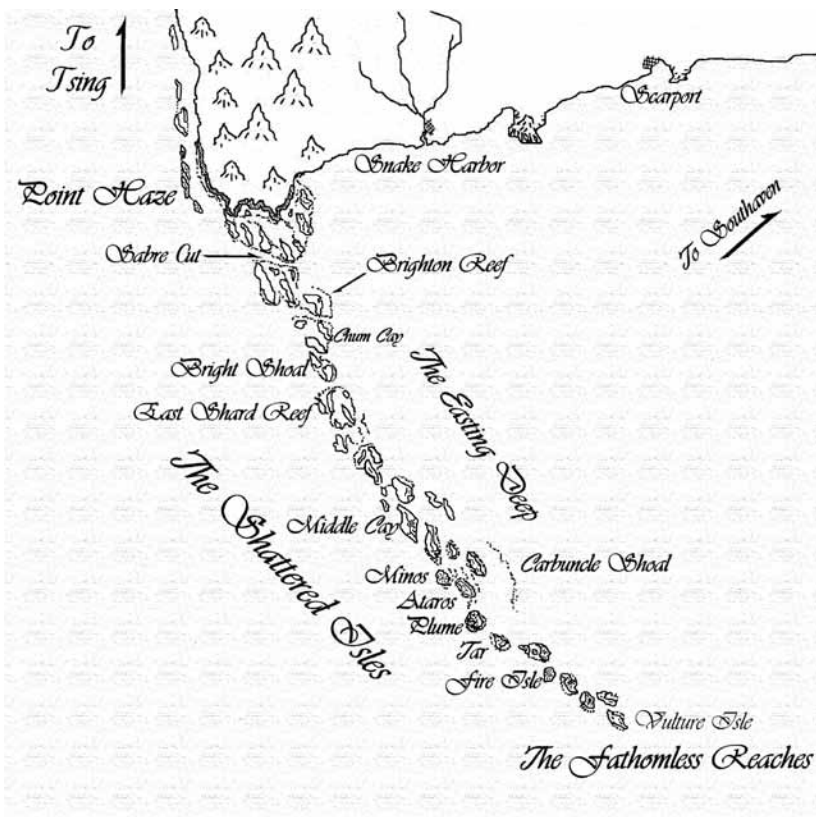


# Scimitar's Heir

A Scimitar Seas Novel  
Book Three

By

Chris A. Jackson



Scimitar's Heir

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## CHAPTER 5

# Transitions

**A tap at the** door roused Emil Norris from a light slumber. The early morning sun glowed through the mosquito netting draped across the archway to his balcony, gently rousing him as it brightened. At first he thought the noise had been a dream, until another knock sounded, firmer but still tentative. He rolled over...and froze.

A cascade of crimson hair flowed over the pillow next to him, framing Camilla's lovely face, only inches away.

*What in the name of...* His mind raced, then the memories of the previous evening flooded back.

With the letters for the emperor safely en route to Tsing aboard the *Flothrindel*, a huge weight had lifted off of their shoulders. Emil and Camilla had toasted one another with a fine red wine and watched the sun set. Their responsibilities to Cynthia Flaxal and the Empire of Tsing fulfilled, they had nothing more to do until His Majesty sent another ship, or Cynthia returned.

Camilla had arranged a fabulous dinner: lobster fresh from the lagoon, thinly sliced papaya, and a half dozen other treats he scarce remembered. The wine—strong, heady and plentiful—had encouraged conversation. Words had flowed easily as a river, at first slow and trivial, then building until they rushed so hard and fast that the walls each of them had erected around their wounded souls broke like a dam before a flood. How little they had truly known about each other. Her tears had wetted his shoulder as she told him of her long years imprisoned by Bloodwind, of how he had finally broken her will, of the death of her father. Only when she confessed to thrusting a dagger into Bloodwind's vile heart with her own hand, had her tears ceased to flow and her voice gone hard.

In return, he told her what he had admitted to no one else in the world. He acknowledged the wracking guilt he had felt over the loss of his family, how he had convinced himself that it was his own fault, that if only the empire had been a safer place, they need not have died. His own personal crusade had led him here to Plume Isle, determined to root out evil even where it, apparently, didn't exist. And he had shed

his own tears when he considered the thousands of sailors and soldiers on the *Clairissa* and *Fire Drake* who had paid with their lives for his misguided hubris.

