

## Chapter Five

*"Everyone knows they wanted to be immortal."*

"She will see this as a betrayal."

Sascha eyed the man standing before him in the grey dawn light. Behind the hunter from Licenza, a pair of grooms were hauling feed and water for the outpost's horses. In the distance, a dog cavorted among the chickens. The rest of the yard was quiet. Sascha had intended to make an early start, only to find Luca waiting for him in the common room of the officer's house. They had walked out to the yard in silence.

"She may," Luca said. "If she learns of it."

In Sascha's experience these things were generally learned of, eventually, one way or another. He decided not to disabuse the man of this notion.

"And she means to continue to follow him?"

"Wouldn't you, in her place?" Luca asked.

"Of course. I just wonder when she will remember that she has an agreement with the Archduke, and that he does not take such things lightly. I don't know the exact nature of what he has asked of her, but I do know he won't appreciate a delay."

"She has not forgotten," Luca said. He seemed to expect Sascha to press him to reveal more—despite the fact that Sascha had pointedly refrained from doing so at any number of opportunities. But Sascha had no intention of inserting himself in affairs the Archduke did not see fit to share with him.

"Why do you follow her?" That at least he would ask. As far as he was concerned, Manon Barca had not yet demonstrated a reason to merit respect and loyalty.

The hunter met Sascha's gaze with equal steadiness. The man had seemed unremarkable the night before, except perhaps for his willingness to speak when Manon could, or would, not. It had been done, Sascha had understood, out of a desire to spare her. He had not understood why. But here in first light of morning, Sascha saw strength he could appreciate.

“I did her wrong, upon our first meeting,” Luca said.

Sascha waited. There was always more, if one was willing to wait.

The hunter shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “And if she is not careful,” he paused, choosing his words carefully, “there are forces surrounding her that could destroy her.”

“If she does not destroy herself first,” Sascha said, looking for the man’s reaction. He was pleased with what he saw.

Luca did not argue, did not offer a blustering refutation of Sascha’s pronouncement. He merely nodded, his eyes solemn.

“Be careful,” Sascha said, turning to accept his horse as a third groom walked her out of the stable. “Chaos seems to follow Manon Barca around. Or she brings it with her. I’m not sure.”

Luca smiled. “I’ve noticed.”

Sascha pulled himself into the saddle. “I do not say that to be amusing.” He waited until the smile faded. “Manon Barca once used her Carrier powers to attempt to sink a ship—all for one person on board. Think about how many lives she was willing to sacrifice in exchange for a moment that might have passed for fleeting vengeance. And if that is what she did with all of Toridium harbor to witness, think, for a moment, whether it is possible she has done worse when no one was watching.”

He saw the weight of his words settle on Luca, saw, but did not linger for a response. The mare sprang forward at his touch and together they brushed past the hunter from Licenza while Manon Barca slept, unaware of the secret, her secret, which Sascha now carried with him.

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“You are the Arch-Commander of Arconia, a hero of the Seven Cities. I would hardly refuse you anything.”

Sascha was fairly sure he wasn’t imagining the edge of sarcasm in the old man’s voice. He wondered if this Master Librarian employed it with Eska, or just with

those he assumed—rightly, in this case—had not spent as much time lost in a book as they ought.

“Which I appreciate, Master Diomede,” Sascha said. “But I do not come to you because I outrank you and can ask what I wish. I come to you, indeed, I knock on your door at this obscenely early hour because you have the respect of the smartest person I know.”

The librarian snorted and passed a hand over his ample belly. “Then perhaps you should speak to this person instead of bothering me before my sausages.”

“I would, but I knocked on a different door even earlier than this one and I learned that Eska de Caraval is not in the city, not even on these shores.”

In fact, Sascha had arrived at the de Caraval home, straight from the road into Arconia, while darkness still caressed the rooftops of the city. He had waited—because one does not generally wish to bother the Vice-Chancellor of Arconia, who likely slept little enough without dawn disturbances—until the eastern horizon had shown the first hints of grey and pink. The maid who had peered through a crack in the door with suspicious—and sleepy—eyes, had started upon catching sight of the insignia on his coat. She knew the three stars over crossed spears, it seemed, and bolted, leaving the door ajar behind her, before Sascha had a chance to speak.

He had hovered on the threshold for a moment, then ventured into the marble hall, just as the Vice-Chancellor, the very same who Sascha had hoped might remain undisturbed, appeared at the top of the wide staircase to the second level.

Eska’s father appeared to be far more awake than the maid, however, and he had looked down at Sascha with a single raised eyebrow. Sascha had begged pardon and gotten to the point rather promptly. He had not seen Maximilian de Caraval outside of the Varadome in more than two years and was aware that this fact was likely not lost on the Vice-Chancellor.

