

Chapter Eighteen

“And they will answer my song.”

“I like the look of him. Strong. But not one of those overconfident buffoons.”

Sascha shifted his head just enough to catch Leondroval Caridore’s eye. Grass tickled his nose. “You get all of that from Ramses Tukhamon’s backside?”

Caridore’s shrug was as expansive as if he were leaning casually against a tree with a flask in hand, which was quite remarkable considering he was flat on the ground, face pressed to the earth, after crawling across a small ridge to get within sight of the Grey Eagles camp.

“Sometimes an ass says a great deal, Arch-Commander.”

If stealth weren’t paramount, Sascha would have burst out laughing. As it was, he had to snort into the grass, which only resulted in further tickling.

They had tracked the Grey Eagles all day—or, in truth, Sascha and his men had followed at a respectful distance while Caridore’s scouts did their work, keeping the Eagles close without risking their own position. Four scouts protected their own flanks, riding at precisely aligned distances so as to detect any counter-scouting ordered by Tukhamon. But the Grey Eagles had moved with the casual ease of those who suspected nothing, indeed, they might as well have been out for a country stroll. The plethora of weapons bristling about their persons belied this, of course, as did, apparently, Ramses Tukhamon’s ass.

Now, with the sun moments away from sinking below the horizon, the captain of the Grey Eagles was laughing—he did have a good laugh, Sascha had to admit—with a pair of his men as they lit a long pipe and passed it amongst themselves. Tukhamon wore a pair of swords, one strapped to his back and the other, shorter and slightly curved, around his waist. His dark hair was pulled up and off his neck and fastened into a thick knot with a wide band of blue cloth. Around him, his mercenaries settled in for an evening next to a rippling stream, staking out particular trees to sleep under or the preferred patches of ground—no doubt with the smoothest pine needles—with the unspoken familiarity of men who knew their place in the hierarchy. Sascha could see it unfolding. Seasoned men clustered

closest to the running water, where the ground was flat and pleasant. Younger members of the troop left to find a suitable rock on which to rest their heads out on the fringe of the camp. Sascha counted four who had chosen poorly—too far from the rest, one even out of sight behind a pair of bushes, vulnerable in the coming darkness. He waited for Tukhamon to correct them, to position them in a manner that was more prudent, but the captain did no such thing.

Sascha frowned and jerked his head at Caridore to signal his intent to retreat. Together they crawled away until it was safe to stand, then returned to the rest of their party.

Captain Colombial waited with eager eyes, following every step Sascha took as he and Caridore descended into the small gully they had claimed for themselves. He waited until Sascha and Caridore had arranged for four scouts to take turns watching the Eagles from the ridge that night, but there was no doubt what sort of words would spill from his mouth the moment he had Sascha's attention.

"Can we take them, Arch-Commander?"

It was not a question of ability, nor even of numbers, though the Grey Eagles had the slight advantage. No, Captain Jolie Colombial was asking for permission.

And that was the problem. They could. A night ambush could be undertaken. Tukhamon seemed entirely at ease, unsuspecting. Four of his men would die in silence, maybe more, before an alarm was sounded. Sascha was more than aware that Colombial and his six men could handle twice their number. That left roughly ten of the Eagles for Caridore and his scouts to kill or subdue. And Sascha himself would take Tukhamon if the man did not surrender.

It was, if not easy, too uncomplicated.

Though he would rather keep the two men separated as much as possible, Sascha drew Caridore and Colombial aside, stepping between the two halves of a massive boulder that had split open long ago.

"Let me see the camp, Arch-Commander," Colombial urged. "Find the best points of attack. We can take them in their sleep."

"Better let one of my boys show him the way, Arch-Commander," Caridore butted in. "He'll get lost in the dark."

Colombial shot Caridore a withering glance and opened his mouth to retaliate, but Sascha cut in.

“Enough,” he said, his voice sharp. “Both of you.” Sascha looked from one to the other. “When was the last time you saw a mercenary captain conduct himself in such a way in enemy territory?”

Silence. Which was both satisfying and entirely unhelpful.

“Tukhamon might be under Licenzan pay,” Sascha went on, “but he will know as well as any mercenary that the cities of Bellara do not often make such contracts. Meaning he will be unwelcome and mistrusted everywhere he goes. What gives him the confidence to divide his troop? To travel and make camp with such a disregard for caution?”

“Arrogance, Arch-Commander,” Columbial said, with a certain ironic confidence.

“Stupidity,” Caridore said in the same moment.

