging around more, he took out a naval class ring, and this she scooped out of his fingers.

It was a fat, heavy ring, emblazoned with the crown of Amber and unicorns rampant on either side, the carving worked so their horns supported an emerald. It fit her dark finger perfectly, and Obrecht pulled it off.

"No. We are not avoiding heat to have you wearing a stolen sailor ring in public."

"But it fits me."

"I don't care. In the bag with the knives, and I'll have my cousin melt them down."

"Ugh," grouched Tatianna and flopped backwards onto the bed away from him. Her toga fell open, and after a moment she looked over to see if he noticed.

Obrecht hadn't. He found another little bag, something finely worked with silk stitching on good wool. The dockman stroked the material between two fingers.

"This is cashmere," he said in something like awe.

Tatianna sat up a little and propped herself forward on both elbows. The sheet had almost fallen to her middle again but caught around her chest. Obrecht didn't notice that either.

"Cashmere?" she asked.

"Rich people fabric."

"I know what cashmere is," she snapped. "What's in it?"

Instead of looking, he held up the bag. "Why would a ship's captain have a cashmere bag?"

"She's rich. She's an officer."

"She's not that rich," he argued. "I cased her house. It's nice, but she took command recently. This is her first deployment. This is her first time making big money, and she hasn't gotten paid for the float yet. Why would she have a cashmere bag? That's some royal shit."

"What's in it?" whined Tatianna.

"Nothing, probably. Money it feels like or— rings." Obrecht poured them out in a jumble.

Eight gold rings, heavy and thick, unadorned, round as the moon, lay on his palm. They were heavy. Gold must be heavier than he thought, for the eight of them pulled his hand down. The weight of them put his knuckles against his thigh when he wasn't thinking about hold them up. Eight gold rings without inscription or marking.

Tatianna's hand slithered between Obrecht's arm and his side and snatched one. He tried to snatch her, but she rolled free, coming up naked with the ring on her finger.

"It fits," she said, hold her right hand up. The ring lay around her index finger, a plain, unimposing band. It gleamed bright yellow against dark skin.

"Put it back," he demanded.

"I'm keeping it! Half the take is mine, and I couldn't have the one with the stone!" Tatianna snorted, and squirmed away as Obrecht rounded on her. She added, "See if one fits you,"

Distracted by her movement from the rings, for a moment he just watched her. The pile of seven rings lay in his fist.

He opened his left hand, and one of the rings fell around his thumb as naturally as if it was made for him. It lay without wiggling or shifting, and sat on his middle knuckle. Obrecht took his eyes off her to watch it. The ring gleamed.

"We should melt down the others," he said. He stared at his thumb. "We should have Elroy melt them down with the others."

"If he melts all six of those, we'll have to split the gold with him. Those are simple rings. They've got no markings or gems. We could keep them," Tatianna said, leaning back on her hands. Her right, the one with the ring, was hidden under sheets and wet blankets.

"We could," said Obrecht.

"Elroy has to melt the knives anyway, and that big navy ring. He's getting a good take. We should keep the simple rings. They're easy to fence."

"We should," said Obrecht.

"After all, you did all the work. You took them, and I watched. No one saw your face, and no one saw mine. Even the captain didn't. We should keep the rings and let Elroy melt the other stuff."

"We'll keep the rings," agreed Obrecht. He shook himself suddenly. "We'll keep these but don't make a point of them. Don't wear all four of yours at once. In fact, I'm going to keep all of them, except the one you're wearing."

"The hell you are," said Tatianna and threw herself upright. The toga reappeared, wrapped around her from neck to knees. She sat on her heels with knees together, facing him. She jabbed her finger at the cashmere bag. "Three of those are mine, and we're splitting the loot now."

"No, because you'll wear all four of them at once!" snapped Obrecht. "One ring is nothing. They have no markings. Four rings? Gold rings? At once? That will attract suspicion."

"You said no one cared!"

"If the guard dog sleeps, you don't wake him!"

The warehouse was dark and still. Shadows lengthened in the corners, for outside night was falling. Inside only cracks in the roof allowed sunlight to pass. Tatianna and Obrecht glared at each other for a moment, but then Tatianna smiled.

"Oh, darling," she said. Rolling her shoulders back, the toga slipped. It didn't fall all the way but slid down until tension caught it over her chest again. Obrecht's eyes gravitated towards her cleavage. She spoke slowly, breathing between almost every word. "Baby. I'll do whatever you want to do. You marked and cut the pretty rich bitch. You were so brave. I only kept watch, and you were so brave."

Obrecht panted too.

"Come here, baby," whispered Tatianna.

He crawled towards her on hands and knees, the cashmere bag clutched in his fist. She leaned back as he approached, staying out range his kisses, until she'd fallen all the way back underneath him, and one of his rough hands scraped the old sheet away. It fell off the crate bed again.

"Come here, baby," whispered Tatianna.

Obrecht lowered himself on top of her, and she caught him between her thighs. She constricted his waist like a python, and wet skin clung to his dry sides. She pressed her torso against him and splayed her right hand against his back. The plain gold ring dug into his skin.

Her left hand happened to find the bag he dropped and tucked it away in a crevice under the blankets. Inside the warehouse the shadows gathered before night fell outside, and soon it was dark as pitch.