

SCIMITAR SUN

Chris A. Jackson

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CHAPTER FIVE

Diplomacy's Course

"IMPRESSIVE." COUNT NORRIS' APPRECIATIVE smile appeared genuine. "You can haul three ships up for repair and still house one under construction in the lofting shed? Very impressive indeed!"

"Aye, we *could* haul three ships, though we never seen the need, yer graceship," Dura said, trying to match the count's ambling gait but fidgeting like a race horse in a draft harness. Camilla had warned her to be on her best behavior, yet not overly accommodating concerning the new ship designs. "And the ways ain't so big as to haul a decent-sized galleon, like *Seven Sisters* or *Winter Gale*, fer instance. They do fine fer Mistress Flaxal's schooners, but that's about as big as we go."

"Big enough to haul corsairs, no doubt," he said, arching an eyebrow. "Isn't that what the late Captain Bloodwind used them for, I mean?"

"Aye, that 'e did, yer graceship, but we tore that old piece of—I mean, the old ways, apart. It weren't in good repair, and was cobbled together like a court document to begin with." She hawked and spat in distaste. "Ghelfan don't put up with shoddy equipment in his yard."

"So I've heard." The count turned to the lofting shed and guided the tour toward it.

"Most of what was once Bloodwind's has been completely removed or refurbished," Camilla added, gesturing across the bay toward the tidy collection of huts that had replaced the shantytown burned in the attack. "The local natives aren't much for organization, but they work well under Dura's direction."

"Aye, they ain't lazy, I'll give 'em that! And they know one end of an adze from another, which is more'n I can say fer some green hands I've trained." Dura stuffed her hands in her pockets and recalled, "Why I knew one feller who chopped off two toes the first time he—"

"Dura, the count really doesn't want to hear—"

"And what are you currently building in there?" the count interrupted, gesturing to the closed lofting shed. "Another schooner?"

"Na. Jest one of Mistress Flaxal's silly projects." Dura chuckled and shook her shaggy head. "She comes up with some of the damnedest—"

"I'd very much like to see it." The count's eyes slid to Camilla's. His tone was light, but his manner clearly dared her to deny him anything.

“Surely, Count. We have no secrets here.” His sly court manner was wearing on her. Despite the way she’d seemingly won him over the previous night, by this morning the formality had returned. He seemed determined to examine every nook and cranny of the ship yard and to not believe a single word she said. “Have a care where you place your feet. I wouldn’t want you to get creosote on those lovely shoes.”

“Thank you, Lady Camilla. I’ll step with care.”

Dura guided them through the small side door of the building and ushered them into her domain. Camilla knew that Cynthia had come up with another new design, but had not paid much attention to the details. Now, with the nearly finished hulls towering over her head, she gaped inwardly, despite her outward composure.

“What in the name of—” The count stopped short, looking first at one narrow hull, then the other, then at the arched beams of laminated wood that united the two. “I’m sorry, but what manner of construction is this? It looks like two ships united into one big raft!”

“Aye, it is a strange lookin’ contraption, ain’t it?” Dura guided them around to the two bows and pointed. “She don’t have a name for it yet, but I suspect, just like happened with the schooners, some bloke’ll latch a moniker to it and it’ll stick. She said she got the design from the natives’ outrigger canoes. The outrigger makes the boat more stable, ye see, so she just took the idea and made it bigger. About seventy feet bigger.”

“This is a wonder!” Norris exclaimed. “Surely this is not a cargo vessel! The hulls are too narrow to hold much of anything. What is its purpose?”

“She never said what purpose she had for it, other than to see how it sailed. It’d probably haul more’n you think, though. Her profile’s low, and you could stuff a good bit of cargo on the main deck, dependin’ on how she was rigged. The booms’ll be set high, or it’d sweep the deck clear of crew when she jibes, but—”

“Booms? One mast on each hull, then.” The count squinted up at the planked hulls and the massive arches connecting them.

“Er... no, yer graceship. She’ll have two masts set fore an’ aft, schooner rigged, with gaff tops’ls.”

“Why not one mast on each hull?”

Dura just looked at him like he’d suggested pigs should take up knitting, and said, “I just build ‘em, yer graceship, I don’t design ‘em.”

“Well,” Norris said, stepping back as if trying to imagine the finished

vessel, “the emperor will be very interested to hear about this. I’ve neither seen nor heard of the like.”

“Why would Emperor Tynean have an interest in something like this, Count?” Camilla tried to keep her tone casually curious, but her mind was spinning ahead with concern.

“The emperor’s interest in your mistress’ new ship designs is one of the primary reasons for my visit, Lady Camilla. As I said, your schooners have created quite a stir in Tsing. He sees many potential applications for such craft.” His eyes shifted from the sleek hulls to her, as if gauging how both might be best applied to serve his emperor. “I’m sure we can reach some amicable agreement that allows the empire to utilize this astonishing breakthrough in naval architecture.”

