

Chapter Fifteen

“Courage is the recognition of fear and choosing to act despite it.”

“You’re sure they wore the grey?”

“Without a doubt, Arch-Commander.”

For one of Commander Caridore’s scouts, the young man standing in front of Sascha looked entirely too respectable. Hair neatly trimmed, uniform well maintained, and ramrod straight posture. New, then. Caridore would influence him soon enough. He always did.

“And you’re sure they saw nothing?” Sascha asked.

“Yes, Arch-Commander.”

Sascha eyed the scout for a moment, assessing his confidence, which stemmed from his commanding officer. Caridore would not have let his man speak anything but the truth.

“That’s all,” Sascha said. “Take any supplies you need.” The young man offered a crisp salute and hurried off into the foggy morning air. Sascha finished rolling down the sleeves of his white shirt and buttoned them at the cuff, then waved away the nearby attendant and his shallow bowl of water. Shrugging into his coat, Sascha turned from his tent—and nearly trod on the toes of the very person he was about to go in search of.

“You saw?” Sascha asked.

Commander-Superior Heliosa de Bellanteau gave a short nod. “But not heard. What news?”

“Unexpected,” Sascha said. “It seems Ramses Tukhamon is in the vicinity, or at least thirty of his Grey Eagles are.”

De Bellanteau frowned. “The report said Tukhamon would not be joining with Licenza until they reached Vienisi.”

Sascha nodded. “It seems our intelligence minister has made an error. What concerns me more is that they haven’t joined with anyone. Caridore’s scouts are still reporting no Licenzan troops. These Eagles appear to be roaming.”

“If we are scouting them, they could be scouting us.”

“Correct,” Sascha said. His gaze drifted past de Bellanteau, seeing, but not really observing, soldiers preparing for the day ahead. “I trust Caridore, though. If he says his men remained undetected, I believe that to be true.”

De Bellanteau raised an eyebrow. “You believe the presence of Grey Eagles here, far from where they are expected to be, to be a coincidence?”

Sascha smiled, appreciating the healthy skepticism the battalion commander did not bother to mask. “Certainly not.”

“What are your orders, then, Arch-Commander?”

The fog was breaking, pierced by rays of light, but for a moment the world clung to stillness. In front of Sascha, Heliosa de Bellanteau waited, the model of discipline, arms clasped behind her back, eyes on Sascha’s chin, enough distance between them to allow Sascha the illusion of private thought—but he had no need of that time or distance, had made his decision before dismissing the scout.

“We alter course, just enough to the east to prevent any chance encounters with these Grey Eagles,” Sascha said, turning back to his tent. De Bellanteau followed and they ducked through the open flap, an attendant hurrying after, ready to take instruction. “Our primary objective remains unchanged,” Sascha continued. He began to button his coat. “But it’s time to trim the fat. Time to move with more speed and less baggage. Essential supplies only, everything else goes back to the Watch. I will leave the details to you, Commander-Superior.”

De Bellanteau took this in with a nod. “And you, Arch-Commander?”

“I ride to join Caridore. If Ramses Tukhamon himself is with these Grey Eagles, perhaps we can cut the head off the snake. I don’t imagine his men will honor his promise to Licenza if he’s dead.” Sascha turned and directed his next words at the attendant. “Tell Captain Colombial I want him and his six best ready to ride immediately. Then see to my horse.” The attendant raced off, nearly slipping on the dewy grass as he exited the tent. A second attendant took his place, hovering, gaze following Sascha’s every move, ready to jump into action. Sascha looked at de Bellanteau once more. “Hector Mirelli. He is your best Carrier, is he not?”

De Bellanteau weighed this question for a moment. “More or less, Arch-Commander. He is the most consistent, yes, but he seems,” she hesitated, choosing her word with care, “unfocused.”

“Send for him,” Sascha said as he buckled his sword belt over his hips. “Make sure he is provisioned and supplied appropriately. He won’t know how to do that for himself.”

