

Chapter Seventeen

"By that reckoning, I should be dead already."

Pain and light.

These were the things Eska knew. Perhaps one came first, heralding the other, or perhaps they were one. She couldn't feel her arms, though she supposed they were pinned above her head still, not in the least because her shoulders felt ready to slip from their sockets with the slightest movement. She didn't open her eyes to face the light. Wasn't sure she could.

And then the pain grew worse—or at least more immediate. Sharp and stinging, a grass switch against her legs.

"You look half dead."

It took Eska a moment to comprehend that she, well, comprehended those words.

Perhaps she ought to open her eyes after all.

Which is how she discovered she had quite the audience.

Eska was surrounded by Vardini. She saw the woman with the silver earrings, and the older woman from the night before, as well as the warrior who had taken her and the boy Cedo. And if she was not mistaken, either the clan had grown overnight (unlikely) or a second had arrived. But the face closest to her was not Vardini.

The man peering at her was portly and pale and dressed in fine brocade. He squinted, despite being quite close, which suggested poor eyesight, and dabbed frequently at his sweaty hairline with a silk handkerchief. In short, he was as unlikely a creature to be found in the Vardini grasslands as a house cat in a swamp.

And Eska immediately knew two other things about him, though she could not decide which was more important.

He spoke Bellaran. Excellent.

He smelled of harrow root. Unexpected.

Eska had heard of the substance having that effect on certain individuals. Some scholars thought it due to poor diet, others insisted it could be traced to blood

composition, all agreed it was a sign of over-consumption. Eska did not have an opinion on the particulars. All she knew was that the spicy scent was oozing from this man's pores as if he were sweating it out.

The switch slashed against Eska's calves again, wielded by a Vardini warrior she did not recognize. She closed her eyes, her throat too dry to utter any complaint.

The man in the purple brocade spoke rapidly in Vardu to the warrior. This exchange continued for a moment, until the Vardini man scowled, drew a long knife, and, with a swift chop, cut Eska's hands free from the post.

She fell forward, her arms crying out with new pain, and dropped to her knees in front of the portly man. He could have caught her. Indeed, she came face to face with his knees as she fought to stay upright. But he merely dabbed at his neck with his handkerchief.

More words passed between the two men, and then the warrior shouted to the assembled Vardini—at which point they began to move away. The two women with were the last to go, and Eska saw them argue heatedly as they went, but after a moment she was alone with the stranger—or at least as alone as they could be under the watchful eyes of the warrior, who, after depositing a folding stool in the muddy grass, lingered a short distance away, pacing back and forth, his eyes never straying from Eska.

The pale man passed his handkerchief over his forehead and rearranged his belly, then lowered himself onto the stool. He peered at Eska again.

"Well, they don't like you very much."

No second stool appeared to be forthcoming. Nor water for her parched lips and throat.

"Who are you?" Eska managed. With her feet still bound, she had little choice but to remain on her knees—that or flop onto her side like some sort of beached sea creature, which Eska very much doubted would improve her mood.

"I?" The man indicated himself with the hand holding the handkerchief. "I am Lucullus Vorianus."

"You speak Bellaran. Which city?"

“My, my, where are your manners? I have given you my name, now you ought to give me yours.”

Eska wet her lips and tried to reel in her impatience. “Eska de Caraval, of Arconia.”

“Delighted. And I was once of Parnaxes, but I have been across the sea these many years.”

“And your position with the Vardini?”

The handkerchief fluttered in his hand. “You are very direct. If I were you, I wouldn’t frown so much.” Vorianus gave a slight tilt of his head toward the watching warrior.

“Why?” Eska asked, attempting to manufacture a more neutral expression.

“Because I highly doubt you and I will be given a second chance at this conversation. You might consider me rude for sitting while you kneel and for not offering you water to quench your thirst, but if it were up to him, you’d still be tacked to that post like a prize carcass ready for butchering. If he suspects this isn’t going well, it will end quickly.”

Eska considered this for a moment. “And what exactly is this conversation we are having, Master Vorianus?”

