

Chapter Nine

"But I won't drink that military-brewed horse piss."

"I've got it, the Plumed Serpents. How does that sound?"

Sascha sank into the pool, submerged himself beneath a torrent of bubbles, lingered there, relishing the heat of the water. When he surfaced, Cyrus de Marchessault was lounging against the tiled edge of the pool, one arm draped over the marble shoulders of one of the nine statues that provided an audience for the bathers. Sascha ran his hands over his face and up across his scalp.

"Plumed Serpents. It's very...feathery. What does it even mean?"

"It doesn't have to mean anything, Sascha. Is there meaning behind the Talons of Sul? The Blue Beggars?"

"Ah, yes, and yes, I'm afraid," Sascha said with an exaggerated nod.

Cyrus's face fell. "Even the Beggars? Truly?"

"Truly. If you want to be taken seriously as a mercenary troupe, Cy, you need the right name," Sascha said with mock gravity.

"You're just jealous," Cyrus said, his shoulders rolling in an expansive shrug.

Sascha smiled through the steam at his friend. "I'm glad you've found some humor in this." But the words seemed to remove that very humor from Cyrus's face.

"What else am I to do, Sascha? The alternative is skewering Hadrien Valinzuela on my sword. Or perhaps Arcturos himself."

Sascha resisted the urge to glance around. The chamber was empty, on his orders. He knew it, Cyrus knew it. Only the statues and the lush greenery were there to hear Cyrus's perfidy. Still, words spoken once could be spoken again.

"Plumed Serpents," Sascha said, attempting to drag his friend back from that particular edge. "I like it."

Treason was not the only darkness Sascha would prefer to keep at bay. Charming, cheerful Cyrus de Marchessault, a man known for his laughter, had two shadows, one cast by the sun, the other lurking under the surface, threatening to consume from within.

Sascha had seen that shadow feast on his friend before. He did not wish to encourage it to hunger.

And yet, in the time since Cyrus was stripped of his rank and position as Commander-Superior of Orlando Battalion, he had ranted, yes, and shown his anger, but he had also demonstrated a great deal of composure—and dry humor, of which his plan to form and captain a mercenary force was but the latest example. Sascha was glad to see it, but he did not trust it.

“No, you don’t,” Cyrus said. “It’s atrocious.” The smile had returned, but it seemed to waver under Sascha’s inspection—or perhaps under assault from within. “You think of her still, don’t you.”

Sascha took a deep breath. There was no need to ask to whom his friend was referring. The abrupt shift was unsettling, not for himself, despite the subject, but because of what it signaled in Cyrus.

They had not spoken of Eska de Caraval in over a year. When Sascha had turned away from Eska’s door, his heart seemingly leaking from his chest in the wake of her refusal, it was Cyrus de Marchessault he had fled to. It was Cyrus who went down on his knees so he could cradle Sascha’s head in his arms. It was Cyrus who suffered through every pain-sharpened word, every grief-filled silence. And it was Cyrus who had made him laugh again.

The summons from the Archduke had come not long after. Arch-Commander Domenico de Farenault was retiring—and he had named Sascha his successor. It was Cyrus who made him answer that summons.

Not that Sascha had not wanted the position. He had. Very much. But sorrow had broken his ambition into pieces and only Cyrus had understood how to put them back together.

For his friend to speak of Eska now, to recall the memory of the darkest storm Sascha had endured—Sascha feared the shadow within Cyrus was very hungry indeed.

“Yes,” Sascha said. The tiles made the word louder than he intended. “Always.” He nearly succumbed in that moment, nearly told Cyrus about the night Eska had jumped from the roof of the Varadome. That would have led, in turn, to telling of his

encounter with Eska in Toridium, and then to recounting the fleeting moment in the wake of the Iron Baron's arrest, and Cyrus would have understood what Sascha himself was not prepared to admit.

"And you still love her."

Apparently Cyrus de Marchessault understood without knowing any of those things.

Sascha leaned back and let himself float, his eyes on the painted ferns gracing the ceiling. "I thought we were talking about Plumed Serpents." It was a poor attempt at deflection.

Cyrus was silent for a long moment. "You should tell her." More silence. Sascha closed his eyes. "We are but drops in a wide, endless ocean, Sascha. Insignificant. Fleeting. Pretending to a purpose that does not exist." Sascha heard Cyrus inhale, heard the long, heavy exhale, imagined the shadow releasing on his breath. "But you, when you and she were one, you defied that. You almost made me believe we might be more than dust returning to dust."

