

## Chapter Two

*"Fear is stoked by those who know how to control it."*

"If I may, Arch-Commander, I heard whispers of dark spirits."

Sascha contemplated the soldier standing before him. She had regained her breath—having ridden with some haste into the outpost moments before—and stated her facts with precision and without adornment, a quality that always pleased Sascha immensely. But this statement, this quiet addition, tacked on at the end and spoken with trepidation and nervous energy, as though the soldier could not quite decide whether she ought to say it at all, was something else entirely.

They were standing outside the small barracks that housed the unit stationed at the convergence of the river and the main road between Arconia and Toridium. The sound of a farrier's hammer rang out in the evening air and light from the officers' house cast a warm glow on the soldier facing Sascha. He was suddenly very glad he had received her report outside, away from the ears of the officers and the four Griffins. He didn't know these soldiers, only that they led a quiet life, a peaceful presence in a land that had not known strife since the Great Rising and the downfall of the Alescuan dynasty. If they were as superstitious as the farmers they watched over, word of dark spirits befouling a river with rotten fish and blackened water would soon spread and send the region into a frenzy. In Sascha's experience, a frenzy had an unfortunate habit of giving rise to a mob—and mobs were not known for their conscientious behavior.

"Dark spirits? Fish die, soldier. The water will run clean again, soon enough. The captain of this outpost will see that the river is cleared. It is not always for us to understand the whims of nature," Sascha said.

"But, Arch-Commander, there was also a fire, the night the river turned black, a fire where no fire ought to have been."

"You said there was a storm that night. Surely lightning is the culprit." Sascha tried to keep his impatience from showing. The look on the soldier's face told him he was unsuccessful. She looked down, dropping her soldierly manners for the first time. "What is it?"

She hesitated, not quite meeting his gaze.

Sascha sighed. "Your name, soldier?"

"Sevilla Rouselle, Second Shield, Arch-Commander."

"Second Shield Rouselle, you cannot be faulted for not knowing me, but I assure you I do not censure my soldiers for speaking their minds. If you believe it important, tell me."

The woman straightened and tucked her arms behind her back. When she spoke, her voice had reclaimed the confident tone with which she had begun her report. "The fire burned on a rocky outcrop overlooking the river, Arch-Commander. It is known to be without vegetation or any other material that might succumb to a lightning strike. When I heard this, I went to see it for myself and can confirm. The rocks bore scorch marks, but there was no ash, no charred remains."

A bell rang to call the outpost to the evening meal. The farrier's hammer went silent. Faint laughter from the other end of the compound rippled through the gathering dark. A dog trotted by, no doubt in search of scraps. Sascha waited until all was quiet.

"Are there known Carriers in the vicinity of this village?" he asked. Darkness had made the soldier's face more difficult to read, but her black braids gleamed, catching and holding all the available light.

Rouselle shook her head. "No, Arch-Commander."

Sascha turned and paced away, then back again, coming to a halt less than an arm's length from the woman. "Do you know what happens when people get wind of some terror in the night?"

"What do you mean?"

"Innocent people die," Sascha said, hoping she understood the urgency in his voice even though she could likely see little of his face. "Fear is stoked by those who know how to control it. And that fear is used to punish."

"Punish who?"

Sascha was quiet for a moment. "When you were a child, who did the bullies torture ceaselessly?"

Rouselle's sudden understanding was audible as she drew in a sharp breath. "The weak."

"And those who are different from the rest. The child who cannot speak, for instance, or the old woman who keeps to herself. I have never been to this village, soldier, but I have been many places and everywhere I go, people are the same. If this fear spreads, someone who does not deserve it will be blamed. Say nothing further of dark spirits. Or Carriers," he added.

"Yes, Arch-Commander." The darkness between them grew heavy with silence. Then, "Is that it, then? The river gets cleared and we pretend nothing happened?"

"I never said that," Sascha said. He was already calculating the delay in his return to Arconia. And then there was Hector Mirelli and the Griffins to consider. They could be sent ahead. Of course, the Arch-Commander of Arconia would never make what was likely an inconsequential and meaningless detour into a remote valley simply to gain a few days of freedom from the dark presence of the Griffins. Never. "You and I will ride to this village in the morning. I will see it for myself."

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Inconsequential. Yes, that was a word the Archduke might use. Nothing harsher, of course, because he had a way of conveying that without words. Sascha had seen it deployed on others many times. The silence. One eyebrow raised ever so slightly. The lips set in a weary, long-suffering line.

