

Chapter One

"I'll use the sharp end next time."

"If you're going to stab me with that, may I suggest you try the sharp end?"

Sascha gestured to the rusty arrowhead protruding out the back of the boy's fist—as non-threateningly as one can gesture when one is flanked by four immaculate, obsidian-clad elite Griffins and one is carrying the spear one made famous. The Arch-Commander of Arconia shifted his stance slightly, causing the sun to flash angrily off the blade of his spear and the boy to flinch. The dirty white fletching, such as it was, shivered in Sascha's direction.

"Your courage is commendable, my friend," Sascha went on, taking care to keep his voice light, as though he were speaking of seashells or an exquisite vintage of wine. "Do you have a bow with which to practice?"

Behind Sascha came a minute sound of impatience from one of the Griffins. It grated on him, but his smile for the boy never wavered. Next time he would bring only his own men, those he trusted, not these arrogant enforcers—no matter the Archduke's orders.

The question served its purpose, turning the boy's fear into confusion. He shook his head. "Rotted."

"That's a shame," Sascha said. "A good bow, if properly cared for, can outlive the hunter who draws it. Perhaps I can offer you one?" He looked over his shoulder and flicked his fingers at the closest Griffin. "I require your bow."

The man hesitated, his gaze narrowing at the prospect of handing over his sleek, perfectly tuned bow, an instrument of death worth more than this boy's family required to live for a year. Sascha held that gaze, waited for the man to break. They always did. Sascha noted the very moment the Griffin's eyes went distant and knew this was one who would complain to the Archduke. Let him. At last the Griffin stepped forward with a single smart stride and handed the bow to Alexandre de Minos, Arch-Commander of Arconia.

If Sascha's smile was that much sharper when he turned back to the boy, the sight of the bow in his hand surely outweighed it. The boy took half a step, his fist

relaxing around the arrow, then froze, his gaze darting between the bow and Sascha's face, astonishment threatening to disarm his wary features.

Sascha went down to one knee and set his spear in the dirt near his foot, then held the bow out. "Go on. You must learn the feel of her and she of you."

The arrow dropped from the boy's hand as he came forward, his fingers reaching out for the smooth, time-polished ash.

"Can you take care of her?"

The eyes that met Sascha's were wide. "I will. I promise."

"Good. What's your name, friend?"

"Kris." The boy held Sascha's gaze, despite the prize he held.

"Kris. Short for Kristobal?"

The boy shook his head and lifted his chin ever so slightly. "Kristovin"

Sascha nodded slowly. "An old name. It suits you. Now, Kris, do you think we could revisit my request to speak with your brother?"

The boy nodded. "He's fishing. Papa gives him one afternoon in four to fish."

Sascha got to his feet, keeping the spear blade pointed at the ground. "Silver trout? Burrons?"

Kris smiled. "Those, yes, but he has a secret spot for striped reds."

"My favorite," Sascha said, keeping his voice low and sharing in the boy's delight.

"I can bring you there."

Sascha felt more than heard the shift in the four Griffins at his back—a breath, a tightening of a hand on a sword hilt, a collective readying. "I've kept you from your chores long enough already. I'm sure we can find the place if you describe it to me."

Kris rattled off directions readily enough—south to the stream, a grove of birch trees just past the small stone bridge, a pool hidden behind boulders and beneath a beech perfect for climbing—and Sascha allowed himself one last smile. He leaned down and placed one hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You take good care of this now," he said, looking down at the bow, large in Kris's hands. "I don't want to learn you've let it rot away. Wax for the string, after

every use. A little grease, bear if you can get it, but anything will do, smoothed on the wood a few times a year. And never dry fire. Do you know what that means?"

Kris shook his head.

"Only pull and release if you have an arrow nocked. Can you remember that?"

The boy nodded, his face solemn.

"Until we meet again, Kristovin." Sascha winked at the boy, regretted it immediately, and then turned to face the Griffins. Unyielding faces stared back at him. "Let's go."

