

Chapter Twenty

"Most blades are a mercy."

"You've put me in a difficult spot, Leon."

Sascha's words hardly needed to be spoken. Indeed, the truth of them was writ in every line of Leondroval Caridore's face, exacerbated by the pale morning light streaming through the trees in sharp rays. The commander looked old. Contrite. And yet more than both of those things. He looked like less of himself, as though some of his vitality had slipped away in the night. He met Sascha's gaze, barely, the words hanging heavy between them.

Then again, the words did need to be spoken. Sascha's position required it. And the situation certainly merited it. No soldier or officer in the Arconian ranks, no matter how low or how high, could escape the consequences of so grievous a failure of judgment. Lives had been risked, thanks to Caridore's drunkenness, secrecy compromised. And though Sascha would never do so, others would not hesitate to name the endangerment of the Arch-Commander as chief among the commander's offenses, worthy of even greater punishment, or some such nonsense.

"I am prepared, Arch-Commander." Caridore's voice was flat, dead. Sascha hated to hear it. The drunkenness was gone, but the shadow of it remained. Red, dry eyes. Disheveled—more than usual—hair.

"Prepared? What do you mean, Commander?"

By way of answer, Caridore merely pulled his sword partially from its scabbard. The steel caught a ray of sun, the sharp edge flashing.

"Leon." Sascha tried not to frown, did not want to diminish the man. "That is hardly necessary."

Caridore raised his chin slightly and made no move to sheathe the blade. "Rather this than let those ass-chins in Arconia pass judgment on me. Bernal doesn't know which way to point a sword. Ferruccio hasn't spent a day in a barracks. The rest are no better."

The concealed frown threatened to turn into a laugh. Sascha pushed it away, not without some difficulty. “To be fair to poor Ferruccia, Leon, you don’t spend much time in barracks, either.”

Cardiore grunted. The sword remained frozen in his hands.

Sascha sighed. “I am no fonder of our military court than you are, Leon. But I won’t watch you stab open your own belly and bleed out in some forsaken corner of Licenza. Or whatever exactly you had in mind. No artery cutting. No intestine spilling. Do you understand? You will not take your own life in some misguided attempt at self-inflicted justice.”

Caridore’s gaze shifted to somewhere behind Sascha’s left ear. “I won’t let you protect me, Arch-Commander.” There was some desperation in the voice now. Sascha curbed it.

“I don’t intend to.”

The eyes flickered back. No longer lifeless.

“Not in the way you think, at least. You are a decorated officer, Commander Caridore, with years of distinguished service, no matter the opinion others may have of you. Opinions cannot withstand facts. And the facts are that, yes, you made an error. And as such you will face consequences that I alone cannot determine.” Sascha stepped close and put his hands over Caridore’s. Slowly, deliberately, his eyes fixed on the other man’s face, Sascha slid the sword back into the scabbard. “But nor will I leave you to the scavengers. You have my word that the consequences will be fair and just. Is that understood?”

After a moment—a moment in which Sascha could see the conflict in the other man—Caridore gave a shaky nod.

“I want to hear you say it, Leon.”

A swallow, unsteadiness in the eyes. Whatever piece of Caridore that was lost would not be back in a hurry—if it returned at all. Sascha did not like to think on the consequences of that.

“I understand, Arch-Commander. Your word is my law.”

And then Leondroval Caridore, tears forming in his eyes, drew back from Sascha and snapped a salute. A proper one. As sharp and neat and precise as those of a cadet fresh out of training.

Perhaps it ought to have been inspiring. Reassuring. Something along those lines. And Sascha supposed it was, in part. After all, Caridore was a man loyal to his scouts and to Arconia, and very little else. If Sascha had managed to earn some of that loyalty, that was to be counted a success.

But if it was at the cost of everything that made Leondroval Caridore the man he was, the commander he was, Sascha did not want it.