“Is this for the Archduke’s benefit, Arch-Commander? Put his pets to use? The boy will be a burden.”

“For his benefit? No.” Sascha did not like the implication that he might make a decision in the field to placate even the Archduke. “I have been given a new tool, Commander-Superior. I ought to learn how to wield it. And if he is a burden, he is my burden to bear.” Sascha caught the waiting attendant’s eye and gestured at his saddlebags, then looked back at de Bellanteau as the boy began to pack essentials for Sascha’s journey. “See that he is ready.”

De Bellanteau saluted and stepped out of the tent. Sascha tossed a pair of gloves at the attendant, gave a few further words of direction, and then—abruptly realizing he had not eaten yet that morning—followed the battalion commander out.

Brushing off salutes as he went, Sascha worked his way to the mess tent and snared himself a pair of sausages wrapped in bread, but he had achieved only a single, mouth-watering bite when, mid-chew, the men around him went quiet. Sascha glanced up from the grease on his fingers and saw their faces directed, in unison, behind him. Sascha turned—and had the uncommon experience of a sight that was both exceptionally welcome and charged with trouble.

Sascha had never before seen Cyrus de Marchessault look quite so imposing—which was saying something considering Cyrus’s stature and strong features. He was, simply, the word personified, that is, when he wasn’t smiling. When Cyrus de Marchessault smiled, he was everyone’s friend, drinking companion, and confidant.

Cyrus was not smiling.

Neither was Sascha.

The former battalion commander rode a white horse and wore a black coat, its stiff collar rising as high as his jaw, the white braided trim stark and simple. Silver buttons flashed in the sunlight. A sword rested in a scabbard on his hip, a scarlet tassel on the scabbard the only splash of color on Cyrus's person. The horse snorted into the silence, the heavy burst of breath chasing away the final remnants of fog.

Sascha could not remember the last time he had heard a camp of soldiers so silent.

"Arch-Commander de Minos." The formality was expected, but there was something in Cyrus's voice that set Sascha on edge.

"Lord de Marchessault," Sascha replied.

The camp cook then proceeded to rattle his iron pots far louder than he needed to, which had the intended effect of sending all the eyes watching Sascha and Cyrus elsewhere. Conversation resumed and mouths that had gone slack chewed their food once more. The cook winked at Sascha, who thanked him with the smallest of smiles, and then Sascha was moving through the crowd back toward his tent, Cyrus behind him. They passed the watching eyes of Captain Colombial and his six men, ready for departure, past Hector Mirelli, who was standing as far from the seven soldiers as Heliosa de Bellanteau's frown would allow, past Commander-Superior Pisani and his unconvincing attempt to appear uninterested in Cyrus's presence—past everything, even Sascha's tent, until the sounds of the camp were merely faint murmurs that, if one tried very hard, could nearly be mistaken for a pleasantly burbling brook.

And even then, Sascha stayed silent.

Cyrus dismounted, patted his horse's neck, looked at Sascha and then looked away, his expression nonchalant. But Cyrus was unaccustomed to withstanding the weight of Sascha's patience, and it was a matter of moments before he dropped his reins with no small amount of frustration and began to speak.

"I couldn't stay in the city," Cyrus said. "Couldn't breathe there." He shook his head. Sascha waited some more, his heart demanding to be a friend, his head filled with colder thoughts, thoughts that belonged to the Arch-Commander of Arconia.

“Couldn’t take the comments,” Cyrus went on, “the whispers.” He looked at Sascha. “The pity.” The look lingered, the hard lines melting away. “Say something, Sascha. Please.” There was desperation in his eyes now.

There were a great many things Sascha could have said. There was only one thing Arch-Commander de Minos could say.

“Why are you here?” Sascha heard the edge in his voice, had put it there intentionally. It was not a voice he had used on his greatest friend before.