The sadness in Cyrus's voice was like a blade in Sascha's heart. He reached his feet down to the bottom of the pool and stood, turning to face his friend. But Cyrus was climbing from the pool, shedding water like a second skin. The steam swallowed him—and Sascha's voice—a moment later.

An hour later, Sascha rode south from Arconia at the head of a small column of soldiers, his three remaining battalion commanders behind him, the banners of Arconia, the Archduke, and the Seven Cities rippling overhead. To the eyes of his soldiers, the Arch-Commander of Arconia was as he always was—authoritative, calm, proud. But Sascha felt none of those things.

Cyrus de Marchessault had vanished, taking his shadow with him. Sascha wanted to search him out, wanted to wrestle the shadow into submission and bring his friend out of the darkness. But the Arch-Commander of Arconia must follow orders.

“They’re not ready.”

Sascha stood before the poor excuse for a unit of soldiers. The faces that looked back at him were a mix of young and old, male and female—and none of them accustomed to standing at attention before a commanding officer.

“They certainly are not.”

Sascha glanced at the woman on his left. She knew how to stand at attention, was doing so even though it wasn’t required of her in that moment. But then, Heliosa de Bellanteau, Commander-Superior of Thesion Battalion, had made a name for herself by doing what wasn’t required.

She was no Cyrus—Sascha did not think they had ever shared a laugh in a decade of professional acquaintance—but she was more than capable, if a bit grim and uninspired. And of the three battalion commanders, none of whom Sascha had appointed, she had no desire to rise higher, a fact she had declared to him at the time of his promotion to Arch-Commander—unmasked and unlooked for.

As such, when their small parade of soldiers had arrived at Belarian’s Watch, Arconia’s primary military compound an afternoon’s ride from the city, it was de Bellanteau Sascha had asked to accompany him as he got his first look at the Archduke’s new unit: Carriers.

The Carriers had marched with them, placed in the middle of the column in the hopes that they might learn a thing or two about marching and how to behave now that they were part of a military force. De Bellanteau had reported mid-march—without even a hint of sarcasm—that one man was insisting he did not need boots and one young woman had intentionally singed the eyebrows of a soldier of whose attentions she was not enamored.

Sascha had seen no need to intervene, as it appeared the woman had done an admirable job of warning off her would-be suitor, but he had asked de Bellanteau to issue a warning to the soldier and a reminder to the woman that such things ought to be reported rather than, well, burned.

As such, Sascha had no illusions when he called for the small Carrier unit to be assembled in the Watch’s main pavilion that he was about to see a fine fighting force.

“I suppose this is what comes of granting a civilian control of their training,” Heliosa de Bellanteau said. Or rather, her profile said it. Sascha could have wished for her to absorb a touch of the Carriers’s lack of discipline, just enough to make conversation with less like a drill.

That civilian stood to the unit’s right, present as their leader by default rather than by any great aptitude for that role or any official position in the Arconian military.

What Envero Falcon did excel at, however, was controlling the fire he could produce in his hands. Sascha had been skeptical of the claims about his greatness, claims repeated vigorously and shamelessly by Envero Falcon himself, but that skepticism had admitted defeat the moment Falcon picked a lock using nothing but a tiny bolt of flickering fire as a key. Of course, any number of Carriers could have blasted the door into ash, but Falcon had shaped his flame, relying on subtlety and precision rather than brute force. The demonstration had been most effective and the Archduke had given Falcon the task of teaching his new Carriers to achieve that same level of control.

The task of teaching said Carriers to function as a unit, to work together, to wield their abilities with purpose rather than wild abandon—well, this was a job for Heliosa de Bellanteau, only she didn’t know it yet.

Even so, as Sascha scanned the faces of the newest members of Arconia’s military, he could not help but wonder if even Commander-Superior de Bellanteau was capable of fashioning them into a fighting force by the time they made contact with the Principe of Licenza’s soldiers or Ramses Tukhamon’s mercenaries.