Sascha returned the salute and made to turn back toward the small camp. The morning demanded more from him. Ramses Tukhamon had to declare his intentions.

Caridore's voice called him back.

"Arch-Commander, aren't you going to ask?" Caridore hesitated, something Sascha had never seen him do before. That did not bode well. "About the liquor?" He paused again, clearly hoping Sascha would finish the question for him. Sascha would not. "About whether it's gone?"

"Is that a question I need to ask, Commander?"

A quick shake of the head. He looked like a boy, caught causing mischief, eager to please. "No, Arch-Commander." And when he spoke again, Sascha was relieved to hear a shift in his voice, a certainty that had not been there before. "You need never ask that question again."

It was a start. Only time would tell if Leondroval Caridore would recover what he had lost that night—and in turn if Sascha would recover his commander of scouts.

Ramses Tukhamon was waiting at the other end of the gulley. He looked at ease, even had the gall to eye the sky—already bright—as Sascha approached through his men.

"Perhaps first light means something different in Arconia," the captain of the Grey Eagles said, smiling.

Sascha did not smile. If the man thought the sharing of stories under starlight and a night spent around the same campfire made them friendly, Sascha intended to disabuse him of that particular mistake.

“Your answer, Captain.”

“You look tired, Arch-Commander,” Tukhamon said, apparently in no great hurry.

“What I am is no concern of yours, Captain.”

In truth, Sascha was tired. He had not slept, fated to spend the dark hours after the fight on the ridge staring aimlessly, sometimes at the firelight, sometimes at the stars within the dark holes between the darker trees above. What Tukhamon hoped to gain by recognizing this and announcing that recognition, Sascha could not say.

The mercenary captain spread his hands in a gesture that managed to imply both polite placation and affronted superiority all at once.

“Then I shall be brief.” Tukhamon took a breath. “I do not accept your terms, Arch-Commander de Minos.” He may as well have been making an exceedingly bland comment on the weather or the state of his horse’s hooves, so unexceptional was his voice. There was a smugness in his eyes, to be sure, leaving Sascha no doubt that the man was enjoying himself. The obvious question was why.

Not only that, but Tukhamon desperately wanted Sascha to ask the obvious. Bright eyes watched Sascha. A curve at the corner of his mouth. The slightest lean in his stance, forward, signaling his desire to spring on Sascha’s question.

All the more reason not to ask it. There was nothing, Sascha had learned, quite like depriving an enemy of what he or she most desired. And they were, he and Ramses Tukhamon, enemies now. This much was decided. And Sascha knew the question would not garner any truth worth having.

“So be it,” Sascha said. The man’s mouth tightened and at last it was Sascha’s turn to hint at a smile. “The Grey Eagles are henceforth named enemy combatants, susceptible to all consequences therein associated.” Sascha let the words ring out down the length of the gully. “Captain, would you prefer to ride unfettered at my side? Or do you require bonds and a heavy guard?”

Tukhamon's left eye twitched as he fought off a frown, then he bought himself a moment by sweeping low in an elaborate bow. When he straightened, he had smoothed over his features and his voice was even when he spoke. "I would be honored to ride with you, Arch-Commander."

Only when the small camp was packed up, only when the Grey Eagles were mounted, only when Sascha had a moment alone with Captain Colombial—on the pretense of showing the other man a nonexistent blemish on his horse's left rear hoof—did Sascha let go of the tightness he had been holding in his chest since Ramses Tukhamon had declared his belligerence.

"He's waiting for something," Sascha breathed. "He doesn't mind riding with us as a prisoner. And he could have easily given this answer last night. Time." Sascha glanced up at Colombial, all the while continuing to gesture at the hoof resting between his knees. "He wanted time, and he got it." This truth seemed to burn at Sascha like a brand held in place far too long and made all the more painful by his inability to perceive Tukhamon's reasoning or intentions.

Colombial nodded his understanding. "Do you believe the rest of his company to be near? Perhaps he expects an attack? A rescue?"