Sascha, as he looked down at the tainted water, could feel that his own mouth was twisted into something he fancied resembled the faces of the dead fish that floated on the surface.

Not because of the stench, though it was atrocious. No, despite the scene in front of him, it was the steady flow of whispers emanating from behind him that had him grimacing.

"Is it really him? The Arch-Commander?"

"The Scourge of Eduin, they call him."

And so on.

He ought to have foreseen this. And ought to have stayed away for that reason. After all, the Arch-Commander of Arconia doesn't just turn up in a remote village without good cause. His presence would no doubt add fuel to the stories circulating about the river.

Sascha lifted his gaze, trying to block out the murmurs. "And the fire?" He nodded in the direction of a bald rise overlooking the village on the opposite bank. "Up there, I take it?" he asked, glancing at Second Shield Rouselle.

"Yes, Arch-Commander. Shall I show you?"

"No, thank you. I'll go myself." Sascha gestured toward the villagers. "Spread word that the outpost is sending a party to help clear the fish from the river. And ask them about their supplies of fresh water. Your captain will want to know if they will be in need of drinking water from another source."

"Yes, Arch-Commander." Rouselle turned and Sascha was glad to see her attention immediately drew the villagers to her. Perhaps he might have a few moments of quiet once he crossed the river.

That illusion was shattered as he remounted his horse and urged the mare into the shallow waters.

"Vice-Lord!"

Sascha, intent on encouraging his horse, who was snorting at the foul odors emanating from the black water now swirling around her legs, did not at first realize this shout was meant for him.

"Vice-Lord!"

Frowning, Sascha turned in his saddle to see a man splashing upstream near the bank, his arms waving about him like sapling trees in a storm, his robe dragging in the water.

"Are you addressing me?" Sascha nudged the mare to face the newcomer.

"Yes, my lord captain, pardon me, my lord captain!" The man splashed to a halt and bent over at the waist, his torso heaving as he wheezed for air.

"None," Sascha began, "none of those words belong..." he trailed off. "Oh, never mind. Is there something you would tell me?"

The man heaved himself into a standing position, one hand gripping his side as though he might squeeze the cramp in it out of existence. "Most gracious warrior lord," he managed at last, "a thing most wretched has happened. Surely we are cursed by an angry god and woe is upon me for I do not know which god." As he spoke, his arms rose until his hands stretched to the sky and his voice climbed an octave to match.

"Sir, please," Sascha said, his voice cutting through the hysteria. "What is it you would say?"

"A death, great Spear Lord. No, worse, a murder!" The last word came out as a shriek. Sascha was acutely aware of the ensuing silence. He did not need to look over his shoulder to know that every villager clustered on the riverbank had heard.

Inconsequential? Perhaps not. But absurd? Yes, that might be just the word for Sascha's little detour.

"Perhaps, my good sir, you had better show me," Sascha said.

The man shrank down into his robe, a curious thing patched together from different materials and altogether far too hot for the weather.

"You wish me to look upon such horror a second time? I fear I do not have the stomach, most illustrious Captain Commander. But more than that, I am but a simple Child of Neferi, Great Lord, and I must not stain myself with the violent ways of this world."

The title the man gave himself meant nothing to Sascha. He felt his patience break loose and drift away—and did not bother to summon it back.

"I am not accustomed to being refused, sir," he said, his voice low and cold. "You will show me, and then you may withdraw and contemplate the violent ways of this world from a distance you deem appropriate."

The man deflated even further into his odd garment, but he protested no more and turned to lead Sascha back the way he had come. That he was muttering under his breath as they went, Sascha was quite certain. Whether he was pleading with Neferi to cleanse him or praying for the violence he so abhorred to be visited upon Sascha, well, the Arch-Commander did not much care.

At length, after they had traversed the shallows downstream—still black and viscous and fouled—the man stopped and gestured out to where a constellation of boulders created a small series of rapids in the river.

“There, most exalted captain of men.” The theatrics had diminished from both voice and body. In their place was something that Sascha was nearly sure was genuine sorrow. Perhaps the Children of Neferi, whoever Neferi might be, made up for their lack of insight and common sense with good hearts.

The body was nearly submerged between the boulders. Indeed, all Sascha could distinguish, even from the horse’s back, was a tangle of wet hair strewn across the slick, flat surface of one of the rocks. And perhaps a hint of pale skin. The bubble-rich water obscured all else.

