

## Chapter Seven

*"The Seven must always be seven."*

"Surely he won't indulge Valinzuela's grievances."

Sascha paused mid-stride and turned to look at the man off his right shoulder.

"You have met our Commendatore, haven't you?" he asked.

His companion rolled his eyes. Sascha resumed walking. One did not keep the Archduke waiting if one could help it.

"I just mean that you might as well ask which came first, ice or water.

Speculating is fairly useless where our Archduke is concerned, Cy. He does as he pleases and I have learned not to waste my energy trying to predict his choices."

Cyrus de Marchessault, Celestial Knight of Bellara, Commander-Superior of the Orlando Battalion, and Sascha's oldest friend hurried to catch up. "The enigma that is Valexi Arcturos de Vauquelin-Preux aside, Hadrien Valinzuela is nothing more than a thug sporting a bit of polish. The Archduke knows this."

"And yet that thug has his ear." Sascha sighed and slowed down, trying to take the edges off his temper, or at least trim the frayed bits. Cyrus did not deserve the consequences of Sascha's poor sleep. He had dreamed and woke again and again—always of Eska de Caraval. It was not a new dream. It had haunted him night after night in the days following Eska's rejection. The circumstances changed—sometimes they were in the rich halls of the Varadome, sometimes they stood on a cliff overlooking the sea—but no matter the place, each and every time Sascha called her name, she would turn to look at him, and each and every time, she would flee. He had thought two years might be enough to banish it for good.

"There is also," Cyrus said, "the fact that you made a very good dent in a man's jaw." The censure on Cyrus's face cracked almost immediately.

Sascha nodded solemnly. "This is true. A very good dent." He let himself smile as Cyrus burst into laughter.

"Ah, I dearly would like to have seen it. I've been longing to put the Griffins in their place since the Archduke pinned that ridiculous thing on Valinzuela's chest."

Cyrus half turned as they continued walking and he jabbed a finger into Sascha's shoulder. "I despised them first, Sascha, don't forget that."

Sascha laughed. "I humbly acknowledge that glory is entirely yours." The doors to the Hall of Mirrors loomed ahead of them and Sascha came to a halt once more. "Are you sure you want to be in there, Cy?" Whatever levity he had allowed into his voice a moment before was quickly cast off. "If it goes well for me, Hadrien Valinzuela will be reminded that to hate one of us is to hate both of us. And if it goes badly for me, better that the Archduke doesn't have an excuse to condemn you as well."

"Very gallant of you, Sascha," Cyrus said, offering a little bow. He turned serious. "But you seem to have forgotten that we have watched each other's backs for years. I will do so again today."

"I could give you an order."

Cyrus de Marchessault laughed and walked onward. "You could," he called out. "But you won't."

And so it was that Sascha entered the Hall of Mirrors with a smile, if not on his face, in his heart.

It didn't last long.

Hadrien Valinzuela was there and he was glowering—but then, this was, as far as Sascha was concerned, the only expression of which the muscles in his face were capable.

Unexpectedly, also present were the other three battalion commanders, meaning the entire senior leadership of Arconia's military was standing—reflected many times over—in the Hall of Mirrors. With the additional presence of a few top government officials, this was a most uncommon gathering.

No doubt the surprise was part of the plan. Sascha glanced at the Archduke, who had seemingly been engaged in pleasant conversation with Valinzuela—a pretense for Sascha's benefit, he was sure. There was little to distinguish him from the encounter of the morning, but as the Archduke turned and moved toward the center of the hall upon Sascha's entrance, a mirror gave away a smile intended for no one, a smile that set the hairs on the back of Sascha's neck to standing.

Suddenly alert, Sascha attempted to gain enough of Cyrus's attention to signal, well, to signal what exactly, he didn't know. He knew only that this was no ordinary afternoon. But Cyrus, convivial, gregarious Cyrus, was busy shaking hands.

Belatedly, as the Archduke began to speak words of welcome, Sascha realized that the other three battalion commanders had certainly been summoned, but that Cyrus had given no indication of a summons. Either his oldest friend had withheld this fact, or something else entirely was at work. And Sascha would have staked his life against the former.