Lucullus Vorianus crossed one knee over the other, propped his elbow on his knee and his chin on his palm, and leaned close. He was no longer squinting, in fact, his face had grown quite intent—and the warrior was directly behind him. “Why, it is the one in which I explain to you all the trouble you’re in and we attempt to keep you alive.”

“I see,” Eska said. “And why would you have an interest in keeping me alive? What’s in it for you?”

“I suppose you wouldn’t be satisfied if I said something very nice about feeling kinship with you, our shared heritage, our beloved Seven Cities, and on and on like so?” The vacant expression returned as the warrior came around to Vorianus’s left and he dabbed at his neck with the handkerchief.

“You would suppose correctly,” Eska said, fascinated with the changes in the man.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not the one trussed up like a pig and don’t particularly feel the need to answer your question.” Vorianus’s expression and words were entirely at odds with each other, and he gave a nervous little laugh.

There were few situations that could make Eska de Caraval uneasy, but a lack of information, pertinent, vital information, was one—and the knowledge that others had the information she needed. But she saw no choice but to step into the arena of whatever game it was the Parnaxoan was playing. “Well, then, Master Vorianus,” she said, “perhaps you had better begin.”

Lucullus Vorianus uncrossed his legs, crossed them the other way, and settled onto his stool in a manner that reminded Eska of a dog turning this way and that on a soft blanket before lying down to sleep.

“Your hosts,” he began at last, “are the Wind at Dawn clan, roughly translated of course. They are a small but respected clan with a long heritage. None of this splintering that so many of the Vardini clans are known for. Those who arrived with me this morning, including our watchful friend here, are from the Sun Behind the Grass clan, larger, with an even longer heritage, and one of the four great clans of the Vardini. Sun Behind the Grass and Wind at Dawn are what you and I might call neighbors, though of course such a thing is a nebulous construct when one blade of grass looks much like another. Do you follow?”

Eska nodded. “Indeed, Master Vorianus. Let me guess, Sun Behind the Grass demands a certain degree of loyalty from Wind at Dawn and can interfere in the smaller clan’s affairs?”

Vorianus raised an eyebrow. “Not just a pretty face, I see. You are mostly correct. The clans are fully autonomous, so I would say that interfere is overstating it slightly. But Wind at Dawn benefits from the stability that comes with having one of the great clans as a neighbor. And Sun Behind the Grass benefits from having a neighbor that is not overly ambitious. The relationship is complicated, and, mind you, I am vastly oversimplifying the politics between the Vardini, but this will suffice for what you need to know.”

“And what is it I need to know?” Eska asked.

Vorianus waved the handkerchief at an insect circling his head before speaking. "Part of the relationship between the two is an exchange of warriors. They spend a season, sometimes more, living and fighting with the other. It strengthens the bond and acts as a means for younger warriors to learn from those who are more experienced. But you seem clever enough to guess at what other use this practice might have."

"They are hostages," Eska said. The impromptu lesson was very nearly allowing her to forget how much her body hurt. Alas, it was having no such effect on her thirst.

"Not afraid to be blunt, either," Vorianus said. "The Vardini do not share your bluntness, not, at least, when it comes to this exchange of warriors. Their language is very careful in this regard. But you are correct. Now, Eska de Caraval, you are two for two in your insights. I don't suppose you could manage a third?"

"You mean what this practice has to do with me." Eska took a breath and glanced through the tall grass toward the hide structures of the Wind at Dawn encampment. When she looked back at the Parnaxoan, he was watching her intently. "The man I killed was one of these exchanged warriors. He was of Sun Behind the Grass."

Vorianus sat back and smiled. "Very good." He followed this up with another nervous laugh and a series of exaggerated dabs at his hairline. "You have upset the balance between the two clans. Wind at Dawn was responsible for this man's life. His death sullies Wind at Dawn's honor and threatens Sun Behind the Grass's place in the Vardini hierarchy."

"By that reckoning, I should be dead already," Eska said. "Why am I not?"