"Possibly. But if that was all he wanted, he could have surrendered. Pretended to accept my terms. Doing so would have lightened our attention on him, made it easier to slip away during an ambush. Refusing endangers him."

"Then perhaps we should endanger him, Arch-Commander." There was practicality—nothing more—in Colombial's voice as he spoke those words.

"Not yet. I still want him alive," Sascha said. He lowered the hoof to the ground and patted his horse's flank, his gaze fixed on Colombial's fierce grey eyes. "But that may change. And I will need you to be ready with little warning."

"Always, Arch-Commander."

"One more thing, Captain," Sascha said. "You will ride near the rear. Once we are underway, fall back, subtly, and with four or five men, both yours and Caridore's. When you judge the time right, when there is some cover and when Tukhamon and his men are sufficiently distracted by the swaying steps of their horses and the warm sun, send one of Caridore's scouts back to the column to give a full report to

Commander-Superior Bellanteau. With a little luck, Tukhamon won't notice and he'll lead us directly to the rest of the Eagles."

Jolie Colombial frowned a little. "How do you mean to do that, Arch-Commander?"

Sascha gave the smallest of shrugs and grinned—not out of any great humor, but the sort of grin one grins when one is likely about to do something reckless without sufficient planning. Colombial knew enough to give a smart nod in response and nothing more.

Sascha turned to his horse, unable to keep himself from wishing it was Cyrus who stood before him. Colombial was capable. Colombial was discreet. Colombial was steadfast. But he was not Cyrus. He was not an extension of Sascha, both in mind and body. He trusted Colombial to do what needed to be done. But Cyrus he would trust as though he himself were doing it. And if reckless was the watchword for the day, there was no one Sascha would rather have at his side.

As Sascha pulled himself up into the saddle and gave the signal to depart, the pang of that loss settled into his chest, burrowing a deep hole. If Sascha were prone to dramatic metaphors, he might have imagined it constructing a fortress, excavating defensive works, staking out a claim with devastating swiftness. But Sascha was not prone to such things. He knew only that the pain in his heart was not likely to diminish any time soon, if ever.

After all, he still felt the loss of Eska. Two years later. Six campaigns. And uncounted opportunities to find distraction in work.

With a deliberate breath that he forced into his shoulders and down through his chest, Sascha sat up a little taller in his saddle as he maneuvered his horse to the front of their party, where Tukhamon waited.

"My men wished to see us duel, Captain," Sascha said by way of greeting.

They had wished no such thing.

The response was immediate and uncontrolled. A glance at Sascha, raised eyebrows, the swift sort of appraisal that can be undertaken in an instant by practiced eyes.

And the eagerness Sascha anticipated.

“We could yet, Arch-Commander,” Tukhamon said. The glance shifted to the spear fastened to Sascha’s saddle. “That is a fearsome weapon.” Said without fear. Admiration, perhaps even covetousness.

“I would hate to deprive you of your imminent retirement, Captain,” Sascha said, returning to the one thing that had earned him a glimpse, a hint, really, of a crack in the mercenary’s armor. Sascha saw no reason not to chip away at that crack. Either he did lasting damage, or the man would have to muster so much irritation to keep Sascha at bay that his other defenses might falter—allowing Sascha to pry at his true plans.

Tukhamon scoffed. “I am not so old as you seem to think, de Minos. Though I would not mind if you continue to underestimate me.”

Oh, but he did mind. And Sascha could see it. Had seen it before. Men who knew their reflexes were not what they once were. Who knew their lungs could not endure a lengthy brawl. Who knew their bodies were showing signs of wear and age—perhaps not to other eyes, but to their own harsh expectations. Ramses Tukhamon wanted Sascha to see them as equals.

“How many single combats have you fought in your career, Captain?”

“Four.”