Sascha shook his head. “I don’t believe it’s either of those things. We are missing something. And I will not,” Sascha directed his gaze at Colombial, “initiate conflict until we know what that something is. I will not kill the only people capable of telling us what we need to know. Is that understood, Captain?”

A stiff nod. “Yes, Arch-Commander.”

“We watch Tukhamon’s every move. We come to understand him well enough to know what he will do next before he does,” Sascha said.

“Does that include letting him reunite with the rest of his troop?”

It was Caridore who posed the question—the essential question, really. That was the danger in watching and waiting, in not severing the head from the snake. Sascha’s task was not to gather information, after all. He was to protect Vienisi from Ramses Tukhamon and the ambitions of the Principe of Licenza. Killing the mercenary captain before he ever set foot in Vienisi territory was certainly one way to achieve that.

“It does not, Commander Caridore.”

That ought to have been the end of it. The Arch-Commander had spoken, made his decision known.

Later, much later, if Sascha had been asked, he would have been adamant that there was no way of predicting what would follow. After all, Captain Colombial, if proud, was a career soldier, used to taking orders. And if Commander Caridore was unconventional, he was a man who made his living not killing, not seeking open conflict. Yes, Sascha had seen the man take a surreptitious sip from a flask that was most certainly not filled with water. But he had seen this before. The orders were accepted and Sascha had every reason to expect them to be followed.

The contents of Leondroval Caridore's flask had something else in mind.

It was the singing that woke Sascha.

Atrocious singing. But that was hardly the point. It could have been a divine voice sent by the stars and Sascha would have cursed it all the same. Because it was entirely too loud and it was coming from the ridge between the two camps.

And it belonged to Commander Caridore.

Sascha had always excelled at waking quickly. It was an innate skill honed by years of early mornings—and a single dawn attack during his first campaign. Sascha survived. Many did not.

This skill saw him reaching for his spear the moment he opened his eyes, saw him come to his feet before the sleeping forms around him stirred, saw him reach the edge of the gulley before the closest of the two scouts on watch raced into camp. Sascha let him wake the others. He needed to reach Caridore.

Bounding through the trees on long strides, Sascha wove his way through the white birches and slender pines and up the slope leading to the ridge, the drunken voice of Caridore a beacon in the night.

Sascha summited the ridge, paused, searching the cloud-crossed moonlight for Caridore. There. Arms wide, belting his song to the stars. Sascha ran, letting his spear fall from his hand, and slammed into Caridore, tackling him to the ground. The song died, cut off with a squawk. Silence, but for Sascha's steady breathing and Caridore's deep inhale as he fought to get air back into his lungs.

"Whadja doin," was Caridore's slurred response to ending up sprawled on his back, cushioned, it would seem, by the alcohol in his bloodstream. The commander

looked up at Sascha with eyes that did not focus, but Sascha's attention was elsewhere.

He kept Caridore pinned down—an easy task given the commander's apparent lack of concern with having Sascha's full weight on him—but his ears and eyes were straining for signs of life in the Grey Eagle camp below. For a moment, he dared to hope. The night went on as it ought. A breeze whispered through leaves. Insects buzzed. An owl offered an indignant hoot.

And then one by one the insects went quiet.

The Eagles were coming.

Sascha got to his feet, pivoting to face the slope. A rustling to his right, another straight ahead. Without taking his eyes from the darkness in front of him, Sascha backtracked and retrieved his spear from the grass. Caridore, still stretched out on his back as though admiring the stars, mumbled something and laughed, the sound ringing out—but Sascha no longer cared about silence. The stage had been set.

From behind Sascha came the sound of his men approaching. But there was no time to regroup. Doing so would leave Caridore vulnerable, which Sascha would not do, no matter how egregious the commander's offense. Captain Colombial was more than capable of organizing the scouts and his own men. Sascha would trust that—and stand his ground.

It was not ground of his choosing. The slope was gentle and the top of the ridge broad, exposing him on all sides if the Eagles moved quickly. If he was lucky, they might approach with excessive caution given that they did not know what, precisely awaited them at the top. And if some invisible deity was feeling very generous, Sascha supposed Tukhamon might only have sent two or three men to investigate the off-key disturbance. But the sounds rising up the slope were not the movement of just two or three men and Sascha did not care to rely on luck. He stepped forward, placing himself between Caridore's prone figure and whatever was coming up the hill, spear grasped lightly in his right hand, the sharp edges glinting with cold moonlight as the blade kissed the soft pink petals of a tall-stemmed flower poking its head above the grass.