“You *might* reach such an agreement,” Camilla began with a dissembling smile, “with Cynthia Flaxal. I cannot make any agreements regarding her ships’ designs, and she is not disposed to begin selling them, yet.”

“She has said as much?” The count seemed surprised, but Camilla could see that it was feigned. “Surely there is room for negotiation, on this design, for instance.”

“There is always room for negotiation, my dear Count,” she said, meaning it. “But of what value to the empire could an experimental craft be? It hasn’t even been tested at sea yet.”

“One never knows how something so radically different might impact the affairs of the empire, Lady Camilla,” he said, as if the line were rote. “The world, and I daresay the Shattered Isles, is a dangerous place. Anything new that might be applied to the imperial defense, commerce, or even faster communications could vastly change the way we live, or indeed whether we survive.”

“Oh, come now,” Camilla scoffed, patting his arm. “How could something as trivial as a new ship determine the survival of the empire?”

“My dear lady, one can never determine how something might impact one’s survival until all of its potential applications are thought through. Why, something as seemingly safe as a sea voyage can determine life or death, as it has in my very own family.”

“I’m sorry?” she asked, taken aback by his sudden admission. “One of your family was lost at sea?”

“My *entire* family, my dear. My wife, two children and their governess, along with the entire ship and all her crew, were lost in

these very waters not three years ago.” His tone was casual, but she could see that there was pain behind the admission. “No one ever found a trace of them.”

“Three years ago... Might you remember the name of the ship?” she asked. This might explain a lot about Count Norris.

“Of course I remember. She was the *Alabaster Rose* out of Tsing and bound for Fornice, where I was stationed. She was captained by a man named Derwall, and hauling a cargo of mixed trade goods. Why do you ask?”

“*Alabaster Rose*...” she muttered, trying to remember if she’d ever heard any of Bloodwind’s captains mention that name. She shook her head, unable to recall. “I’m sorry, Count. Three years ago I was in this very place, a prisoner of Captain Bloodwind. I heard the names of many of the ships that his captains took over the years, but I can’t recall if that was one of them.”

The count’s eyebrows rose, but he held his silence. It was the sort of restraint she expected from a diplomat, and she appreciated it. Camilla cleared her throat. “If you wish, I could try to find out if the *Alabaster Rose* was one of the ships he took.”

“What does it matter, really?” he asked, his voice sharp. “The ship was lost with all hands. Whether it was pirates, cannibals, the mer or a sea drake, no one will ever know, and regardless, my family is gone.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Count Norris.” She smiled sympathetically and gave his arm a squeeze that she honestly hoped was supportive. “I know what it’s like to lose someone close to you.”

“It was long ago, my dear. Shall we continue the tour? I daresay there is yet much more to see.”

“Of course.” She guided him to the door, leaving the lofting shed and the uncharacteristically silent Dura behind.



“There she is, just as sure as seagulls squawk!” Sam edged to the foredeck of the little catboat and gripped the mast, squinting to the south as they rounded the point of Plume Isle. “A two-master, just like Seoril said. Bring her upwind, Taylan. I want a closer look.”

“She wants a closer look,” Taylan said, just loud enough for Dorain, his mate, to hear. He hauled on the sheets and turned the catboat southeast.

“Aye,” Dorain said. “I feel like a bloody babysitter.”

“Oh, she ain’t no baby, mate.” His friend nodded forward. The wind pressed Sam’s tattered linen shirt against her torso as she stood, shading her eyes for a better view. “There’s woman under them knickers, sure as fish swim.”

“Oh, aye, but word is Captain Parek’s plowin’ that ground, and he don’t take kind to poachers.”

“Still...” Taylan scratched his scraggly beard, clearly wondering if the prize was worth the risk. “She should be careful standin’ up there like that. She could fall over and never be seen nor heard from again.”

“Aye, on a little boat like this, fallin’ overboard could be a fatal thing.” The two men exchanged a meaningful look, then looked forward to where young Sam waved to the sailors aboard the man-o-war as they cruised past.



The school was assembled, a mass of mer floating and swimming in all orientations. All eyes were directed toward the center of the writhing mass where the Trident Holder signed for all to see.

It is true that there is a warship anchored in our waters. It is also true that it is anchored near the home of Seamage Flaxal’s Heir. She has gone to the place of her birth, and will be gone for many more tides, so we cannot ask her about this warship. He swam a tight circle, a sign of open irritation. *We know nothing about the landwalkers’ reason for sending a warship into our home.*

A mer swam forward, arms splayed wide in supplication, a sign that he wanted to address the school.

I see you, Eelback, Broadtail signed, making the gesture of formal recognition and swimming to the side so the other mer could take the center position.