Respectable. And more than Sascha, if one was counting. But while Ramses Tukhamon might utter that number with a fair amount of boastful pride in his voice, single combat was the preferred measure for greatness only for those who counted ale-soaked taverna brawls as the most important moments of their lives.

“And the results?”

Tukhamon’s nostrils flared slightly. “Am I not standing before you, flesh and bone?”

Sascha shrugged. “Draws can happen.” The flare returned. “But I misspoke, Captain. I should have asked whether any of your four opponents were awarded the right to yield and yet draw breath.”

He could see the lie forming. Whatever Ramses Tukhamon had managed to conceal in the darkness the night before, Sascha seemed to be developing a knack

for reading the other man. But then the mercenary's mouth twisted a little and he offered a begrudging, "One. Only because he had caught the eye of a princess."

"How fortunate for him," Sascha murmured.

"Thought the same," Tukhamon said, "but I heard she wasn't the sort of princess whose attention you wanted to catch."

"Then perhaps your blade would have been a mercy."

Tukhamon grunted. "Most blades are a mercy."

A curious statement. Another crack for Sascha to chip at.

"Would you like that mercy from me, Captain?"

The look flung at Sascha then was sharp. "Do I look in need of mercy, de Minos?"

"You are my prisoner," Sascha said, keeping his attention forward. "I made it clear that a refusal of my offer would result in the destruction of you and your Grey Eagles. So, yes, it would be possible to make that assessment." He paused, just long enough to cut Tukhamon off. "But you are unharmed. Your men likewise. All in all not a bad result of having to surrender your sword. I even allowed you free use of your limbs." Only then did Sascha glance at the captain. "You have some expectation of surviving this, I imagine."

There. Mingling with the sharpness. Sascha named it uncertainty. Not regarding the current predicament, no. Something beyond that. Something Sascha could not yet see.

"I have survived worse," Tukhamon said, all smoothness and smiles.

"No doubt," Sascha said softly. He kept his gaze fixed on the other man's face, on those dark eyes.

"You are full of questions, Arch-Commander. Might I respond with one of my own?"

Sascha gestured with an open palm, inviting the man to speak.

"Where are we going? We continue south, which means you do not intend to bring me back to Arconia just yet. You say you wish to destroy my men, and yet you do not know where to find my Eagles, unless you intend to wander here and there in hopes of some good fortune."

There were many reasons to head south, onward to Vienisi, most of which had to do with continuing the plan to defend that city and most of which Sascha had no intent of revealing to Ramses Tukhamon.

But there was one answer Sascha was perfectly happy to share, if only for the reaction he would get.

“It matters not if I can find your Eagles, Captain, because I expect them to find us.”

The dropping jaw, hastily but poorly recovered, was very good. The forehead wrinkle was certainly an excellent addition. But Sascha’s favorite part of Ramses Tukhamon’s expression was the way he very nearly appeared to swallow his tongue.

It could have been amusing, given different circumstances. But Sascha’s unblinking stare was in stark opposition to any amusement he might have felt.

“No doubt you have a predetermined time and place at which you were to reconvene with the rest of your company,” Sascha continued, graciously allowing Tukhamon a chance to repair his composure. “Allow me to surmise that this time is in the not too distant future. And I can imagine no small amount of consternation might overtake your lieutenants when that time passes by and your silhouette fails to darken the horizon.” He gave a casual wave of his hand at the horizon ahead of the party. “Barring any sudden inspiration seizing one of your men and convincing him that your absence is his moment to shine—and supplant you—they will aspire to discover your whereabouts. And being an experienced and unfoolish sort of captain, you will have told them the general vicinity in which you and your comrades could be found.” Sascha glanced at his guest. “Have I arrived at some appropriate conclusions? Or am I mistaken?”

His tongue having relocated itself, Tukhamon deigned to use it. “These are hardly outrageous conclusions, Arch-Commander. I imagine if the outcome of our skirmish on the ridge had been reversed, I could make the same about you. Are there not those, perhaps, one might suggest, a larger force of your soldiers, who would seek to determine your whereabouts should you fail to materialize at a

designated time and place? Or do you expect me to believe that you are wandering through the hinterlands with merely a party of scouts?”