The crescent moon was high in the sky before they fell silent, their secrets revealed, their tears spent...then there was no more need for words. Two injured souls found solace in one another, shared the miseries of their pasts and, together, become whole again.

Another knock, and Camilla's eyes fluttered open. Startlement, recognition, then memory flashed across her beautiful face over the span of several heartbeats. He smiled rather sheepishly, and her wonderful, sensuous lips curled up at the corners in answer.

"Someone's at the door," he whispered, moving to rise. "Stay here. I'll get it."

"But it's early! Who would be..."

"I don't know, but don't worry about it. I'll take care of it." He reassured her with a smile while donning a robe, and left the bedroom.

The sitting room was a shambles: plates, glasses, two empty wine bottles, and a platter of half-eaten sweets cluttered the low table, and articles of clothing were strewn all over the furniture and floor. Emil quickly gathered up Camilla's discarded dress, corset, petticoats, and assorted undergarments and draped them over a chair out of sight of the doorway. He then straightened his robe and reached for the door. That was when he got his second surprise of the morning.

"It be about bloody time, yer Countship!" Paska declared, elbowing him aside and striding into the suite. "I be knockin' half de day!" She bore a huge tray laden with covered plates, pots, and bowls, as well as an entire tea and blackbrew service. Behind her, two brawny men carried in a huge copper tub, followed by an entire train of grinning native men and women bearing steaming buckets, towels, soap and brushes.

"What in the name of—"

"Dis is just oua way of sayin' tank'e to you, yer Countship. You done de one t'ing I been tryin' to get done fer near two year now, and you done it wit'out even tryin'!" Paska handed him the tray, put her strong hands on his shoulders, and turned him around. "Now you just take dat right back to bed and tell Miss Cammy to eat hearty."

"But I didn't—"

"Oh, yes you done did, yer Countship!" She laughed loud and hard, clapping him on the shoulder with such force that he almost dropped

the tray. “You two done worked up an appetite, I don’t wonda! Now eat up and come out fer your bath before de wata get cold!” She pushed him into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him. The sound of laughter and buckets of water being poured into the tub sounded clearly through the closed portal.

“How did they...” He looked to Camilla, who was sitting up in bed, the coverlet drawn up to her neck, a mirthful smile on her beautiful face.

“It’s a small island, Emil,” she said, patting the bed beside her. “Everyone knows everything about everybody else here. Come and sit, before you drop the tray.”

He sat as ordered and placed the huge tray between them. “I still don’t understand how that woman could have known that we...that you and I...well...you know.”

“What I don’t understand is how they managed to get all this done before daybreak,” she said, setting aside the cover of one plate. She picked up a slice of mango and one of cheese, then took a bite of each, closing her eyes in bliss as she slowly chewed. Then she uncovered more plates, revealing poached eggs, fresh biscuits, butter, a pot of preserves, a rasher of bacon and a pile of sausages.

“Well,” she said with a smile, “are you going pour some tea for me, or just sit there with your mouth hanging open?” She cut a bit of sausage, dredged it through an egg yolk and force-fed it to him.

It was, he had to admit, utterly delicious. He poured her tea as he chewed, and was spreading a dollop of preserves over a hot biscuit when a sudden thought occurred to him, and he wrinkled his brow.

“Do you think Tim knows, too?” he asked before taking a bite.

“Probably,” Camilla said as she poured a cup of blackbrew, added some milk, and handed it to him. “But don’t let it worry you, Emil. He’s been around the natives long enough to know what happens between men and women.”

“He has?” he said, nearly choking on his biscuit. He washed down the bite with blackbrew. “But he’s only...”

“He’s old enough,” she said, sipping her tea and smiling at him. “Don’t worry, Emil. They’re happy for us, that’s all. Now eat! I don’t want the water to get cold before we can bathe.”

“Before we can...” If the previous surprise had disconcerted him, this one delighted him. Emil dug in to his breakfast, finding that he had indeed worked up an appetite.



"Tipos! Wake up!" Keyloo grabbed his foot and shook it. "You gotta see this!"

"See what?" Tipos asked, noting that it was barely light outside. "It's not my watch until mid-morning!"

"We're passing Rockport, and there must be a dozen warships in the harbor!"