The reason that the warship is here is as plain as the scent of blood in the water, he signed, also swimming in tight circles. *The seamage has summoned her powerful landwalker friends. The reason for her trip to the place of her birth is known to us: she goes to speak to a powerful mage, a wielder of fire! She marshals her forces!*

Tails thrashed around the school, orientations unifying and then breaking up into chaos again. Several mer swam forward, arms spread, wishing to be recognized. Broadtail took center position, signifying that Eelback’s time was finished.

I see you, Quickfin, Broadtail signed.

Eelback started to withdraw, then signed, *Yes, let the friend of your eldest son, betrothed of the seamage, come forward.*

The school shuddered in response to the implication that Broadtail was playing favorites, but he stilled their discordance with a wave of his trident. *Enough of your insults, Eelback! Disparage me again and I will challenge you!*

No insult was meant, Trident Holder! Eelback signed, spreading his arms wide as Quickfin swam past, ignoring him utterly. *I merely relate facts. I, too, wish to learn what the friend of your son knows of this matter, and why he did not bring it to your attention sooner.*

Enough! Quickfin has our attention!

Quickfin nodded to the Trident Holder and turned a lazy pirouette, a motion of calm and ease. *As to the motives of Seamage Flaxal's Heir, Tailwalker, Chaser and I learned that she was travelling to the place of her birth only six tides ago. The Trident Holder was still weaning his recent brood of finlings and, since none could stop Seamage Flaxal's Heir from going, we felt the news could wait.*

The school eased their chaotic motion a trifle.

It is true she goes to speak with a firemage, but her reasoning was thus: it is better to befriend such a mage and know his mind, than to alienate him and make an enemy. Several heads among the school bobbed in agreement. *Neither I nor Tailwalker knew anything of this warship, and neither, I believe, does Seamage Flaxal's Heir. We cannot consult with her on the matter until she returns. The ship, on the very word of Eelback's friend, Redtail, anchored safely outside the reef, damaging no coral.* He swirled his arms in tight circles in a mer shrug. *They have not harmed us and have not hurt our home. Should we attack them in response to their *good* behavior?*

The school thrashed in unison, orienting immediately, though there were some dissenters still.

As to what I know that Eelback does not, he continued, making a gesture of finality that said he was finishing his speech, *it would take many tides to tell this, and we don't have the time.*

Gills fluttered around the school in united mirth. Eelback flared his fins in irritation, but did not sign a word.

A female mer came forward next, and Broadtail nodded to her. *I see you Kelpie, Priestess of Odea. Tell us what you know of this.*

Thank you, Trident Holder. She turned to the crowd, her large yellow eyes looking among the hundreds of mer. As a preiess, she knew most of them and was respected by all for her service to the community. *I know, perhaps better than any here, the motives of Seamage Flaxal's Heir. I watched her being born into our world, tended her wounds and returned her to the land as a seamage. Many of you were there, the night of the Scimitar Moon, when Odea spoke through the sky and made Seamage Flaxal's Heir one with the sea.*

The school stirred, rapt with her telling of the now-legendary tale.

I know she loves the mer, and would never intentionally harm our world.

There was some agitation at this, and still some questions about her associations with a firemage, and the presence of the warship.

Seamage Flaxal's Heir is in a delicate position, my friends. She has great power, great influence and great responsibility. Her influence gains the attention of powerful forces, both above and below the surface of our world. If I asked any of you how you would proceed, with such a weight dragging at your tail, I think you would say 'cautiously'.

Many heads bobbed in agreement.

With caution in mind, she is dealing with these powers, balancing them like the lancer balances his weapon. She seeks alliances with all the forces that influence our home and hers. She seeks a concordance, as do we in her union with Tailwalker. Her gaze lingered upon the Trident Holder's son for a long moment before she spread her arms wide and yielded the center position, swimming smoothly back to her place.

Several more mer came forward to be recognized, Redtail and Tailwalker among them, each giving their own opinions of what had occurred, what was likely to occur if the school decided to attack the warship, and what would happen if they did nothing.

A full tide had passed, but finally no more came forward. Trident Holder Broadtail once again took the center position and signed for them all to take notice.

We have heard from all who have an opinion or knowledge on this matter. We all know the facts and feel the fears and worries that will shape our decision. It is time.

The school edged forward as their leader raised his trident, which glowed with a deep blue light.

I invoke The Voice! he signed, and his trident flared blue-white as

the school rushed in on him in an ever-tightening spiral.

A pulse of energy reverberated through the school as they reached the center. Within that energy was The Voice, the power of their union as one school, declaring their united decision. Although some might not have agreed with The Voice, they all were bound to abide by it.

But as the school dispersed, Eelback took careful note of who appeared happy with the decision and who did not. He also noted that Kelpie, Odea's priestess, swam very near the Trident Holder's son and his friend, Quickfin.