Eska, he learned, was away. Across the sea, in fact, on a journey of unknown length. With the Company, of course. He had known this was possible. After all, he had last seen her while arresting Thibault de Venescu, the Iron Baron, and she had disappeared—with Sascha’s horse—in the direction of the harbor.

This information conveyed, Maximilian de Caraval had offered Sascha tea or coffee or whatever it was he might prefer, an offer Sascha was quite certain he was meant to refuse. And so he did.

There was only one other place to go. The place Eska trusted most. The Lordican would not be open, naturally, but Sascha happened to have attended a dinner some years before, with Eska, of course, at the house of Diomedé Tulienne, Master Librarian. And Sascha happened to have a very good memory for many things, not least of which were names and places and addresses.

Landing him firmly on the Master Librarian's doorstep without a clear notion of his next steps. He knew Eska would have been very amused. He liked to think she might also be a bit proud.

At the name of Eska de Caraval, Master Diomedé's good-natured grumpiness was replaced by a fond smile. "Even Eska never knocked on my door at this early an hour, but between you and me, it was probably only a matter of time." He stepped away from the door and gestured Sascha inside. "Please. We can talk in my study."

The study might have been, it turned out, more aptly considered a storage room for scrolls.

The walls, all four of them, were lined with small cubbies, each stuffed—no, no, such a word would not be justifiable—each containing anywhere from two to six scrolls, and each scroll lovingly rolled to perfection and placed with care. Above Sascha, who had to pause upon entry to take all this in, more parchment wavered in the draft of the door opening and closing, suspended with clothespins from twine that stretched from wall to wall. Furniture consisted of two chairs, a table holding several writing instruments, and a single tall cabinet in one corner. The lone window, tall and without adornment, cast a shaft of light across the floor while dust motes drifted here and there.

"My work," Master Diomedé said, as if this might not be obvious. The librarian settled into the chair closest to the window and indicated for Sascha to take the other. "Now, young man, what brings you to my door?"

This was not like giving a military report. Sascha had never had difficulty relaying a series of facts and events or offering an interpretation of them.

“I have just ridden in from the country east of Arconia, near the Livian outpost, if you know it,” he began. “While conducting work for the Archduke in the area, I was alerted to a strange incident in a nearby village. The river there had turned black and foul and not a single living fish was to be found. Additionally, a strange fire was seen the night before this—strange because it evidently had burned on bare rock, without kindling or fuel of other kind. I was curious, but I only determined to go see it for myself when the soldier reporting to me spoke of whispers of dark spirits. I grew concerned that fear might drive these villagers to harass or even harm an innocent person as they sought someone to blame.”

“A wise choice,” Diomede said. “Fear is a powerful thing.”

Sascha nodded. “I found that not only was the river tainted, a murder had been committed.” Sascha waited as a servant entered the study bearing a gently steaming pot of tea and a tray containing plates of bread and sausages and a liberal supply of butter. As the servant retreated, Master Diomede slathered butter on a slice of bread. He began to chew as Sascha continued his tale. “The body was marked, branded, and her throat was cut. Violently so. While I had originally assumed the change in the river was due to natural occurrences, I find it unlikely that these things are not connected. This is a village that sees few strangers. These are people for whom excitement comes in the form of arguing over whether the ale is as good as last year’s or whether the storm will bring enough rain. These are not people who cut throats.”

If the librarian disagreed or concurred with this assessment, he gave no sign. Sascha plowed onward.

“Leaving any further investigation in the hands of the outpost captain, I began the return journey to Arconia. I was attacked that very same evening, not far from the village.” Sascha glanced down at his hands, remembering the way the fog had crept into his mind. “I am no stranger to the ways of battle, ambush, the many ways of killing a man. This was unlike anything I have ever experienced, Master Diomede. My attacker used a fog of his creation. I was robbed of my senses. Of the ability to move with any speed in my defense. I would have died, if not for the

timely arrival of a Carrier. She penetrated the fog with fire and scared off my attacker.”

The librarian had ceased to eat. He sat back in his chair and studied Sascha. “You have my interest, Arch-Commander. Do know anything as to the identity of this stranger?”

“He wore a mask. A skull of gold. I learned from the woman who saved me that she had been tracking him for some days. She and her companion had witnessed a number of other things in that time, things far stranger than a tainted river. More importantly, she understood something of the brand on the dead woman, for she possesses a sibling to the thing that caused it.”

Diomede Tulienne remained quiet, his gaze resting somewhere over Sascha’s shoulder.