Of the many barriers to achieving this, first among them was, Sascha understood, the fact that the Carriers felt little to no affinity for each other, despite the fact that they were the only Carriers within the walls of Belarian’s Watch. They were present for different reasons—all recruited by the Archduke, perhaps half by Sascha himself. Some had been desperate for the monetary compensation, either for themselves or their families. Some were there for the chance to test their powers, so often restricted by society. And Sascha knew that two had accepted the

terms rather than face imprisonment in the Hivarium. None appeared to have any great enthusiasm for a military life.

Sascha raised his voice to address the Carriers. “Welcome to Belarian’s Watch. From this moment forth, this is your commanding officer,” he said, indicating de Bellanteau. He did not bother to assess her reaction. “I am ordered to incorporate your unit into our coming engagements, which means that if you wish to live, I suggest you learn to follow Commander-Superior de Bellanteau’s every word, her every inhale and exhale, until you can anticipate her commands before she herself knows them.” Unlikely, but it made a point. “If you are a believer in deities, here is your new god. And if you are not, think of her as the only thing standing between you and watching your intestines spill from your abdomen. Is that understood?”

A handful of the men and women made a clumsy salute. Others shifted uncomfortably, unsure, or perhaps merely stubborn. Envero Faulcon swept his feathered hat—an ostentatious uniform violation Sascha was forced to ignore—from his head in an elaborate bow.

Next to Sascha, Heliosa de Bellanteau snapped a crisp salute. Sascha saw three Carriers, including the young Hector Mirelli, attempt to mimic her. Three was better than none, he supposed, suppressing a smile. He turned to face his battalion commander. Her gaze was steel, her jaw iron. Whether she relished the challenge or resented Sascha for burdening her with it, no trace of her opinion existed on her face. Very likely she gave herself no leave to have an opinion on it at all, which was why she was precisely the officer for the job.

“We leave Belarian’s Watch in three days,” Sascha said. He winked. “Good luck.” Sascha turned to face the unit of Carriers once more and fixed Envero Faulcon with a hard gaze. “And now, Master Faulcon, I would like a demonstration of the progress your soldiers have made so far.” He gestured to the stone pavilion, flanked on three sides by low barracks. “Will this be sufficient space, or should we vacate the premises and go outside the walls?”

Vacating the premises, it turned out, was most definitely necessary.

Under Faulcon’s orders the unit arrayed itself—a bow shot from the walls of the Watch—in a line two Carriers deep. Sascha and de Bellanteau watched from the

side as the front row of Carriers dropped to one knee. On Faulcon's word, the kneeling Carriers each produced a small ball of fire in one palm. A second command produced the same from the second row. A third command triggered the release of power, sending flames streaking toward a designated target—or so, Sascha decided, was the intent.

The reality was that the bolts of fire, rather than releasing on cue together, burst forth in a staggered fashion and flew varying distances, some sputtering out in the dirt well short of the target while others overshot the mark considerably. Of the thirty Carriers, perhaps six had managed to ignite the waist-high tower of split logs they had been aiming for.

Even Heliosa de Bellenteau could not refrain from a visible reaction to this mediocre demonstration, though a slight compression of her lips was the extent of it.

"Again," Sascha commanded. Faulcon bowed, apparently unperturbed by the results, and issued his orders a second time.

The result was an improvement—an additional four Carriers hit the mark, making it a grand total of ten. And of those ten, Sascha noted, only Hector Mirelli had succeeded twice.

"No consistency," Sascha muttered. "And what happens when they attempt it on moving targets?" He was not expecting an answer.

"Perhaps their erratic aim is more suited to moving targets."

For a moment—a very brief one—Sascha wondered if he was hearing Heliosa de Bellenteau attempt humor for the first time in his presence. But no, he realized, as he took in her profile once more, she was merely attempting to calculate if the seemingly random nature of the Carriers' aim might be more effective against equally random movement.

"Would we allow our archers to step into battle with such a complete lack of precision and order?"

De Bellenteau gave a firm shake of her head. "Of course not, Arch-Commander."

Sascha sighed, his gaze returning to the Carriers. “I would leave them behind if the decision were mine to make,” he said, quietly. “Let them drill endlessly until they are less likely to get themselves killed and endanger the rest of us.”

“The Archduke was clear on this?”

Sascha nodded. “Utterly. He wants them at the forefront of any engagement, an example of Arconia’s commitment to defending the Seven Cities.” Were it Cyrus de Marchessault standing next to him, Sascha would have voiced his private thoughts about what else the Archduke wished to convey—namely that he could do what no ruler in the Seven Cities had dared to do since the Alescuan dynasty was destroyed: control Carrier power and wield it in battle.