"Before we can turn to the matter of the day," the Archduke was saying, "there is another minor thing that, regrettably, must be addressed." His gaze turned to Sascha. "In the matter of your offense against one Yvoro Erequoix, I have conferred with Commander Valinzuela and we have reached a suitable agreement."

"Am I to have no say in this agreement, Commendatore?"

"You are not, Arch-Commander," the Archduke said, his voice smooth and easy. "But I thank you for bringing Commander-Superior de Marchessault here with you today. This will save me the effort of seeking him out."

Sascha's heart dropped somewhere into the vicinity of his stomach—or perhaps right out of his body entirely. A trickle of sweat inched its way down his spine.

"I fail to see what Commander-Superior de Marchessault has to do with all of this," he said, keeping his eyes fixed on the Archduke.

"Oh, it's a roundabout sort of thing," Valexi Arcturos de Vauquelin-Preux said, waving one hand in a circular sort of manner. "You see, Commander Valinzuela required your dismissal, which was not agreeable to me, as you might imagine." And yet this was said in a way that suggested it could be made agreeable if Sascha took a misstep. The Archduke looked around at the gathered faces. "After all, Arch-Commander de Minos is a hero." Murmurs of agreement, sincere, though Sascha was sure he could hear derision in the Archduke's voice. "The Guardian of Verdienne. A Celestial Knight. And he has never failed Arconia or our Seven Cities." He looked back at Sascha. "However, we cannot let the injury to this loyal Griffin go unmarked. And so we have reached a compromise."

From the corner of his vision, Sascha could see Valinzuela's grimace twist into a satisfied smirk. More sweat beading on his spine. The Archduke's gaze slid to Cyrus. Dear Cyrus, who didn't yet see what was happening.

"Cyrus de Marchessault, Celestial Knight of Bellara, Lord de Marchessault," the Archduke intoned, "you are hereby stripped of your command of Orlando Battalion and relieved of all duties." One had gestured toward the doors. "You are dismissed."

The silence was really quite remarkable.

Sascha sought his friend's gaze from across the narrow hall. There was hurt there, the beginnings of anger. But Cyrus de Marchessault was a proud man. With head held high, his shoulders straight, he began to make the desired exit, his boots ringing out on the silver floor.

"Commendatore," Sascha said. The boots went quiet. "I beg you to reconsider." Sascha kept this voice tight, desperate not to show how deep this compromise cut. Not that the Archduke didn't already know. That was precisely why he had forged that particular verbal knife.

"No," Valexi Arcturos de Vauquelin-Preux said. And with that, he turned and began to speak to one of his trade ministers, leaving Sascha treading air in the middle of the hall. It seemed every face reflected back at him belonged to Cyrus. Shifting his stance, he found the true Cyrus. His friend gave a nod, and then he was gone, the doors closing with a thud Sascha felt in his chest.

The Archduke straightened and looked around once more. "Ah," he said brightly, as though greeting them all for the first time. "Let us begin, shall we?" He paced to the back of the hall and pushed against a mirror's frame. It swung open and the Archduke stepped to the side. With an expansive gesture, he ushered them through to the chamber beyond and each took up position behind a chair situated around an obsidian block fashioned into an oval table. Sascha moved to his and sat when he was bidden to do so, vaguely aware of the absence of Maximilian de Caraval, Vice-Chancellor and second in power in Arconia only to the Archduke—a curious thing worthy of his attention. But his mind was numb to the words that followed—that is, until the Archduke said:

“We have, I am afraid, reached the end of an age. Four nearly eight hundred years, our Seven Cities have lived in harmony with one another We have prospered together, fought together, died together.” The Archduke’s voice was solemn and strong, resonating off the wooden walls of the chamber. “We survived the Alescus together and emerged stronger than ever, strong in kinship, strong in the face of enemies who wanted to take advantage of the death of the last Alescuan king.” The Archduke looked down, his hands clasped before him, the image of dignified, restrained grief. Sascha was not fooled, though a small part of him knew he saw through the illusion only because he was still raw with anger. “It fills me with sorrow to tell you this. To break your faith in what we all cherish and serve.” Another pause. “Licenza conspires against us.”