"Warships!" That got him out of his hammock faster than if the boat had been sinking. His bare feet slapped the companionway steps and he held out his hand for the viewing glass, then squinted into the morning sun. A glance confirmed Keyloo's claim, but his estimate of their number had been low. "More like a dozen and a half," he said as rubbed sleep from his eyes and looked again. But they were already sailing beyond the great rock that had earned the harbor its name.

"Wear ship, Keyloo. I need to see this." His orders were followed without a word, and *Flothrendel* jibed sweetly, her boom sweeping over the little cockpit, the sail filling with a crack. They came around to a southerly course in the span of only a few breaths. "Good! Now bring her up 'till she luffs."

"Aye," Keyloo said, steering while Tawah handled the sheets. As the boat came up into the wind, Tipos hopped up onto the low coach roof, grasped the mast and peered at the forest of spars that crowded Rockport harbor.

"Bloody hells," he muttered, tallying the ships, estimating how many men were aboard them. "Three of 'em are almost as big as that *Clairissa*! And there's thirteen others, as well!" He lowered the glass and stared. "Must be near seven thousand men!"

"Seven thousand..." Tawah gaped at the number. "That's more people than in all the Shattered Isles!"

"Aye, and they're all warriors," Keyloo said, his tone grim. "You suppose we should go in there and present the count's package to their leader?"

"It'd be a sight shorter trip than goin' all the way up to Tsing," Tawah agreed, "and it might keep 'em from doin' somethin' bad. Somethin' very bad."

"Somethin' like slaughterin' every man, woman and child on Plume Isle," Keyloo suggested.

Tipos shook his head, perplexed by this unexpected situation and

disturbed by his mates' visions of doom. "There's no way that ship *Lady Gwen* even reached Tsing yet, never you mind her coming back with all these warships. These must have been here already...waiting. The question is: do they know what happened? If they don't, and we tell them, will these letters ever get to Tsing, or will we be dancing from a yardarm?" Silently, he weighed his options. If they hurried, they could reach Tsing in five more days, talk to the emperor, convince him not to destroy their people, and return in another week. Would the commander of this fleet stay his hand that long? If he didn't...

"With the Shambata Daroo gone, Plume Isle is defenseless."

"Yes, but they don't know she's gone," Tipos countered, looking back to the fleet of warships and squinting in thought. "They will not attack; not after what happened to their flagship. Fear will hold them back, maybe long enough for us to get word to the emperor and come back."

"Maybe." Keyloo's tone clearly said that he didn't agree with Tipos' logic.

"Maybe," Tipos reiterated. "But one thing for sure: I was told by the Shambata Daroo herself to take these letters to His Majesty the emperor, and none other. If they end up in the hands of some navy officer, the emperor might never know the truth."

He gritted his teeth and made his decision.

"We sail on to Tsing, as fast as *Flothrindel* will go!" Tipos hopped down into the cockpit, snapped closed the viewing glass and pointed north. "Tack her, Keyloo, and mind your sheets! If we crack on, we might just get back before everyone we know is killed."



"Remember, Mister Huffington," Master Upton said, "into His Majesty's hand only. The only other person who may look in this satchel is His Majesty's bodyguard." The master of security placed a hand on Huffington's shoulder in a seemingly nonchalant manner, but Huffington felt the weight of responsibility in the gesture. Count Norris had always exhibited great caution when dealing with this man, whom he called the emperor's spymaster. Huffington tried not to shudder.

"So you told me, sir, and so I'll do." Huffington shouldered the heavy leather satchel. Not only did it contain dispatches to the emperor from both Upton and the admiral, but also two lead ingots; if necessary, he could toss the satchel overboard and its secrets would be safe forever.

“There is sensitive information in that satchel—extremely sensitive information—that could make or break men’s careers, and perhaps cost or save lives. Have a care that it does not fall into the wrong hands.” Upton patted his shoulder and removed his hand.

“Excuse me, sir,” Huffington said, finally dredging up the courage to ask the question that had been nagging him since the previous evening. “But why me? You have aides...”

Upton stared at him with cold eyes. “You are a witness to the loss of His Majesty’s flagship, and your observations are...untainted by opinion or prejudice. In politics, there are few who are entirely trustworthy; even my own aides may have been compromised. I have...researched your background, and believe that I can trust you. You have worked yourself into a comfortable position as Count Norris’ secretary, but I know that you have other useful skills, including discretion.”