It was a powerful statement to attempt to make. No Carriers, Sascha knew, had served the Seven Cities in an official military capacity since they had fought on both sides of the last battle of the Great Rising. The persecution of Carriers that followed the death of Varin II, the last Alescuan king, had bolstered the unspoken policy and deepened the rift between those who Carried and those who did not, a rift that would only heal gradually—and in some places the scar still ran deep.

But Cyrus was not there and while Sascha respected and admired Heliosa de Bellenteau, theirs was not a relationship of confidences and secrets. It was a current of orders, given and accepted, that flowed in only one direction.

“I’d have them taking birds from the sky in a day.”

Of all the possible witnesses to the unsatisfactory display, Sascha would have paid a great deal of money to ensure Hadrien Valinzuela was not one. Suppressing the heavy exhale he desperately felt the need to unleash, Sascha turned to face the commander of the Archduke’s Griffins and bristled internally at the sight of the man’s puffed out chest under crossed arms and the smug expression his beard was wearing. A pair of Griffins had accompanied their commander and each seemed to have adopted, like mimic birds, their leader’s mannerisms. It was rather like facing three Valinzuelas.

If Sascha hadn’t needed to ensure the Carrier unit achieved some level of discipline and accuracy, he would have gladly handed their training to Valinzuela

for the sheer pleasure of watching the man fail. The idea was exceptionally tempting.

“I don’t recall requesting your presence, Commander,” Sascha said, his voice cold. He was within his rights to reprimand the man—after all, while Valinzuela might enjoy a long leash in Arconia, an active military campaign was another matter entirely. As Arch-Commander, Sascha’s word was law.

“I am the personal representative of the Archduke, de Minos,” Valinzuela said. If it were possible for a beard to grow in proportion to its owner’s arrogance, Valinzuela’s would have just expanded to twice its bushiness. “I am here as the Commendatore’s eyes and ears.” Valinzuela stopped just short of saying he could, therefore, do as he wished.

It was a tricky bit of wordplay and Sascha had recognized it for what it was the moment the Archduke had named Valinzuela to the campaign in this capacity. If the Archduke himself were present, the situation would be far less murky. As a civilian, even Valexi Arcturos de Vaquelin-Preux could not overrule Sascha when it came to military orders in the field. But Valinzuela held military rank—and now the Archduke had given him nebulous authority that would no doubt be exploited at every possible opportunity. It was, in short, a turn of events Sascha could have done without.

“As you say,” Sascha said, fixing a polite smile on his face. “Perhaps the Commendatore’s eyes and ears would like to experience the demonstration once more and lend his opinions?” Next to Sascha, Heliosa de Bellanteau’s throat emitted a strangled sound. Sascha kept his attention on Valinzuela. “I have reports to listen to, which will be, as you can imagine, quite dull.”

Valinzuela’s beard wilted—no, not really, but Sascha did see the man deflate a little, clearly unprepared to combat Sascha’s failure to respond in an antagonistic manner.

Sascha took advantage of the man’s hesitation to glance at de Bellanteau. He mouthed out a wordless ‘sorry’ and then he was striding away toward the walls of Belarian’s Watch. He heard Faulcon begin the sequence a third time, heard the sound of fire striking earth. Resisting the urge to look back and see the results,

Sascha passed through the Watch's gate, his mind shifting to focus on what lay ahead.

A hovering attendant, one of three dedicated to Sascha's service when in the field, dashed forward at his approach, then dashed away again in the direction of the barracks just as quickly as Sascha dipped his head in a nod. Sascha himself continued on to the building that housed the Arch-Commander's quarters, a sturdy, inelegant two-story structure made slightly less dreary by the presence of three trees, which also happened to be the only greenery within the entire compound. A small table nestled within the shade of those trees held a respectable array of food—cheese, grapes, figs, and a thick pastry vessel containing venison in gravy. Sascha waved a hand at the pair of flies diligently investigating the figs, and then, upon realizing the small folding chair that ought to be present was mysteriously in absentia, ventured to eat a few mouthfuls while standing. His disappointment upon discovering that the pastry had gone a bit soggy was tempered slightly by the excellence of the cheese—excellence that he was not allowed to savor. The attendant returned—dashing, as usual—and announced that the assembly was complete and awaiting the Arch-Commander.