Around Sascha, sharp inhales and quiet murmurs told of the consternation of those around the obsidian table. Sascha watched the Archduke still.

The Archduke gestured to the woman seated opposite Sascha. “On my orders, Minister Dulair has, for the past year, conducted an extensive study of Licenza and my brother-in-rule, the Principe. While I acted merely on suspicion of trade infractions, Minister Dulair’s investigation has revealed proof of far more insidious activities. In short, though I will, of course, offer the full report to any who wish, the Principe plans to destroy the Seven Cities from within. He will move on Vienisi before the year is over.”

Valexí Arcturos de Vauquelin-Preux looked around the table, taking a moment to look each man and woman in the eye. He lingered on Sascha last, and there was nothing of the game from the Hall of Mirrors in his eyes.

“I do not mean to let Corannos Arjaxios Ashvilli break these alliances, this union,” the Archduke thundered. “The Seven must always be seven.” He waited a moment, waited for those words to settle in the hearts of those who listened, and then swept his chair away from the table and sat. “Minister Dulair, please share what you have learned of Licenza’s preparations for war against our brothers and sisters in Vienisi.”

The tiny woman across from Sascha gave a nod. The grey hair twisted into a jeweled cage at the crown of her head did not budge. A packet of papers lay before

her, white against the obsidian, but she did not so much as touch them as she began to speak.

“The Principe of Licenza, citing concerns regarding raiders plaguing his coastline, began expanding his defensive forces over a year ago. Everyone in this room is aware of that. We supported the measure and raised no objections to it. I have since learned, however, that the Principe has gone beyond the limits, limits proposed and ratified by all Seven Cities, of this expansion. In addition to amassing new soldiers from his own lands, he has also, we only recently became aware, signed a contract with the Iraborean mercenary captain Ramses Tukhamon. While we do not know the specifics of the forces Tukhamon has promised to bring to the field, we do know he intends to join with the Principe’s soldiers prior to entering Vienisian territory.”

Sascha glanced at the three battalion commanders present. The name of Ramses Tukhamon was well known in military circles throughout the Seven Cities, though Sascha doubted many others present would know the difference between the Iraborean captain and any other mercenary who roamed the world in search of gold and glory. Tukhamon was not the most revered, and he had done most of his fighting well to the south of Bellara, but he was said to be resilient—and bold. He was also not inexpensive.

“Tukhamon’s fee,” Sascha said, earning himself a slight frown from Minister Dulair. He ignored it. There was no more time for petty grievances. “How did Licenza pay it?”

Dulair cleared her throat. “The circumstances are unclear. We suspect, given there has been no noticeable deficit anywhere else, that it has only been paid in part, with the rest promised upon victory.”

Sascha nodded. This was not unexpected, nor was it unusual. But it did offer some perspective. “Unpaid mercenaries are susceptible,” he said.

“Are you suggesting we bribe them away from Licenza?” The speaker, seated three chairs to Sascha’s right, leaned out over the table so he could sneer properly at Sascha.

“Yes, Minister Corelli,” Sascha said, somewhat impressed with his own composure. “That or determine some other means of luring them away. The Principe’s new forces will be only lightly trained. Take away Tukhamon and you take away his most dangerous teeth.”

The sneer grew. “You would have us consort with such low creatures? Plead with them?” Corelli scoffed.

“I did not say plead, Minister,” Sascha said through gritted teeth.

Still Corelli persisted, though whose back he was attempting to scratch with this particular performance was lost on Sascha. “Are you afraid of taking on this Tukhamon in battle? Do you not have faith in Arconian swords and shields?”

Sascha glanced farther up the table to where the Archduke sat. He seemed to be enjoying the exchange, though his face, as ever, gave little away.

“I have every faith in my soldiers, Minister. But my first duty is to preserve their lives, not send them to die needlessly against an enemy we might turn away by other means.”

Sascha’s equanimity was rewarded with a few murmurs of agreement. Corelli’s sneer melted into a grimace and at last the Archduke intervened.