Sascha took a deep breath, let it out slowly, felt the hairs on his arms lift from his skin, felt the steady beat of his heart in his chest—and then dark figures rose up before him, three spear lengths away, emerging like shadows spilling from the earth, first two, then a third, and the sound of footfalls on grass promised yet more.

A shout rang out as one of the three spotted him, followed by the slightest of hesitations, and then, no doubt perceiving both the steel he carried and that he was alone, they came for him.

But he wasn't alone.

An arrow whistled past Sascha's right ear and plunged into the throat of the nearest attacker. He dropped without a sound. The other two Eagles drew up short and if Sascha had bothered to look for it, he would have seen their eyes, gleaming in the moonlight, darting here and there in search of the archer. Sascha was not bothering to look, though, because he was lunging at them.

His spear sliced open the belly of the one on his right, the sharp steel hardly slowing as Sascha pivoted, his momentum driving the edge of the blade onward. The second Eagle leaned back, dodging the strike—or thought he did, but Sascha extended to his fullest reach and the spear carved into the man's ribs. Sascha did not wait to see him die. Wrenching the tip of the spear free, he surged ahead, to face the next pair of shadows.

Another arrow whispered through the night, burying itself in a torso. Sascha heard the clash of steel on steel, knew his men had engaged, saw shapes hurtling through the dark—and brought his spear down in an arc on an Eagle's shoulder, the blade cleaving through flesh and bone. Sascha pulled the spear back, but the blade stuck. Releasing the shaft as the dying man dropped to his knees, Sascha danced away from a sword meant for his chest, spun, and grasped the spear with an underhand grip. Rushing forward, Sascha vaulted over the man, planting one foot on the man's chest as he leaped. The blade came free and Sascha thrust the spear forward, driving it home in a third mercenary's collarbone as he landed. He pushed the body from his spear tip.

And then the night around Sascha was empty.

To his left, the chaos of the initial encounter between the two forces had evolved into a stand off. Captain Colombial and his men held position, shields braced before them, spears at the ready. Immediately behind them, a line of scouts had blades drawn. And in the rear, six archers aimed arrows at the opposition, bow strings drawn taut, black fletching and black wood nearly invisible in the darkness.

Opposite this display, the Grey Eagles were similarly arrayed, though with the distinct absence of archers. They were vulnerable, and Ramses Tukhamon knew it.

He stood at the front, unmoving but for the rise and fall of his chest as he assessed his options. Sascha could imagine the course his mind was taking. Time to insert himself into that course.

“Ramses Tukhamon,” Sascha said. The captain of the Grey Eagles turned his head to face Sascha. Moonlight played across one cheek. “Give me a reason to tell them not to put an arrow in your heart.”

Tukhamon’s gaze dropped to the bodies around Sascha’s feet, though it did not linger long. The mercenary looked back at the Arconian soldiers. A cricket broke the silence—and Tukhamon dropped his sword, the longer of the two he had carried in daylight, to the ground. It landed upright, the tip sinking into the earth, and wavered for a moment, a plain sword, unembellished, a killer’s blade. Sascha wondered at the bloodshed it had witnessed.

With a quiet word, Ramses Tukhamon ordered his men to do the same. They complied, slowly, and not without a few shared glances, as though none wished to be the first or the last to lower his weapon.

Only when all visible weapons rested in the grass did Colombial move. The captain and his men stepped forward, the archers keeping vigilant watch, and herded the mercenaries away from their blades, which were collected and dropped at Sascha’s feet. Colombial did this slowly, being sure to let steel clatter against steel, a cacophony of noise that sang of the Grey Eagles’ defeat. Sascha saw more than one mercenary wince. Tukhamon kept his face still.

When this was done, Sascha signaled for Colombial to retrieve Commander Caridore from his pleasant repose under the stars—the man appeared to be asleep.

“Bring him back to camp,” Sascha said, his gaze resting on Leondroval Caridore’s weathered face as two of Colombial’s soldiers lifted him between them. “Let him sleep.” There would be more to say, a reprimand, a reckoning. But that was for another day. Sascha did not relish the thought.

Colombial nodded. “And the Eagles?”

Sascha glanced their way. They looked small in the darkness. And smaller without their weapons. Tired. Far from home. But still dangerous.

Sascha squared his shoulders and faced Tukhamon. “Captain. You understand me?”

A nod.

“May I suggest your men accompany mine while you and I talk? They will be well looked after.” Suggest. Accompany. Polite words. Tukhamon would know them for what they were. “Is this agreeable?”

“It is.”

“I will allow one to remain behind as witness,” Sascha said. “Choose.”