A frown, but one of confusion, not anger. “To join you, of course,” Cyrus said. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly, as though he began to believe Sascha was joking. The hope brightening his eyes nearly made Sascha turn away.

“To do what?”

Cyrus spread his hands. “To fight. To watch your back. To preserve the Seven Cities, even if Arcturos thinks he doesn’t need me.” The last was spat out by a bitter tongue.

Sascha wanted to take a deep breath, wanted to take his friend by the shoulder and say the words that would bring Cyrus’s hope to life. Instead he remained still and crushed that hope.

“You are no longer an officer in this army. No longer a soldier in Arconia’s service.”

Cyrus was quiet, a silence born of disbelief, his lips slightly parted, his gaze unmoving—and then at last Sascha heard the sharp exhale, as though Cyrus had taken a blow to the chest. He blinked, took a step back.

“I can help, Sascha. You know my skills. I’ll do anything, anything you need.”

“I can’t have a civilian in the field, Cyrus, you know that,” Sascha said.

“Civilian.” There was anger now. “Civilian,” Cyrus repeated. “Is that all I am? The same as any soft-handed banker or scribe who doesn’t know a dull blade from a sharp one?” Cyrus stepped close to Sascha, his teeth bared. “I am still a Celestial Knight of Bellara, just as you are!”

“Are you?” Sascha held his ground, kept his voice calm. “Arcturos means to let the ministers debate that. Even so,” Sascha pushed on, trying not to think of the

darkness he knew was raging within his friend, “a Celestial Knight holds no official position on campaign. It is a courtesy, you know that.”

Cyrus turned away, paced right and then left. “Is that it, then?” He rounded on Sascha, seizing the lapel of his coat, pressing his forehead against Sascha’s. “Is that all that a lifetime of friendship has come to? Is that all you will say after fifteen years of fighting side by side? Am I not worthy of the great Silentspear?” His voice rose with every question until it rang out among the trees standing witness.

At last Sascha allowed himself to relent—though he knew it would not be enough.

“Cyrus,” he said, lifting his hand to rest it on the one gripping his coat, “you are my dearest friend. You know I feel the injustice of your dismissal. You know there is no one I would rather fight next to than you.” Sascha tightened his fingers and put his other hand on Cyrus’s shoulder. “And gladly would I give my life in battle if it saved yours. But you ask what I can not give.” Sascha let go and pried Cyrus de Marchessault’s hand from his lapel as he stepped back. “You know my duty, Cyrus. You know my responsibilities. To do what you ask would be to undermine my authority, the very root of the position I hold, and the fabric of this army.”

It was all true. It was all necessary. But the words tasted of dust.

Cyrus held Sascha’s gaze for a long moment, seething with anger and betrayal. And then he was gone, vaulting into the saddle, the horse leaping forward as Cyrus pressed his heels into its flanks, a storm of black and white surging through the trees.

Sascha closed his eyes as the sound of hooves faded away, wondering if he would ever share a laugh with his friend again, wondering if the hollow pit in his chest would ever diminish.

But he already knew the answer. It would. Of course it would. Because he had to make it so. Because he was the Arch-Commander of Arconia. Because he could take it—just as the Archduke knew he could.

“How are you finding life in the military, Master Mirelli?”

It was not a question Sascha particularly felt like asking, nor, he was quite sure, was the answer one he particularly wanted to receive. He would much rather have made the journey to meet up with Commander Caridore in absolute silence, which suited his dark mood. But silence, Sascha had discovered shortly after setting out, meant he heard nothing but the words he had spoken to Cyrus, echoing through his mind mercilessly and without end. And so he resorted to talking to the young Hector Mirelli.

“The food is better than I thought it would be,” Hector said.

Sascha laughed despite himself. “That’s because we were only a few days out from the Watch and with full baggage train. You’ll learn. Not that Marius doesn’t try his best. I’ve seen him work wonders with mushrooms.”

Hector’s face had grown more desolate with every word Sascha spoke. “I don’t like mushrooms.”