“How did you come across it?” Sascha asked of his peculiar guide, not taking his eyes from the body.

“I cross the river here each day, lord commander,” the man said, his voice still subdued. “I have set up my small shrine to Neferi in a grove of oaks on the other side. A humble shrine, but I hope one day to make it worthy of my divine protector.”

Sascha dismounted and handed his reins to the man, then waded out into the flowing water, the current testing the height of his boots.

There was no need to ask how the man knew it to be murder. Even submerged, the gash across the dead woman’s throat was clear—deep and wide, a wound inflicted with rage. Gently, Sascha placed one hand behind the woman’s head and lifted until her shoulders broke the surface of the river. Her face stared up at him, skin gone grey, lips tinged with blue, the gaping wound washed clean of blood. Her expression betrayed no sign that she was aware of the violence done to her—but Sascha had seen enough of death to know such things could be a lie.

Plunging his other arm into the river, Sascha reached under the dead woman’s legs and lifted her free from the watery cradle. As the water sluiced over her body, a rent in her tunic, just below her sternum, caught his eye. Beneath the waterlogged linen, something dark marred the skin. Frowning, Sascha waded back to the

riverbank and set her gently on the damp earth. Glancing up, he saw the man avert his eyes.

“You may go, sir. Send the soldier to me, if you please.”

The man dropped the mare’s reins and quite nearly fled, his soggy robe slapping about his legs as he went.

Sascha bent his head to the body once more and, removing one glove, used his fingers to push apart the slash in the woman’s clothing, revealing a burn—not just a burn, a brand.

Perfectly circular, the blackened and charred skin interrupted by a series of markings, narrow lines and small dots, where the flesh had not burned.

“Odd,” Sascha murmured. This was something of an understatement. He was no stranger to the effects of fire on flesh. The tyrant of Eduin had taken great pleasure in branding his subjects so those who fled from behind his walls could be hunted down, identified, and returned. But iron could not be both hot and cold, it could not mark skin and leave some of it undamaged.

“Lover’s quarrel?”

Sascha looked up and over his shoulder. Second Shield Rouselle was eyeing the body with the kind of pity that suggested she would certainly never be foolish enough to get her throat cut open.

“I think not.” Sascha beckoned her over and showed her the brand. “Does this mark mean anything to you?”

Rouselle peered at it, turning her head this way and that. “No, Arch-Commander,” she said at last, “nothing.”

“You arrived here yesterday, correct? To deliver messages funneled through the outpost?”

“Yes, Arch-Commander.”

“And there was no report of a body?”

“No, Arch-Commander.”

Sascha looked down at the brand once more, then at the dead woman’s face.

“Do you think she was killed after I left, Arch-Commander?”

Sascha was about to suggest that Second Shield Rouselle might be able to answer her own question—but of course she couldn't. This Second Shield had never seen a battle. Too young to have fought at Eduin or Verdienne. And her low rank meant she likely had no more than a single skirmish with bandits under her belt. He settled for a brief explanation that she would no doubt find far more satisfactory than he did.

"The water makes it difficult to determine. Certainly she has been in the river since at least last night, but it easily could have been longer."

"Then she was killed the night the river turned black."

"What makes you so certain the two incidents are related? Do you have evidence of such?" Sascha cocked his head and looked at the young woman expectantly.

Second Shield Rouselle flushed. "No, Arch-Commander. My apologies."

Sascha stood and slide his glove back on his hand. "Unnecessary. In a village such as this, it would be remarkable if two such events occurred in a decade. Though we have no proof as yet, I do not think the timing is a coincidence." He glanced upstream toward the village. "We'll need to have her identified." Rouselle nodded and got to her feet. Sascha waited until she met his gaze. "I can't stay. While this woman's death is tragic, the Arch-Commander of Arconia is needed elsewhere. Do you understand what I'm saying? If this woman is to have justice, you must be the one to bring it about."

Rouselle gave an uncertain nod.

"When your captain's men arrive to help with the river, ride back to the outpost and explain everything to him in detail." A sudden thought sent a grimace flitting across Sascha's face. "Captain Senecal, is he," Sascha hesitated, but only for a moment—after all, the Arch-Commander of Arconia does not need to be concerned with upsetting the fragile ego of an outpost captain. "Will he make a mess of this?"