The way to the fishing pool was as the boy described and surely, due to its proximity to the village, not as secret as he thought. A carpenter and his apprentice stared as they skirted the edge of the village, the table taking shape beneath their hands forgotten at the sight of five armed men. A woman took hold of her child, eyes never straying from the strangers. They would not know his face, not here, five days ride from Arconia, but they would know the Griffins for what they were—members of the private guard of the Archduke, the premier fighting force in Arconia, matched only in all of Bellara by the Grimoros of Rhia. The story of the day the Griffins came to the village would be told around hearths for years to come. And Arch-Commander de Minos could only hope it would be a story told without hate and fear.

When they passed the narrow stone bridge, Sascha caught sight of the thick limbs of the beech tree, one arcing over the gently rippling pool, and dropped into a crouch. The Griffins mirrored his movement and together as five they crept through the chin-tickling grass to gain the vantage point offered by the tall bank. From there, situated between the beech's roots, Sascha saw his quarry.

The young man held his pole with the casual disregard of someone who does not much care whether or not a fish might deign to nibble on the hook. His free arm served as a pillow for his head and one foot dangled in the pool, the water embracing his toes. The sight struck Sascha with unexpected force—but then, he had seen Eska de Caraval occupy such a pose once, albeit without the fishing pole—and he forced himself to steady the sudden acceleration of his heart with several deep breaths. The Griffins, hunched around him like some flock of malignant crows,

seemed too intent on their prey to notice the change in the Arch-Commander, and it was gone nearly as quickly as it had come. When Sascha rose to his feet, he was every inch the Protector of the Seven Cities and Celestial Knight of Bellara, a commander of men, the spear at his side a reminder of the death he carried with him. A wave of his hand dispersed the Griffins to form a perimeter, filtering silently through the grass and wildflowers until they had contained the young man between the stream and their swords.

“Hector Mirelli,” Sascha called out. The young man started and fumbled for his fishing pole as he twisted in search of the voice naming him. “Stand in the name of Valexi Arcturos de Vauquelin-Preux, Archduke of Arconia.”

Unarmed. Slender. Not all together graceful, if his scramble to his feet was any indication. Unthreatening. The eyes that looked up at Sascha were, however, quick to ignite with mistrust. There was always danger in mistrust, or at least danger could be born of the impulses that so often followed. All of this channeled through the Arch-Commander’s mind with quick precision.

And then there was the matter of his talents.

“I am Alexandre de Minos, Arch-Commander of Arconia, and I stand before you on behalf of our Archduke.” Sascha kept his voice calm but commanding, the kind of voice that was effective on frightened soldiers and uncertain citizens alike.

Hector Mirelli’s gaze darted away from Sascha to take in the four figures surrounding him. The Griffins—no, malevolent crows really was a better term—loomed.

“I thought you might come for me,” Hector said.

Unexpected, but not impossible. Though discretion had been requested, word would have begun to spread of the recent activities carried out by the Griffins on behalf of the Archduke.

“Then you know why I am here,” Sascha said. “The Archduke’s offer is generous, Hector. A monthly stipend, training, compensation to your family for your lost labor.”

“And all I need to do is enslave myself to the Archduke’s will.” Hector’s voice did not waver. The young man seemed to have found his resolve. Under different

circumstances, Sascha might have found much to like about him, might have seen potential.

“That is hardly a fair assessment of the offer. You have valuable skills, Hector. Do you not wish to make use of them for your city?” Never taking his eyes from the young man’s face, Sascha descended the bank and came to stand on Hector’s level.

“Three hundred years ago I could have been hunted for those same skills,” Hector spat out. “Hunted like a common beast by men from the city you say is mine.”

“Three hundred years is a long time,” Sascha said. “Consider how your family will prosper.” He waited, letting the thought of enough coins to ensure security and comfort for years to come do the work for him.

Afterward, he would have said the wait was about to prove worthwhile. He would have sworn the young man’s jaw relaxed, the mistrust seeping from the brown eyes. He did swear, in fact, to no avail.

But the Griffin moved—and that was enough.

It was innocuous, one hand going to a sword hilt, but deliberate, of that Sascha had no doubt. Meant to provoke and instill fear. He knew the gesture well enough, had used it and its variations many times.

And Hector flinched—only his flinch manifested in the form of a rush of flame spewing from his hand. It arced out, streaking toward the Griffin, who leaped sideways, the heat from the fire distorting the air around Sascha.