Abandoning the meal, Sascha followed the attendant across the compound to the main pavilion. There, in the shade of a red and white striped canopy attached to the roof of one of the barracks, four immaculately uniformed individuals awaited Sascha, plus one individual whose appearance could be described in a number of ways, including disheveled, untidy, and slovenly. Sascha preferred the term rustic.

Four salutes went up as Sascha mounted the trio of steps to the pavilion's stone-paved surface—four salutes and one flask, which remained upended over its owner's mouth for an amount of time that could be considered disrespectful. Given the identity of the owner, Sascha ignored this, ignored the grunt of disappointment as the flask was discovered to be nearly empty, ignored the gentle shaking of said flask to elicit the final drops, and proceeded to tell the other four figures to be at ease.

Sascha took a moment to scan the items covering the surface of the folding table erected under the canopy—namely maps of varying size and scope. Behind him, the

attendant stationed herself at the edge of the canopy and took up a tablet and writing implement in anticipation of receiving dictation.

“Commander Gaspar,” Sascha said, nodding at the officer directly across the table, who oversaw Belarian’s Watch and the troops permanently stationed within the compound during times of peace. “Quartermaster Porthos.” This at the woman next to Gaspar. “Let’s begin.”

The report that followed—which elucidated the number of soldiers currently in residence at Belarian’s Watch, the status of new recruits, and the horses, supplies, and beasts of burden immediately available to Sascha—was delivered in Gaspar’s crisp tones, supplemented by Porthos’s quiet additions.

“Two cohorts from each of the four battalions, yes?” Sascha asked Gaspar, though he already knew the answer. The commander nodded. “Very well,” Sascha said, turning to address the other two officers around the table. “Rather than have all four battalions operating at partial capacity, we’ll form the eight cohorts into two smaller battalions for the initial stage of this campaign.” He looked to the older of the two battalion commanders. “One will be under your command, Pisani. The other will be de Bellanteau’s.” The second commander shifted at this perceived slight, but Sascha carried on before dissatisfaction could emerge. “Commander Gaspar,” he said, glancing back across the table, “I want four additional cohorts mustered from the rosters as swiftly as can be managed. Command over those will be yours, Selorin.” Here Sascha indicated the second battalion commander. “You will follow the main force into Licenzan territory as soon as you are able. Understood?”

There was a disgruntled sort of twist to Commander-Superior Selorin’s mouth, but he made no objection and saluted alongside the older Pisani. Already Sascha was thinking ahead to how he might appease, within the action of the campaign, the battalion commander’s bruised sense of entitlement. Perhaps a definitive assault or a bold charge against the mercenary Tukhamon. If Selorin had the opportunity to parade the decapitated head of Ramses Tukhamon in front of Pisani, he might, in return, feel good will toward Sascha—begrudgingly given and fleeting, certainly,

but good will was an important commodity when one was constantly juggling the pride of one's commanders.

Sascha addressed the group. "The main force departs in three days. The Archduke and Minister Dulair have promised to send the latest intelligence on the Principe's movements tomorrow, at which time we will form our initial strategy." Sascha looked to his right for the first time since arriving under the striped canopy. "Commander Caridore, you will accompany me. The rest of you are dismissed."

Another round of four salutes with the conspicuous absence of a fifth. Sascha stepped close to the fifth figure and lowered his voice as the others began to speak amongst themselves.

"Come on, let's get that flask refilled, and then you and I can talk."

Commander Caridore squinted over Sascha's shoulder, the scar running alongside his left eye narrowing into a thin white line with the movement. "Porthos says she's only got ale. But I won't drink that military-brewed horse piss. You know I won't."

Sascha did know. "It would be unthinkable. Good thing I brought a bottle of your favorite tillado."

The squint lifted and Commander Caridore offered Sascha his best impression of a smile, gold tooth and all.

Three generous pours of said bottle of deep amber tillado later and Commander Caridore had ceased to look over his shoulder at every footstep that passed by the three trees outside Sascha's quarters. Two chairs had been found, and Caridore's booted feet had found their way to the top of the table, which listed precariously under the weight. Sascha rather suspected that four more pours would likely see the table careening onto its side—and Caridore with it. Then again, Commander Leondroval Caridore was rather adept at holding his liquor. Sascha revised his estimate accordingly.