“Minister, perhaps we might focus on other things.” The Archduke looked back at Sascha. “Arch-Commander, I would like your recommendations on my desk tomorrow.”

It was not simple as that. Sascha could recommend a dozen courses of action without needing to think.

“Commendatore,” he said, “what is your desired outcome of this engagement?”

The Archduke cocked his head as though Sascha were speaking another language. He let out a little laugh, which brought out nervous smiles on several faces around the table. “Why, Arch-Commander, it is as I have said—and as any true Bellaran would wish. I want to preserve the Seven Cities.”

Many faces around the table nodded in approval and acceptance, all save Minister Dulair, who looked as though she had never approved or accepted of anything in her life. It seemed only Sascha found these words lacking in substance

and only Sascha wondered what might be lurking behind their dutiful façade. The Archduke was not one for insubstantial words.

Sascha kept his gaze level and gave a nod—like all the rest. “You will have my recommendations first thing in the morning.”

The Archduke rose from his chair. Those seated around the table did the same and in small groups, heads bent together in discussion, they removed themselves from the chamber. After requiring that the battalion commanders convene after the evening meal, Sascha waited until only the Archduke remained.

“Alexandre, there will be no talk of my decision regarding de Marchessault,” the Archduke said as he strode across the room.

“This has nothing to do with de Marchessault,” Sascha said.

The Archduke came to a halt, his gaze traveling from Sascha’s face down to his boots and back again. “Speak, then.”

Nothing to do with de Marchessault, no, but in the pantheon of decisions Sascha might make in that moment, this one did not, perhaps, occupy a place of wisdom. And yet he was resolved to ask the question that had taken up residence on the edge of his mind during his ride back to Arconia—and which had grown only more persistent under the stern, though not unkind, gaze of Maximilian de Caraval that morning, not to mention in the wake of his unwelcome dreams during his fitful attempt at sleep.

But Sascha could not shake the image of Eska de Caraval leaping from the roof of the Varadome nor the fierce storm in her eyes as she called him a liar and drew steel on him. There was harrow root behind that storm, he knew, more than he had ever seen. Had she unfurled wings in that moment and flown into the moon’s shadow, he would not have been made more uneasy by the encounter. He had told no one of that night, not even Cyrus, a decision that had not come easily, had told no one that Eska de Caraval had snuck into Sylvain de Ulysey’s chambers. The relief he felt in the hours that followed when no uproar surged through the Varadome had been immense. Perhaps, he had allowed himself to think, perhaps it was meaningless. But Eska’s eyes had told him otherwise and there had once been a time when he had aligned the world and his place in it around those eyes.



Sascha felt the need to straighten his shoulders under the Archduke's attention, to take refuge in the familiarity of military hierarchy, but it seemed he had already done so. "May I ask after the charges brought from Toridium on Eska de Caraval?"

"An investigation is underway," the Archduke said. "Though I think we have more pressing matters before us now. Besides," and here he stepped close, dropping a hand onto Sascha's shoulder, "between you and me, I don't believe Eska de Caraval to be capable of murder."

With those words, Sascha's heart began to beat a little less forcefully in his chest.

"You are well acquainted with her, yes?" A question asked from politeness only. Everyone knew they were well acquainted. "Do you think she could kill a man?"

Sascha shook his head. "She believes in the justice of law, Commendatore. To take justice upon herself would be contrary to her nature."

The Archduke nodded, but then raised one eyebrow. "And if were not a matter of justice?" His voice was light, musing, as though he spoke merely in hypotheticals. "Could she enact violence for a cause? To sow discord?" The Archduke patted Sascha's shoulder. "Ah, ignore my penchant for speculation, Alexandre. I am sure the Lady de Caraval is innocent. She has," he went on, a chuckle escaping between words, "vowed to uncover the true culprit for Chancellor Fiorlieu's death. I imagine she's gathering evidence as we speak. She did a number on de Venescu so I expect a formidable case."

The fact that the Archduke of Arconia was not aware—seemingly—that Eska was across the Anerrean Sea, indeed, had departed many days before, was unexpected. Relieved as he was that the Archduke did not believe the reports from Toridium, Sascha did not feel inclined to enlighten him.