But he saw clearly enough the arrow, loosed from the bow of a different Griffin, sprout from Hector’s shoulder in the same instant the flames ignited the grass where the first Griffin had been standing. The young man twisted as he fell, his eyes wide, one hand reaching uselessly for the arrow buried in his flesh. Before he hit the ground, the Arch-Commander was moving.

The spear in his hand came alive, every movement perfectly timed with his feet, three swift strides, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the Griffin’s arrogant expression shatter into sudden fear—the moment before the shaft of the spear made contact with his jaw.

The man flew backward and landed with a bone-jarring thud. Sascha turned back to Hector's fallen form as cries of protest rose from the Griffin's companions. One took a step toward the Arch-Commander, sword sliding from its scabbard.

"I'll use the sharp end next time," Sascha said, his voice laced with promise. For a moment, there was silence, no birdsong, no insects chirping in the grass. Even the stream seemed to hold its breath. And then the man drew back and Sascha lowered his spear. "I gave one order," he growled. He scanned the faces of the three standing Griffins. "Your captain may encourage the use of that paralyzing poison on your arrows, but you will never again use it in my presence." He waited until all three dropped their gazes, not in contrition, Sascha knew, but at least in understanding that further disobedience would result in bloodshed.

It would have been an interesting fight, Sascha mused as he went to kneel at Hector's side. He had never had occasion to test himself against a Griffin, much less three at once. They were notoriously quick, and prided themselves on being unpredictable, but, then, so did Sascha. But, no, they could not be punished for the actions of the fourth—no matter how certain Sascha was they had been determined to light a spark that would justify retaliation. Any further discipline against them must be done through the proper channels. Sascha put a hand on Hector's shoulder, noting the young man's body was a massive knot of frozen muscles. Only his eyes seemed free to act, and they rolled wildly across the blue expanse of the sky above.

"I apologize, Hector," Sascha said quietly, hoping the young man could hear. "You will recover from this." Most likely, at least. The poison was known to be deadly for some, but they usually perished within moments.

A shadow blocked out the sun from Hector's face. Sascha, intent on feeling the young man's heartbeat, did not look up.

"Arch-Commander. He attacked us. He would have turned on you next. Such actions are a crime punishable by death."

Sascha pushed down the rage that whispered at him to pick up his spear once more. At last he looked up, taking care to keep his features cold and even. No heat, no fury for them to act on.

“Who are you to pass sentence on him? I was not aware the Griffins of Arconia had become a law unto themselves.”

“We are permitted to act in the defense of our lives, Arch-Commander. And in the preservation of yours. We would die to defend Silentspear.”

Sascha wanted to laugh. He rose to his full height, pleased to see the Griffin stiffen to attention. “Do you think to flatter me?”

It was not a question the Griffin was meant to answer—a fact the man understood.

“What are you called?”

“Rospierre, Arch-Commander.”

“Tell me, Rospierre, do you truly believe your life was in danger?”

The question brought a crease to the Griffin’s forehead. “The Carrier released his flames, Arch-Commander.”

“Instinct, not malice.” Sascha took a step closer, eliminating the distance between them. “He was afraid. Of you. Of me. We who have the privilege of authority must use it wisely. We are armed. We come in numbers. We disrupt. We frighten. We hold lives within our hands. Do you really think our own people deserve to be afraid of us?” Sascha scanned the man’s face, searching for, well, if not enlightenment, at least something that suggested original thought. He found none. “If nothing else,” Sascha went on, letting the smallest of smiles tug at the corners of his mouth, “imagine the Archduke’s displeasure if you were to kill this young man.” There, a twitch in the cheek. “The Commendatore wants him brought to Arconia with all the rest. Do you wish to be the one to inform him that Hector Mirelli, a Carrier of reputedly tremendous ability, is dead? And by your hand, too.”

Sascha did not wait for an answer. He looked over Rospierre’s shoulder at the other two Griffins still on their feet. If resentment had an odor, Sascha was sure his nostrils would be full of it. “One of you will see to your companion. The other will help Rospierre here tend to our friend Hector and you will do so with the attention and care you would grant your mother—or your favorite sword, if you don’t remember what it feels like to hold compassion for another human in your heart.” Rospierre saluted and began to move away, but Sascha restrained him with a

strong hand on his shoulder. Their eyes met once more. Arch-Commander de Minos lowered his voice. "If he dies on the way to Arconia, there will be consequences. And you will not like them."