“Then best not to overindulge on that dried meat and cheese Commander-Superior de Bellanteau gave you.” The young man’s concern increased. Sascha took pity. “Fear not, Hector, I don’t think we’ll go hungry while within the lands of Bellara.”

They rode in silence for a moment. Sascha glanced ahead to where Captain Colombial ranged with one of his men. He had told the captain about the Grey Eagles, warned him to exercise all caution as they traveled to join the scouts. Colombial didn’t possess the wilderness skills of Caridore, nor the ability to disappear when he wished to, but that was not why Sascha had ordered him and his men forward from the rest of the column. The seven of them formed the core of the most elite fighting unit under Sascha’s command. Sascha wanted their blades, not their stealth.

“Arch-Commander,” Hector said, his voice quiet, his face pensive. There was little about him to remind Sascha of the young man who had withstood the stares of three Griffins and the Arch-Commander of Arconia without flinching. Sascha wondered if that young man would surface in the heat of battle. “How many men have you killed?”

Ah. That question.

It was a question often asked, either with words and without shame, or lurking behind the eyes of new recruits or curious civilians. Sascha had resented it at first, resented the implication—imagined or not—that he relished taking a life. He had despised the name Silentspear when it was bestowed upon him—first by his fellow officers, soon taken up by strangers, friends, and foes as word spread of his feats. More difficult had been wrestling with the natural instinct to differentiate between lives he had ended with his own hands and, once he earned his first command, lives he had ended from a distance, snuffed out by his choices and his decisions. Most troubling of all, however, the source of many sleepless nights and questions whispered to Eska de Caraval, was accepting that he was equally responsible for the dead who wore the Arconian uniform—just as if he himself had wielded the blades that pierced their bellies or loosed the arrows that caught them in the throats and drained their blood away.

All together, that was a great many lives, indeed. More than a single person ought to have in his ledger. But if Sascha's overflowing ledger meant someone, somewhere, had no ledger at all, that was a weight he was willing to carry.

But somehow Sascha didn't think Hector Mirelli was ready for that answer.

"Enough," Sascha said, by way of an answer. "Even one is enough."

"Do you remember them? All of them?"

The truth was Sascha did not. The faces of those who had fallen to his spear or sword were not ingrained upon his memory. He had heard of this, understood it to be common, especially for the first life taken. But Sascha's first was nothing more than a sword trying to kill him. Even in the moments after that skirmish, with sweat pouring down his neck and blood on his hands and the cries of the dying in his ears, Sascha could not have said if the man's eyes were green or brown or if he had been afraid at the end. Sascha had never admitted as much, not to any of his commanding officers. Not to Cyrus or Eska. He was certainly not about to admit it to Hector Mirelli.

And in a way, he did remember them. He remembered the way they fought, remembered what attacks had nearly succeeded in breaking Sascha's defenses,

remembered their mistakes that cost them their lives. Was this not a better memorial than a half-remembered face? Every death had made Sascha stronger, better. He was Protector of the Seven Cities because of them. He was a Celestial Knight because of them. He was feared and revered and called Silentspear because of them.

And so, when he said, "Yes, all of them," to Hector Mirelli, he was not exactly lying.

Sascha saw Hector accept this with a nod, his gaze fixed somewhere in the distance, his jaw set with the same uncertain determination Sascha had seen in so many young soldiers. No doubt he himself had once worn that look. Hector's glance slid sideways, but he quickly looked away as he saw Sascha watching him.

"Ask, Hector," Sascha said, fairly sure he knew the next question. In his experience, it, or some variation, nearly always followed close on the heels of the other.

"Are you afraid to die?"

Sascha waited until Hector could hold his gaze before speaking. "I am afraid only of what I might leave behind. Whether that be a thing undone or a thing unsaid." The list of things that might fall into that category had grown by one that day, Sascha realized.

"I do not think I have the courage to be a soldier," Hector said.