Tukhamon nodded again and looked at his mercenaries. “Akhenamo,” he said. A tall man stepped forward, barefoot and shirtless, his loose pants settled around his hips with a fringed and beaded belt.

Sascha looked to Captain Colombial once more. “You will remain, Captain.” Colombial saluted, then sent his men, the scouts, and the captive Grey Eagles down the hill. Sascha waited until their footsteps faded into the sounds of the night, then invited Ramses Tukhamon to join him farther down the ridge. The mercenary captain hesitated a moment, then closed the distance between them. He was a well-built man, of a height with Sascha. His trim beard showed grey on the chin, foreshadowing what was to come.

They walked shoulder to shoulder for a dozen strides, Colombial and the man called Akhenamo trailing like shadows cast by a low sun. Sascha slowed and came to a halt. He did not turn to face his adversary, instead looked up at the stars, saw the shape of the leaping wolf and the great spear of Menaxos. As expected, Tukhamon’s gaze drifted upward after a moment.

“We call that one the Sorrow Wolf,” Sascha said, tracing the constellation through the sky. “Do you have another name for it?”

Silence. Sascha waited.

“She is Mother Wolf,” Tukhamon said at last.

“I enjoy learning what the stars hold for those born half a world away. Do you?”

“Stars are stars. The names we give them matter little. They certainly do not care.”

Sascha could appreciate that answer. He felt more than saw Ramses Tukhamon shift his gaze from the night sky. Slowly, Sascha did the same, until the two men were face to face at last.

“Am I to know the name of the man who has stripped me of my sword?” Tukhamon asked. His Bellaran was fluid, his voice deep. “Or are you and I going to dance around and say very little of consequence? Such is the way of Bellarans, in my experience.”

Sascha had considered keeping his identity from Tukhamon. Leverage could be lost and gained on such decisions. If Tukhamon was inclined to respect his position, they might attain a measure of cordiality. But if the mercenary had ill will toward the Arch-Commander of Arconia due to past deeds—friends of friends of friends, and so on—revealing himself might earn nothing but hostility. In the end, Sascha was not one to hide. One didn’t earn a coterie of honors and names by hiding. And one certainly didn’t become Arch-Commander of Arconia by lurking in the shadows. Sascha intended to remain true to his title and reputation.

“Then I apologize for your experience, Captain. You will find, I think, that I am not one for games. My name is Alexandre de Minos,” Sascha said.

The name registered as a curl in the left corner of Tukhamon’s mouth. “Ah. I see.” And then the curl turned into a short laugh. Not bitter, not angry—genuine humor. “You’re probably wondering what I and my Grey Eagles are doing in Licenza. But I could ask the same of you, Arch-Commander de Minos.”

Sascha could refute that. But better yet to ignore it. “Your Bellaran is very good, Captain.”

Tukhamon's smile lingered. "I spent some of my childhood in Rhia. They were good years. The years a boy spends roaming the streets, finding mischief, making the first friends of his choosing."

That the captain of the Grey Eagles had once lived in one of the Seven Cities was new information to Sascha.

"Rhia is a long way from Irabor," Sascha said. He watched Tukhamon, trying to read the other man, but the mercenary merely smiled again. "But enough. We are not here to learn each other's life stories. I know why you're in Licenza, Captain. But I'd like to know why you've separated from the rest of your troop and what I am to do about it."

"You want my opinion on what you ought to do with me?" Tukhamon's smile twisted a little. "I knew the Arch-Commander of Arconia was young. Tell me, are you acting the pup? Or are you truly so innocent as to seek your enemy's counsel?"

"Are you my enemy, Captain?" Sascha waited for those words to bring their full weight to bear, holding Tukhamon's gaze for longer than was strictly comfortable. Then he looked to the stars once more. "Forgive this young pup, Captain, but if you will indulge me, may I ask if you know why we call this nebulous shape the Sorrow Wolf? Did you learn the story while roaming the streets of Rhia?"

"I did not." The deep voice betrayed the slightest hint of irritation.

"This wolf had a family, a pack. Together they roamed the wilds, taking prey when they hungered, singing to the moon when they were joyful. Fast and strong, they were, without equal. Each wolf had teeth with which to bite, each wolf had legs with which to run, each wolf had a warm coat with which to stay warm. And one day, the Sorrow Wolf tested his strong legs and snapped his sharp teeth and laughed at the cold and the snow and the wind from within the warmth of his fur. And he decided he did not need his pack. He left, trotting off into the moonlight, leaping streams and admiring his shadow."