“There is something else.” Sascha hesitated, the secret Luca had shared with him a weight in his chest. There would be no undoing what he said next. It would change the shape of Manon Barca’s future forever. “The woman who saved me is called Manon Barca. You may know the family.”

“I do.”

“Whoever is behind that gold mask used to be her brother.”

The librarian frowned. “You mean to say your attacker was Perrin Barca, only surviving brother of Manon Barca.”

Sascha shook his head slowly. “No. I mean that he is no longer Perrin Barca. He is someone else. It remains to be seen if something of Perrin survives.”

The frown deepened. “I’m not sure I comprehend, Arch-Commander. You seem to be suggesting that an unknown person has assumed control of Perrin Barca’s body.”

“And mind.” Sascha held the librarian’s gaze. “Occupied both as I might occupy a city with my army.”

A long moment of silence.

“You have taken the sister’s word for this? You have no other proof?”

“I trust that a sister knows when her brother is not her brother any longer.”

Sascha could see the librarian's mind at work, could see the rebuttal forming—and could not let that happen.

“Sir, please,” Sascha said, getting to his feet. “I know the words I am saying seem to be impossible. I know you are a man of learning. I know your understanding of the world is built on fact and evidence and years of study—and the study of countless brilliant minds who came before you. But I also know that Eska de Caraval, who shares your love of logic, believes there are things in this world the minds of men and women cannot explain.”

Diomedé pushed himself up from his chair. He seemed unsteady, older, than he had been. With one hand on the back of the chair, he pivoted to face the window, then took three hesitant steps until he reached the panes of glass.

Sascha waited.

“Describe the brand.” The librarian's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

“Perfectly circular,” Sascha said. “The char even but for several small disruptions, markings. A pattern of lines and dots.” He watched Diomedé's head sink, saw how the old man sagged.

When Diomedé turned to face Sascha once more, his steps were sure once more, his posture straight. And yet Sascha could see the strain in his eyes, could see that pride alone bore him upright.

“You say I am a man of logic, Arch-Commander, of facts. You are correct. And the facts are these.” The librarian took a deep breath. “When the Alescuan kings and queens made their first incursions into territory they wished to conquer, they followed a certain pattern, nearly without fail. It was designed to strike fear into the hearts of the people they would soon slaughter, yes, but it was also a game. They were above everyone, you see, saw themselves as without equal. And they played with their victims, like a cat does a mouse. Because they could.”

“The pattern, sir.”

Diomedé's voice was very quiet. “Poison the water source. Set strange fires in the night.” A shaky breath. “And then murder. The manner of death varied. Always it was violent. And always the bodies were marked with brands. Perfectly circular brands.”

Sascha wet his lips, suddenly thirsty. “Everyone knows they wanted to be immortal.” The voice that said those words seemed not be his own.

“I won’t speculate, Arch-Commander.” Diomedes’s face grew harsh. “I don’t know what made the brands. I don’t know why they were made. The last Alescuan tyrant died three hundred years ago.”

Sascha knew better than to upset the man further. “As you say, sir.” And yet, when he stood outside the Master Librarian’s door once more, now in the full light of the morning sun, one thought reigned in Sascha’s mind: an Alescuan walked the world once more.

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By the time Sascha reached the Varadome, desperate for a meal and a bed, a second thought had worked its way into the maelstrom swirling in his mind.

It could be an imitator. This was, in fact, likely a more realistic scenario. An opportunist with talent and a penchant for chaos. A disturbing amount of talent, if Sascha was honest. In the centuries since the death of Varin II, the Alescus had inspired more than a few who were in awe of their power. It was certainly easier to consider that such was the case once again—easier than the notion that a dead man was on the verge of unleashing a reign of terror.

And yet....

There was the matter of Perrin Barca to consider. Fitting him into the equation was an exercise in futility.

In the end, Sascha was deprived of the time to consider Perrin Barca, food, or sleep any further.

He was steps from his bed—just one corner, one more hallway to traverse and then Sascha could sink into the quarters reserved for him at the Varadome—but the voice calling from behind him brought him up short.

“De Minos.”



Not a command. But not a voice he could ignore. Sascha cursed inwardly—though he was so exhausted his mind could not even string together appropriately foul words—and turned.

“Valinzuela.”

The man at the opposite end of the hall, a blue velvet runner stretching between them, stood with his arms behind his back, feet planted, an unpleasant smile bristling with contempt from behind his dark beard. A silver griffin—not the tri-horned sort of the Alescus—gleamed on his lapel.

Sascha tried—he really did try—to evade the coming confrontation. At least until he could face it without yawning. “I’ve just returned from two days of traveling a distance meant for four. You will excuse me—”

“I will not.