"And now you must excuse me, Arch-Commander. Perhaps you and I can arrange a moment to inspect our latest Carrier acquisitions? I have heard good things from the training ground, but have been unable to see for myself in quite some time."

"Of course, Commendatore. I am at your disposal."

“Good, speak to Bernino. He will be able to tell you when my schedule permits it.” The Archduke smiled and lifted his hand away from Sascha’s shoulder and began to walk toward the door. Beyond, the Hall of Mirrors gleamed. “The newest, what was his name?”

“Hector. Hector Mirelli,” Sascha said.

“Yes, that’s the one. I’m looking forward to seeing him.” Valexi Arcturos de Vaquelin-Preux paused on the threshold between rooms, a dark silhouette against silver. “And Alexandre? You really should get more sleep. I need my Arch-Commander to be at his best in these coming days.”

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Sascha pivoted and lunged, his boot sending up a cloud of dust, the spear in his hands thrusting forward, piercing his opponent’s neck. A quick twist, the spear’s blade sliding free, Sascha spun, the shaft an extension of his arm, the blade a blur, the edge carving into torso after torso—and then an abrupt halt. Sascha dropped to one knee, his left hand propelling the spear backward, the wood whispering through his glove. He kept his head low, out of harm’s way, waiting for the butt end of the spear to strike the final blow.

There was no resounding impact. No bone-jarring thud. He had missed.

Sascha waited, sweat dripping from his nose to land in the dusty training ground. And then he rose to his feet and turned to examine where he had gone wrong.

The wooden training mannequins teetered where they stood in a circle around Sascha, battered and shredded through in places. Some would need replacing. Master Ricorrio would see to it. One mannequin, however, still stood proud, its unpainted face staring back at Sascha.

Frowning, Sascha glanced down at the dusty layer of sand beneath his feet, following the marks his footwork had made. The final move of the sequence—ending with a strike to the sternum that would shatter the ribs of a mortal—ought to have sent that final mannequin onto its nonexistent backside.

“I see it.” Cyrus de Marchessault did not move from where he lounged on top of the low wall surrounding the training circle. He was dressed in a white linen shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, a vest hanging unbuttoned off his strong shoulders. No battalion commander coat, no insignia.

“You weren’t even watching,” Sascha said, still frowning at the ground.

“Didn’t need to. You nearly always come up short when you step back before going to your knee.”

Sascha redirected his frown at his friend. They had not yet spoken of what had occurred in the Hall of Mirrors. That would come.

“Let’s see you do it, then.”

A sharp laugh from Cyrus. “And make a fool of myself?” He sat up on the wall and looked down at Sascha. “Rather not have that happen twice in one day.” The allusion was clear, but Sascha could tell Cyrus was not yet ready to venture down that path.

“No, no, let’s see it. Clearly you know my own sequence better than I do.” Sascha held out his spear—a training one, not the one he carried into battle. Not the one that had killed the tyrant behind the walls of Eduin.

Cyrus hopped down from the wall and closed the distance between them. His hand closed over the shaft of the spear. “Why would I go to all that trouble to make you look bad, when I could just do this.” And with one swift move Sascha barely saw coming—it was the angle of Cyrus’s elbow that gave it away—the former battalion commander tried to sweep Sascha’s feet out from under him. An instinctual dodge saved him, just.

Sascha grinned as he regained his balance. “Do what, exactly?”

Cyrus rolled his eyes and tossed the spear back to Sascha. “There’s a reason I never train spears with you. Wouldn’t mind shoving the blade of one of those up Valinzuela’s ass, though.”

A stiff breeze kicked up a spray of dust. Both men averted their faces and shielded their eyes. When the sand settled, their attempts at good humor seemed to flee with the wind. Cyrus held Sascha’s gaze for a long moment, his jaw tightening.

Sascha leaned on the spear and opened his mouth to speak, but Cyrus beat him to it.

“Don’t, Sascha. Don’t apologize.” He lifted his gaze to the sky somewhere over Sascha’s head. “This is not your doing.” Cyrus’s shoulders sagged and he turned and clambered back up on the wall.