Ramses Tukhamon shifted his weight from one leg to the other, his impatience rising. "Spare me your children's story, de Minos. I understand what follows. The wolf could not hunt on his own, could not sing on his own, could not stay warm on his own. And he grew sorrowful and shed tears that froze in the sky, to burn there

forever more as stars. Or something like this, yes? A tale of woe to frighten me when I am without the full force of my Eagles?”

Sascha raised an eyebrow and shrugged, as if this had not occurred to him. “Yes, if you like, you could interpret this story in this way.” He squared his shoulders, dropping the casual air, fixing Tukhamon with a steady gaze. “But I had a different interpretation in mind. The pack is Bellara, Captain, and the Principe of Licenza is the Sorrow Wolf. Arrogant. And alone. Is this the way you wish to die? In the service of a man who cannot win the battle he knows is coming sooner or later?”

“If he pays. That is the life and death of a mercenary, Arch-Commander.” The words were said easily, as though Tukhamon had rehearsed them so often that they had become truth. But Sascha saw his jaw harden, saw the flicker of disquietude in the man’s eyes.

“Tell me, Captain, is there a piece of land waiting for you in Irabor? Or perhaps in some peaceful valley in Parphea? A quiet place to lay down your weapons and live out the rest of your days? Or maybe you crave the splendor of a rich city, where people will see you and admire your scars. You’ve won your share of battles, earned your gold and silver. Surely you have the means to die an old man.” Sascha looked the mercenary up and down. “I might be a pup, but you are not. How much longer before one of your Eagles takes your place? Either by force or by consent, it will happen. This is also the way of the mercenary. Wouldn’t you like to live out what life remains to you without shedding blood? Without looking over your shoulder?” Sascha could see a crack in the man’s pride, as surely as he could see the way Tukhamon’s eyes slid away, as though there was some refuge to be found in the darkness. He pressed on, before stubbornness reared its head. “I don’t want you, Tukhamon. I want the Principe.” A breath. Tukhamon’s gaze returned. “Go home. Fight somewhere else another day, or not at all. It matters not to me. But don’t die for Corannos Arjaxios Ashvilli. Don’t let him and his treason kill your Eagles. Because I will kill them, Captain. Every last one. Because I am the pack. I am the Protector of the Seven Cities. And they will answer my song.”

Ramses Tukhamon waited a heartbeat after those words disappeared in the night and then turned his profile to Sascha. His shoulders rose and fell in a single

great breath. A breeze curled up the slope and stirred a lock of hair that had come loose from the cloth-bound knot. Somewhere, a small animal screamed, a faint, distant cry of distress.

“What is it, exactly, you are offering me, Arch-Commander?”

“Freedom,” Sascha said. “In return, you and your Grey Eagles will immediately vacate all Bellaran lands and make no attempt to return for the remainder of your tenure as captain.”

“You do not wish to turn me against the Principe? Hire me to supplement your own forces?”

“You’ve been paid. I have no wish to supplement your profit.”

Tukhamon spread his hands. “Paid, yes, but not in full.”

Sascha shook his head. “I admire your attempt at negotiation, Captain, but you will see no more Bellaran money.”

A small smile. “I had to try, did I not?”

“Certainly, Captain.”

Tukhamon grew quiet for a moment. “Will you grant me the luxury of time to decide?”

“You have what is left of the night. No more.”

Ramses Tukhamon answered this with a nod. He turned and caught the eye of the mercenary Akhenamo. Whatever passed between them was caught up by the darkness, deeper now as clouds swept across the night sky and flirted with the moon.

“Very well,” Tukhamon said as he faced Sascha once more. “You will have your answer at first light, Arch-Commander.”

Only later, after the two mercenaries had been escorted down the hill to join the rest, after Sascha watched Tukhamon confer with a few of his men and then stretch out on the ground, arms behind his head, eyes closed to the night—though Sascha did not think he slept—only when Sascha stood alone once more on the ridge, unable to sleep, his mind full of wolves and war, did Captain Colombial come to him, a question wrinkling his forehead.

“What is it, Captain?” Sascha said. “One of us ought to sleep tonight. And I don’t think it will be me.”

“Forgive me, Arch-Commander, it has been a long time since I heard the story. But wasn’t the Sorrow Wolf the companion of Icarion the hunter? And he sang such a mournful song when Icarion died that the moon took pity on him, placed him in the night sky, and promised to do the same with Icarion so they might hunt together forever. Only the moon forgot to keep her promise and so the Sorrow Wolf hunts alone and sings eternally. I could have sworn that was the way of it.”

“Hmm,” Sascha mused, “I do believe you’re correct, Captain.”