He was exactly right of course, but the mercenary’s words were at odds with his surprise of the earlier moment—shock that suggested Sascha had touched on something unexpected—and at last Sascha began to feel the knot in his mind unravel. That Tukhamon’s Eagles might search for him was not unexpected. But Sascha had not used those particular words, not the first time. Find, he had said. And finding and searching were two different things.

Ramses Tukhamon expected to be found.

Which begged the conclusion that Ramses Tukhamon expected to be caught. Wanted to be caught.

The implications of that were rather enormous, of course, and most of them were assaulting Sascha at that very moment. He could only hope his face gave no indication of the rate at which his heart was racing or the nature of the maelstrom of thoughts besieging him.

To his relief, the captain seemed as intent on avoiding scrutiny at that moment as Sascha, which meant they were both staring rather determinedly at the space between their horses ears.

But silence was telling. And Sascha couldn’t afford to arouse Tukhamon’s suspicions.

“While I do enjoy a good hinterland wander, Captain, you are correct, of course,” Sascha said, taking care to offer a smile. He had been told that particular smile—a brief flash of teeth, but not too many, before finishing with an asymmetrical curve on his lips (a flaw Sascha had no control over, despite more than a few accusations to the contrary)—accompanied by a directness of gaze that could be, and had been, considered impolite, was intimidating. Whether it was successful on Tukhamon was up for debate, but Sascha supposed there was no harm in attempting to sustain an undercurrent of threat. Nor was it difficult to do so. “What do you say, Captain? A friendly wager?”

Tukhamon’s gaze narrowed as he looked at Sascha. “On what?”

“Why, on which of the two of us is more likely to get what he wants, of course.”

“I am not a gambler, Arch-Commander. I must disappoint you, I’m afraid.” An acceptable response. But, if Sascha was not mistaken, a lie. The pulse beating in his temple suggested it, as did the nearly imperceptible hitch in Tukhamon’s breath as he inhaled before speaking.

In truth, Sascha was not much taken with wagers and games of chance himself. But he had found in his experience that many men of a military nature indulged, if not voraciously, then at least casually—and that a refusal to do so, before even enquiring as to specifics, offered insight into a man’s conviction.

To summarize, Ramses Tukhamon wanted to be caught. But Ramses Tukhamon had his doubts. How fascinating.

Later, Sascha would have been reluctant to admit that this intriguing, but ultimately nebulous, portrait of the man was the catalyst for what followed. After all, he was the Arch-Commander of Arconia and as such he was expected to formulate his plans around facts and certainty and a great deal of numbers. And he did. Mostly.

But facts and certainty and numbers had not ended the siege of Eduin. Or saved Verdienne.

There were those who would argue to the contrary until their final breath. Who would insist that order, not chaos, was responsible for every victory.

But Sascha knew better. Sascha knew that for every order given, for every command obeyed, and for every plan laid out to the finest detail, choices were made, choices that lay outside the scope of each of those things—and it was those choices that so often tipped the scales against defeat and death.

Which was why Sascha, despite knowing—or perhaps because he knew, what was the difference, really?—that he was only scraping the surface of the intentions of Ramses Tukhamon and the forces that had orchestrated their meeting on a starlit ridge in the wilds of Licenza, made a choice. Two, in fact. And neither was particularly defensible or orderly.

He would be the first to admit that choosing to allow the Grey Eagles—whenever they came for Tukhamon—to rescue their captain was a questionable strategy.

The second choice went well beyond that.

Because Sascha intended to exchange places with Tukhamon.

Indeed, if all went as he planned, Sascha calculated that he had two days, perhaps far less, before he was the one surrendering his weapon—not his spear, never the spear—and submitting to the ignominy of defeat.

He was already dreading the paperwork.