Clearly uncomfortable, Rouselle seemed to prefer speaking in the direction of the dead woman. "He is a just man, Arch-Commander, in my experience."

A nebulous description, if Sascha had ever heard one, but that would have to do.



“Very well,” he said. “Then I will leave it in Captain Senecal’s hands.” Sascha squatted on his heels and took one last look at the dead woman. His mare stepped close and nuzzled the back of his neck with her soft nose. Sascha reached for the reins, but did not rise, not until he had lifted the woman’s head from the ground and arranged her limp hair so it hung over one shoulder. He stood and mounted the mare, who danced beneath his touch, eager to rid her sensitive nose of the stench from the river. Sascha addressed the young soldier before him. “Second Shield Rouselle, if you discover anything about this death or about the river and you find you do not trust your captain or that the situation has grown beyond his control, send word to me in Arconia at once. Do not hesitate.” He stared down at her, hoping she understood the gravity of his words. “Do you understand?”

The face that looked back up at him was more composed than he had seen it since the night before. He tried to imagine her older, more experienced, tried to see what kind of soldier she might become. He couldn’t see it. “Yes, Arch-Commander. I understand.”

Sascha nodded once, then squeezed the mare with his calves. She responded eagerly, and they wove quickly through the trees to the main path leading east from the village. From there they could join up once more with the main road to Arconia. He would pass the outpost before twilight—but he was in no mood to stop. Once he forded the river, the road to his city would be open to him, and he intended to let the mare run. Perhaps the rushing night air and the swift hooves beneath him would be enough to grant him a moment of respite from thoughts of the Archduke’s Griffins, their coldness and cruelty, and their commander, Hadrien Valinzuela. There would be words exchanged with him when Sascha reached Arconia.

And then there was Eska de Caraval.

There was no point in denying that she, too, occupied a portion of Sascha’s thoughts—a rather large and unquiet portion.

He had not been able to chase her from his mind since the day he saw her on the banks of the Alencio outside the walls of Toridium. He still debated with himself, in the quiet hours of the night when sleep eluded him, if he ought to have stopped his river cruiser at all that day. He could have chosen not to. It would have been simple

enough to sail on by, pretend he did not see the Firenzia Company at work, pretend he did not see her—but Sascha never had been one to lie to himself, nor did he tend to see regret in his past or his choices.

In the end, giving that order for the ship to halt was as easy as breathing. This he could admit, at least. Breathing, on the other hand, had become surprisingly challenging when he came face to face with the woman he had loved for the first time in two years, for the first time since she had told him she would not marry him.

But if soldiering had taught Sascha anything, it was how to breathe, how to move forward when fear threatened to overcome, how to laugh in the face of doubt and death.

And so he had smiled and spoken to her and her voice had nearly brought him to his knees.

The path streaked by under the mare's hooves, the trees a blur, the birdsong lost in the wind—too much, too fast, the terrain was not smooth, the horse might injure herself. Sascha slowed her, though his heart raced onward for a moment longer.

"You'll have your chance to run," he whispered, leaning over the horse's neck and stroking one ear.

He would tell himself later that he ought to have seen it coming.

The slower pace, the lack of dense underbrush on that particular stretch of road. Not to mention that Alexandre de Minos was not one to be easily startled, much less ambushed.

But, then, one doesn't just *see* fog coming. It just is, moments after it isn't.

The mare skidded to a sudden stop as the fog descended, half-rearing in her haste, her ears pinned back, an unhappy snort widening her nostrils. Sascha kept his seat and settled her with a hand to her neck and soothing words, the work of a moment, but that moment was enough.

His breath caught somewhere in the back of his throat. A sudden desire to cough, but seemingly without the air to do so, seized him, and his chest constricted as his lungs seemed to grow warm, distressingly so. Sascha reached for his spear,

felt the reassuring weight of the shaft as he hefted it—but then he was tilting sideways, sliding from the saddle. As he twisted away from the restive hooves, his vision blurring as his eyes began to water, he saw a shape take form in the thick fog, dark and cloaked and drawing near.

Dropping onto his shoulder and then his side, Sascha fumbled for the spear, blankly realized he no longer had it, could not comprehend the notion of dropping it. The figure emerged from the shroud of white.

Two things was Sascha certain of before he succumbed to the fog in his lungs and in his mind.

A face, gold and grinning.  
And then fire.