"Your Commander Gaspar has a new sword. Did you notice?" Caridore said.

Sascha had noticed.

"Wonder where he got the gold to pay for it. Six emeralds in the scabbard. I counted."

Sascha had not wondered. After all, Commander Gaspar received a handsome salary from the Arconian treasury—a fact that Commander Caridore, his equal in rank, ought to know. Except that Commander Caridore had long ago insisted on taking his pay in the form of small tracts of vacant land, making him one of the largest landholders in Arconia, perhaps even in the Seven Cities. As such, he remained remarkably ignorant of the cost of things like swords. He also remained, Sascha knew, remarkably ignorant of his tiny pockets of land, which ranged across the map, having never visited them.

“Where are your scouts, Leon?” Sascha asked, trying to steer the conversation somewhere productive. This was a continuous task where Caridore was concerned, but the man had been a legend in the Seven Cities when Sascha was still learning how to hold a sword, and had been commander of the most elite unit of scouts in all of Bellara for almost as long. The man was allowed his eccentricities.

Caridore shook his head and drained his glass. “Not telling.”

“You know I need to know, Leon,” Sascha said, his voice even. Arguing with Caridore was never productive. But he really did need to know where the commander had stashed his unit, which he rarely brought within the confines of the compound.

Leondroval Caridore scratched at the silver stubble on his chin. “The Ellian pass,” he said, naming a narrow, sparse valley tucked high in the hills south of the compound.

“Was that so hard?” Sascha asked.

Caridore managed to scowl and grin simultaneously, which might have been an off-putting sight had Sascha not seen it before, and tapped at the rim of his empty glass. The commander, it seemed, was in a good mood. Sascha obliged and poured.

“I want you half a day ahead,” Sascha said. He himself sipped on water—warm and no longer made pleasant by the lemon rinds in the ceramic pitcher. “And I want riders three times a day, no exceptions, once we pass from Arconia into Licenzan lands.” Caridore was known to interpret orders in a looser fashion than was acceptable, but Sascha figured that asking for three riders a day would nearly guarantee that he received two. “No engagement, no interaction,” Sascha went on.

“I want you to be invisible.” This, of all his instructions, was the one he didn’t actually need to give. Leondroval Caridore had once led a unit of soldiers through a swamp swarming with enemy forces, not to mention a breed of bird that particularly enjoyed screaming when startled, without being detected—by man or bird. The stories about his skills were unparalleled. And his scouts, each just as eccentric as their commander and fiercely proud of him, were nearly as formidable when it came to slipping through any landscape. “And I want to see you, personally, at my tent every third day. This is unlike any other campaign even you have seen, Leon. We march against other Bellarans. There can be no mistakes. Which means I must have direct contact with the leader of my scouts.”

Caridore grunted his acceptance of this. This particular order was his least favorite, but his lack of even habitual protest told Sascha he understood the gravity of the campaign.

“And the drink?” Sascha asked the last question as lightly as he could.

“Not a drop after tomorrow. As always. I’ll be sober as a magpie, don’t you worry.”

Convincingly said, but in his two years as Arch-Commander, Sascha had known Caridore to have more than one slip up. Never with serious consequences, but Sascha knew there was always a first time. He dreaded the day. Not least because it might leave Sascha with no choice but to dismiss, without honors, a man who had devoted his life to the Seven Cities.

With a final swig, Leondroval Caridore set down his glass and swung his feet off the tabletop. It teetered, but held. “If that will be all, Arch-Commander, I’ll be going.” Sascha started to nod, but stopped short when Caridore said, “That ballprick Colombial is trying to kill me and I’d rather not be here after dark to give him the opportunity.”

Sascha cocked his head to one side. “Trying to kill you.”

A stern and very serious nod.

“And can you tell me why Captain Colombial would like to kill you?” Sascha was fairly sure he knew the answer.

An equally stern shake of the head. “Can’t.”

“Very well. Don’t die, Commander Caridore.”

“Don’t intend to, Arch-Commander.” And Caridore saluted. Or some variation on a salute. Unmistakable, though, and the first time Sascha had ever witnessed it. Aware that his mouth was somewhat ajar, Sascha closed it, got to his feet, and returned the salute. And with that, Leondroval Caridore stepped out from under the trees and disappeared into the growing twilight, leaving Sascha faintly amused and enormously flattered.