"What is courage, Hector? Define it."

The young man frowned but was quick to answer. "Fearlessness."

Sascha smiled. "I once thought the same. Boldness and daring have their place, yes, even recklessness. But courage is something else. Courage is the recognition of fear and choosing to act despite it."

Sascha watched Hector absorb this for a moment, but restlessness ate away the edges of his mind, the temporary distraction of conversation losing its appeal. Besides, he meant to catch Caridore before dark. "Captain," he called ahead. Captain Colombial swung his horse around. "Time to stretch that very fine stallion's legs."

Their quickened pace carried them through land that was largely empty. Here and there a cluster of buildings appeared from behind a copse of trees or over a

crest in the gentle landscape—remote farms accustomed to passing many days without sight of travelers. They maintained the course Sascha had given to Commander Caridore and crossed into Licenzan territory late in the day, an unmarked place, unless one counted the ancient oak split by lightning or the small white butterflies that danced above yellow flowers under the sunset sky.

They rode on as the stars winked into existence and the creatures of the day went silent, giving way to their nocturnal brethren. At last, just as Sascha had begun to debate whether they ought to halt for an hour, he heard the telltale whistle of the red-eyed kite, followed closely by an answering warble. They had found Caridore—or, really, Caridore had found them.

“Evening Arch-Commander.” Leondroval Caridore emerged from behind a gnarled beech just enough to lean against its trunk. “Beautiful night, isn’t it.” A few other figures stepped from hiding places and one uncovered a small lantern, casting a dim yellow glow on shadowed faces.

Sascha smiled. “Indeed, Commander.”

One of the scouts raced forward at Caridore’s signal and held Sascha’s bridle as he dismounted. Captain Colombial and his men did the same. Hector lingered a moment before slipping down from the back of his borrowed horse, his unease at being among such men clear. Caridore indicated their camp was just ahead through a thicket and waited for Sascha to walk with him as the others went ahead.

“Knew we’d see you tonight, Arch-Commander.” There was a certain sly smirk on Caridore’s face.

“Oh, is that so?”

“Indeed. Even stopped early tonight to make sure you wouldn’t get lost in the dark.”

Sascha laughed. “How considerate.” He slowed and put a hand on the commander’s arm. “Leon,” he said, nodding up toward where Captain Colombial laughed with his men, “this isn’t going to be a problem, is it?”

“Only if he tries to kill me, Arch-Commander.” The glint in Caridore’s eye made this a less than reassuring answer, even though Sascha happened to know Captain Jolie Colombial, if a bit arrogant in his beliefs about the superiority of his elite unit,

held Caridore in high regard. But Caridore had a knack for seeing threats that did not exist and Sascha very much wanted to avoid the prospect of finding two of his finest officers dead in pools of each other's blood.

"Just stay away from each other," Sascha said. "That's an order."

Caridore gave a small shrug. "As you say, Arch-Commander."

"What of the Grey Eagles?" Sascha asked. There was no point in dwelling on the eccentricities of his scout commander.

"Ahead of us still. Moving south just as we are. I suspect they came through the Aristeides from the east," Caridore said, naming a range of tall, forested hills. It was a solid theory. The Aristeides were wild and empty. "They don't seem to be in a hurry," the commander added.

"Your man said they were thirty in number. Any change to this count?"

Caridore shook his head. "No, but Tukhamon is with them."

"You're sure?"

"Does Commander Gaspar smell like potatoes?"

Sascha fixed Caridore with a severe stare—but he had a point.

They reached the small camp—nothing more than a cluster of bedrolls, a second lantern, and horses with half-closed eyes—but Sascha stopped outside the soft glow of light.

"What is Ramses Tukhamon doing here with less than a quarter of his men?" he mused. It was a question directed at the trees and the stars and the frog croaking somewhere in the night, but that didn't stop Caridore from offering an answer.

"Don't know, Arch-Commander, but you wouldn't be here if you didn't mean to find out."