“I broke a man’s jaw. This is the consequence of that choice. It is my doing.” Sascha flipped the spear on end and jabbed the blade into the sand. The shaft quivered before him and went still.

“Unfortunate for that man,” Cyrus said, his voice rising slightly. “But a minor grievance, when all is said and done. Valinzuela’s influence has grown.”

Sascha sighed and went to stand in the wall’s shadow. He leaned back, his shoulders resting on the warm stones, eyes squinting against the bright light. Somewhere to his right, Cyrus’s head was a shadow between him and the sun.

“The Archduke doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to do, Cy,” Sascha said, his voice quiet. “Yes, Hadrien has grown bold in his arrogance and power and has prospered on the scales of the Archduke’s decisions recently. But do not think for a minute that Hadrien Valinzuela convinced Arcturos to take this action.”

The shadow that was Cyrus moved, his head shaking to accompany a muttered insult Sascha could not quite make out. “Then why. I do not understand it. And while faced with the possibility of military action against Licenza. It is a bad time to change commanders, Sascha.” Silence. Then, “And who does he think to raise to my position?”

This was not arrogance, Sascha knew, though it was, perhaps, not without a touch of bitterness. The truth of it, though, was that Cyrus de Marchessault was not easily replaced. Raised to battalion commander after Sascha’s promotion to Arch-Commander, he had served with distinction and demonstrated impeccable leadership, not least that very spring—so long ago, Sascha felt, with so much changed since—at the battles of the Carnellian Isthmus. That campaign, and the prior year’s against the allied Nystrom war bands, would not have been the comprehensive victories they were celebrated as without Cyrus de Marchessault’s

deft command of Orlando Battalion—and Sascha had made that abundantly clear to the Archduke.

But this wasn't about Cyrus de Marchessault.

Sascha said as much.

“What do you mean? Valinzuela saw a chance to strike at me.”

Sascha sighed, wishing for a moment to share in the way Cyrus saw the world. It would be simpler.

“I mean that you are an unfortunate casualty of war, Cyrus. An innocent bystander.” Sascha shifted so he could look at his friend properly. “The Archduke did this to punish me.” Cyrus was quiet, his dark eyes steady. “He could have stripped me of command, could have ordered me to fight Valinzuela, could have done any number of things to my person, my position. But he knew the far greater punishment for me would be to watch you suffer without cause and be powerless to stop it.”

Sascha watched Cyrus absorb this until he could no longer bear to see the anger mounting in his friend's face—for it was an echo of his own, barely harnessed, simmering in his bones. He dared not loosen that leash, and every second he absorbed Cyrus's pain threatened to do just that. Pushing himself off the wall, Sascha paced away. He retrieved the spear from the sand, marched up to the closest mannequin, and sent the blade slicing through the wooden neck. The head dropped to the sand and rolled to a stop at Sascha's feet.

“Why?” Cyrus asked, his voice tight. “What did you do to earn this? You have only ever served him well. Your loyalty is unquestionable. Your skill unparalleled. Without you, Rhia would be overrun by Vothians. Without you, Sidalgo would have brought Eduin to its knees. Without you, Verdienne would be ash. A Griffin's broken jaw is not worth all this.”

This was the question Sascha had not yet let himself contemplate. The answer frightened him. Taking a deep breath, Sascha turned to face Cyrus once more. “He knows all of that. He does not doubt my skill. I do not believe he even doubts my loyalty. Perhaps there is some old transgression, some slight he has not forgotten.”

Sascha did not doubt the Archduke was one to remember every affront, every offense, intended or accidental. And yet this was not what frightened him.

“You think it is something more.” Cyrus slipped down from the wall and came to stand before Sascha. The anger was still there, roiling beneath the surface, but apprehension ran against that current.

Sascha bent down and retrieved the wooden head. He turned it his hands. It was heavier than a human head.

At last he could put off the words no longer. Sascha met Cyrus’s gaze. “I think he wants to know how far he can push me. I think he means to discover where and how I might break. Because he can. Because he knows I will take it.”