"Two reasons," Vorianus said. "It so happens that the warrior you killed had not endeared himself to his host. He sought to claim a Wind at Dawn woman. There are few things that unite the Vardini so completely as their respect for women. His actions were antithetical to everything the clans believe in. He was only allowed to live because the woman insisted it be so."

Eska saw the dead man's face once more, saw his eyes widen as the knife drove into his skull, felt her stomach twist. She pushed the image away. "And the second reason?"

Vorianus leaned close. The stench of harrow root was nearly overwhelming. "It seems you have a champion among Wind at Dawn. The matriarch has taken a liking to you."

Eska frowned. "The matriarch? I haven't met her."

"Ah," Vorianus said, with a small smile, "but you have. She does not yet wear the chain because the formal ceremony has not taken place, but she is the matriarch, make no mistake. Wind at Dawn is transitioning."

That was something, Eska supposed, to have a matriarch regard her with some favor. But what she had seen of the matriarch's relationship with the other woman, who clearly had some influence, suggested the clan was not entirely at ease with their new leader. "How great is her power?"

Vorianus gave a delicate shrug. "I could not say with any certainty. I am not as well acquainted with Wind at Dawn, and each clan is different. Some matriarchs keep their successors at a distance, determined to have sole authority. Others work in tandem. But she is new to the role, yes, and I am not familiar with her or her clan's feelings for her."

"What happens next, Master Vorianus?"

"The Sun Behind the Grass matriarch will be here soon. I imagine there will be a great deal of conversation to which you and I will not be privy," Vorianus said. He made a show of polishing one of his buttons. "This is quite the unprecedented situation. You'll be talked about for generations to come."

"You'll forgive me if I don't find that comforting," Eska said. "Tell me, Master Vorianus, what benefit do you gain from pretending to be dull of mind and poor of eyesight?"

Lucullus Vorianus didn't miss a beat. He trilled another laugh and fanned himself. "Have you never acted the fool, Eska de Caraval?"

"No, actually," Eska said. "You enjoy being underestimated?"

“Enjoy? I wouldn’t say that.” Vorianus smiled, a sickly sort of smile, crushing a bead of sweat in the crease of his cheek. “But you must understand, I am a fat man past my best years, I have no martial advantages, no bravado or courage to speak of, and no vast fortune on which to rest. And so I have adapted. We do what we must to survive. Are you prepared to do the same?”

“What do you mean?”

Vorianus studied Eska for a moment, a new weight behind his gaze. “I know a thing or two about ancient Vardini laws and customs. In fact, if I were a wagering man—which I’m not, because wagering tends to be at odds with survival, I’ve found—but if I were, I’d bet I know as much as these matriarchs. I may be able to use that to your advantage. But you have to promise me you’ll do as I say.”

Putting her fate in another’s hands was not something Eska was accustomed to doing. In fact, it ranked alongside a lack of information as the two things Eska sought to avoid at all costs. Lucullus Vorianus had managed to inflict both upon her in the span of a single conversation.

“I’ll make that promise, Master Vorianus,” Eska said. “But first you will ask our hosts for a cup of water and then you will stir some of your harrow root powder into it.”

Vorianus’s jaw twitched, Eska was sure of it. The first instinctual, unplanned movement he had made since she had opened her eyes. But then he smiled—a little too broadly, perhaps—and wagged a finger in her direction. “A devotee of the root, I see. I confess, I didn’t think you were the type. But I can imagine how very desperate you are for a taste, yes, indeed, I can.”

Resentful of his choice of words, Eska wanted to offer a stinging retort, but she swallowed it down, aware that this man was perhaps her only ally—an uncertain alliance, if there ever was one—and therefore it would not do to antagonize him overly much. If that meant he thought her an addict, so be it. Even as she made that resolution, she felt her face twist in revulsion, but Vorianus, having spun his ample backside on his stool to face the Sun Behind the Grass warrior, was none the wiser.

The water procured, he withdrew a small pouch from his inner waistcoat pocket—complete with a tiny silver spoon, no larger than Eska’s smallest finger.

“You’ll forgive me if I ration you rather strictly,” he said.