*Oh dear gods,* Huffington thought. *What does he know?*

Upton laughed shortly. “If you didn’t want to bring attention to yourself, you should have refrained from requesting an audience with His Majesty to discuss your views of the situation with the seamage. Do you not think we look into the backgrounds of those who will be near His person? It is my job to know everything about everyone, Mister Huffington. And I believe I can trust you.” He cast an appraising eye over Huffington, then handed him a letter sealed with wax and the imprint of a ring. “This letter will gain you an audience with the emperor. Do not fail me.”

“I’ll deliver the message and bring back His Majesty’s reply, Master Upton, whatever it may be.” He tucked the letter inside his waistcoat and nodded.

“Very good. Farewell, then.”

Huffington shook the spymaster’s outstretched hand. The grip was strong, almost painfully so, and he wondered if it was a warning. He turned and boarded the small craft that Upton had requisitioned for the trip, a trim little fishing smack from the local fleet. The smack would make the trip in half the time it would take an imperial launch, and had an enclosed cabin, even if it did stink of fish.

Four hearty imperial sailors had been assigned the task of taking him to Tsing with all haste, and as they cast off the lines and hoisted sail, it was easy to see that they knew their business. They would reach Tsing in a week if the trade winds held true, sooner if a single god smiled on

their venture. Not that Huffington was a religious man. In his line of work, one could not afford to put one's values over one's duty.

He huddled in the small cabin and ignored the smack's boisterous crew, tucking the satchel under his head and closing his eyes, not even wondering at what lay within the stout leather bag. Curiosity could also be deadly to one in his position. What he did wonder, however, as he tried to force himself to sleep, was exactly what his position had become.



"The trade winds are flagging," Cynthia said to Chula as she paced the afterdeck of *Peggy's Dream*, her eyes drawn up to the sails. She could feel the winds course through the rigging—filling, pulling, urging the ships along, but not fast enough.

"Aye, Capt'n. We be flyin' every stitch of canvas she'll hoist, but we've lost t'ree knots since de end of de mid-watch." He peered to windward and she followed his gaze; the swells had lost their white caps, and there were even patches of slick, airless sea interspersed among them. A bad sign. "Comin' inta de doldrums, I'm t'inkin'."

"Sooner than I thought," she said as she peered back at *Orin's Pride*, which was also flying all her canvas but losing headway. They were less than a full day's sail south of the Fathomless Reaches, and though they had been making excellent time, that was changing quickly. Cynthia caught a glimpse of something flying between the ships; Mouse, with another message. She and Feldrin had been using the sprite to pass notes, as it was much quicker and easier than communicating by signal. Mouse landed on her shoulder with a chirp and handed her the rolled piece of paper.

"Thank you, Mouse," she said absently. Cynthia read the note and frowned; Feldrin had reached the same conclusion. They needed more wind. "Pass the word for Edan, please, Chula. It's time he started earning his keep."

"Aye, Capt'n," he said, flashing his pearly grin, then shouted for the boatswain. "Fetch Masta Edan, if you be pleased, Mista Gupa!"

"Aye, sir!" The new boatswain saluted and shouted below for Edan, and word passed through the ship. In moments the young man's distinctive brush of red hair appeared from the fo'c'sle hatch, and he worked his way aft around the newly completed ballistae that crowded the deck.

"You called for me, Cynthia?"

"You'll address her as Capt'n or Mistress, Masta Edan!" Chula snapped. He had been complaining to Cynthia about the boy's attitude, and apparently had reached his limit of tolerance.

"But she's not *my* captain, and she's not *my* mistress, either, Chula," Edan said with a shrug.

"As long as you on dis ship, she's—"

"It's all right, Chula. Let it be." Cynthia waved a hand in dismissal, as if the point were moot—which, as far as she was concerned, it was. "I don't expect Edan to address me with respect. I haven't earned his respect, at least not lately."

"I didn't mean to—"

"I don't care what you *meant* either, Edan. I called you up because there's *work* to be done; it's time for you to start helping us. The winds have slacked and we're not making our best speed." She gestured to the flagging sails. "We need to fill the sails. The same direction, just a bit more strength. It shouldn't be much of a strain, but I thought we'd take shifts; two hours each to start, then maybe more when you get used to it."

"How long do we have to do this?" he asked, eying the sails. Cynthia could feel his questing touch on the wind, and almost smiled.

"Until we reach Akrotia, which will be days, at least, maybe even weeks. We have no way to know until the scouts find the scent of my son."