Sascha yawned—there it was—the extended sort of yawn that could be very poorly interpreted. It was.

“You will not insult me the way you have insulted my men.” The chin beneath the beard jutted out and Valinzuela took one step forward.

Sascha steeled his voice. “The matter does not need to be settled in this very moment, Valinzuela.”

“The matter will be settled when I have visited the same hurt to your jaw as you have done to Erequoix.” The commander of the Archduke’s Griffins started down the hall once more, his fists raised.

Sascha rolled his eyes. “Are you a child, Valinzuela?” He had a moment to process two things: first, that the shoulders of the commander’s uniform would not permit the range of motion that could make his fists deadly—helpful—and second, well, the second was that Sascha was too tired to think of an alternative to the brawl that seemed to be headed his way—less helpful.

“Gentlemen.”

Valinzuela pulled up short, his fierce gaze fixing somewhere behind Sascha.

“Ah, Alexandre. I had heard a rumored sighting of you somewhere within these walls.” Valexi Arcturos de Vaquelin-Preux, Archduke of Arconia stepped into Sascha’s peripheral vision. “I am delighted to learn it is true.”

Sascha turned to face the Archduke full on and inclined his head.

“Commendatore. I am just arrived.”

“And Hadrien, how kind of you to offer your welcome to our Arch-Commander.”

Hadrien Valinzuela scowled, his face darkening.

“You will both attend me. Now.” The voice remained light, the face creased in a gentle, pleasant smile. The change—the command—was in the Archduke’s eyes.

Sascha kept his sigh internal, but Valinzuela made no effort to smooth over his disgruntled features. Indeed, as they followed on the Archduke’s heels as he led them not back toward the wing where he conducted business, but deeper into the warren of offices and apartments, Valinzuela made a point of walking just a step ahead of Sascha, closer to the man they both served. Sascha, not one to indulge in petty games, made a point of not noticing.

The Archduke came to a halt at the entrance to a deserted game hall and indicated for Sascha and Valinzuela to precede him. A low net had been strung between the walls and chalk lines indicated the boundaries of play. A pair of racquets leaned against the far wall.

The Archduke was smiling.

“It seems the two of you are at odds again.” Arcturos gestured to the racquets. “Go on, let this decide the argument, since you insist on squabbling like children.” Valinzuela, to Sascha’s great amusement and equal consternation, was already moving toward the racquets, his shoulders hunched in anger. “After all, I can’t have two of the most senior men in my government prove to be unable to resolve their differences.”

Sascha glanced at his intended opponent. Valinzuela was examining the strings of the racquets—as though one might give an advantage over the other. Ridiculous.

“I forfeit,” he said. It was a risk, but one he was willing to bet the Archduke might appreciate. The expression that met his gaze, however, gave no indication this might be the case. He would make Sascha wait—after all, Sascha had learned that particular skill from the best.

Valinzuela threw the racquet to the ground. “Then you admit your conduct against Erequoix was egregious and beyond the scope of your command.”

He said egregious with two hard Gs. Sascha very dearly wanted to laugh.

“I do not.” Sascha returned his attention to the Archduke, ignoring Valinzuela’s suddenly bared teeth. “I merely choose not to play this particular game.”

The Archduke had never stopped smiling that pleasant smile, leaving little room for interpretation of his thoughts.

“I will accept the forfeiture,” Arcturos said. “Though it does come with a penalty, Alexandre,” he added, with a sympathetic shrug.

To be discovered later, of course. So be it.

The Archduke dropped his smile. “I will be expecting you both in the Hall of Mirrors this afternoon. You will be notified as to the exact time.” His gaze slid to Sascha. “You had better rest, Alexandre.”

Not a threat, but then, not exactly unthreatening. Sascha understood that he had to be at his best, that some sort of reckoning was coming that afternoon, that this was about more than a disagreement between the Arch-Commander of Arconia and the leader of the Griffins. What exactly it was about, Sascha could not have said—but at least Valinzuela’s face made it clear he was equally ignorant.

And then the Archduke was gone, leaving Sascha to wonder if the fists were about to reemerge. Valinzuela’s glowering face certainly suggested they might.

Perhaps it was the exhaustion speaking. Or perhaps not, Sascha really was too tired to decide. Regardless, he apparently decided it was a good idea to smile at the commander of the Griffins and pour every ounce of contempt he possessed into his voice.

“Tell your man Erequoix that I’d be happy to make his face more symmetrical, if he’d like.”

Sascha turned and strode away, though he fancied he could hear Valinzuela choking on his rage. Better not to look, though. That would ruin everything. Besides, Sascha was too busy yawning.