"Weeks?" he scoffed. "How can we keep the winds up for weeks? We'll get exhausted, even taking shifts."

"Yes, we will, so we'll make what time we can while conditions are still good. Eventually the sea will become choked with weed, which will slow us further. At that point, I'll clear the weeds while you provide the wind, which will be even more exhausting." At his incredulous look, she gave him a thin, grim smile. "I never said helping us would be *easy*, Edan."

Chula chuckled in a low, amused tone, and said, "You gonna be a pretty busy boy now, Edan."

Cynthia saw Edan bristle as the first mate showed him the same lack of respect the young man had shown her. She found it troubling, how Edan expected others to automatically show him respect now that he had attained the powers of a pyromage. Well, he would have to learn that respect was earned by deeds, not by power.

"That's enough, Chula," she warned, though her tone was mild. The first mate strode off down the deck, chuckling quietly. She turned back

to Edan. “I know you can do this. It’s like your fire; practice makes perfect.”

“Show me how much wind you need,” Edan said, squaring his thin shoulders in defiance. She knew his pride would make him push himself; in fact, she was counting on it.



“Na! Na!” Sam shouted, jerking the slack sheet from the cannibal’s hand and lashing it fast. She plucked another line from the row of secured sheets and halyards and thrust it into the man’s grip. “Tada! Noosh! Noosh! Pull, you pointy-toothed pollock!” She grabbed the line and pulled, pointing to where the head of the jib sail twitched on the *First Venture’s* forestay.

“Ah!” He grinned at her and pulled. He rattled off a line of gibberish to his mates and three of them grasped the line and hauled away. The jib rose and they snugged it tight, then two others pulled on the line attached to the sail’s clew and sheeted it home. They even trimmed it sharply. They knew how to trim the sails, how to steer the ship, but that was a far cry from knowing what to do when. They were not competent sailors, not by a far shot, but they were learning.

“Jib!” she shouted, pointing at the sail. They nodded and repeated the word, not mangling the pronunciation too badly. She moved to the line they had just secured and grasped it. “Halyard!” Then she pointed to the sail again and grasped the line at the same time. “Jib halyard!”

Light dawned in the eyes of a few of her crew, but most just looked at her like she was an idiot. “You’re the idiots,” she mumbled in frustration. Finally, one large fellow she knew as Uag nodded and grinned, miming her perfectly, pointing first to the sail and saying, “Jib!” then to the line and repeating, “Halyard!”

“Epa! Epa!” she cried, clapping him on the shoulder. “Epa, Uag! Jib halyard!”

He grinned and repeated the phrase, then rattled off a stream of his own language. She smiled when she saw the light of understanding in the eyes of the rest of the crew. Uag had understood what she wanted and translated her orders to his fellows; an invaluable achievement. Then, to her astonishment, he moved to the row of cleated lines and picked out another. He tugged it and looked up to follow where it led, then grinned again.

“Halyard!” he cried, looking to her for confirmation.

“Epa! Ki! Halyard!” she said, grinning back. “Forestaysail halyard.”

He stumbled at that, unable to pronounce the complicated word, but she broke it down by pointing forward, grabbing the forestay, then patting the sail furler on the forestaysail boom. In an instant, he understood, repeated the phrase, and instructed the others.

“Fan-bloody-tastic!” she said, earning a few confused looks. She waved off their questions, and decided she had one more word to teach them this morning. She walked up to Uag and tapped him on the chest and said, “Bosun!” Then she followed it with two words of their own language that she had learned. “Pica” meant small, and “keffa” meant chief, which was a good definition of a boatswain’s job.

They all cheered and pounded Uag on the back, grinning and crying out their unintelligible congratulations, alternatively calling him “bosun” and “pica keffa.” Sam sighed and took a step back, letting them figure it out for themselves.

She looked around and checked their progress. It had taken her a full day to get everything sorted out on Middle Cay, but now they were approaching Fire Isle and had perhaps twelve hours of sailing to go before they reached the tribe’s home island. *Manta* sailed easily in *First Venture*’s lee under only a single jib and a reefed main. *Cutthroat*, she knew, was clawing her way to windward with only a skeleton crew, and would meet them as scheduled tomorrow night in the lee of Carbuncle Shoal, within easy striking distance of Plume Isle.

Her plan was coming together, her crew was learning, and she was in command. She had even found herself a boatswain. For now, she was content.