Eska gave a nod. Any amount would do.

Vorianus filled the spoon twice, which meant he gave her less than a fifth of what she might add to a bath, and handed the clay cup to Eska. She waited for the particles to sink below the surface, pleased to be patient in the face of the obvious hunger in Vorianus’s eyes, and then raised the cup to her lips.

The water itself was marvelous. And then the spicy tang of the harrow root hit Eska’s nose and tongue and she closed her eyes, letting the powder do its work. By the time she opened them, her senses were clear, her mind calm, and she felt, if not exactly impervious, stronger than she had since entering the Vardini grasslands. The look on Lucullus Vorianus’s face, though, was far too knowing for her taste and Eska made a point of injecting her voice with as much indifference as she could when she spoke.

“Thank you, Master Vorianus, you are very kind. Now, tell me more about the matriarch of Sun Behind the Grass. I should like to know what to expect from her.”

The history lesson was cut off, however, before it ever got underway by the approach of the Wind at Dawn matriarch. She shot down the warrior’s attempt to accompany her with nothing more than a steely glare worthy, Eska could not help but think, of Sorina de Caraval when faced with a particularly asinine diplomat, and then came to stand in front of Eska. Vorianus scrambled to his feet—more awkwardly, Eska suspected, than he needed to—and offered the stool to her, but she declined this with a wave, her gaze fixed on Eska. Only after a long moment of study did she speak.

Vorianus translated swiftly. “She wants to know why you have entered the grass.”

Eska took a deep breath. “Tell her I am an archaeologist and was bound for an expedition in Sandalese and came to Vardini lands only to pass through.” The woman accepted this with a nod, then spoke again, her words drawing Vorianus’s eyebrows upward in surprise.

“She says you did what she could not and for that she is grateful. She will argue in your favor when it is time. She will be asking you for a favor, which she will name soon. Will you accept?”

Eska looked up at the woman. Her face was still calm and composed, but there was a curve to her mouth that suggested a smile contained, and a light in her eyes that Eska named anticipation. Whatever lay ahead, Eska’s fate was only a piece of this woman’s intent. She nodded at the woman, who returned the gesture, and then the matriarch turned and retreated.

“A champion, indeed,” Vorianus said, watching her go. “I am curious what she intends to ask of you. Most curious.”

“She wanted him dead, the man I killed.”

“So it seems. That is not in itself unexpected. There are others who would have shared that belief, given his crime.”

“But that means she wants to disrupt the balance between the two clans.”

“Cleverer and cleverer,” Vorianus said, appraising Eska once more.

Eska gave him a smile. “I learn quickly. Still, her position seems tenuous and I have some concern whether her people will support her. We humans are stubborn, Master Vorianus, and I’ve found that people take comfort in the familiar and resent change, even when they would be better off for it.”

Lucullus Vorianus made a little bow. “I spent thirty years resisting change, and look where that got me,” he said, his arms gesturing at the expanse of grass around them.

“I hope to some day hear your story, Master Vorianus,” Eska said. “Provided I live long enough.”

Whatever rapport had emerged between them seemed to teeter and then vanish as Vorianus looked away and resumed wiping away sweat with his now sodden handkerchief. When he glanced her way again—the most fleeting of glances—it was as if an abyss had opened. Two allies she might have, but both were built on something Eska could not see. It was a disconcerting thought, to say the least, to know that she was being used for ends of which she remained ignorant.

A third ally, however, revealed himself later that day, long after Lucullus Vorianus had left his stool in search of sustenance and shade, after, even, the Sun Behind the Grass warrior grew bored of his task and wandered off. She was left to sit in the grass at the base of the post, hands and feet still bound, sun beating down, passing time by the strands of a spider building its web near her knee.

Eska was conscious only because of the harrow root, she knew, when the small shadow appeared over her shoulder. And then Cedo was crouching at her side, pressing a cup of water into her hands.

Eska drained the cup. He took it without a word and walked away, only to return a moment later, the cup refilled. This he did five times, not once venturing to speak, not once questioning whether she needed more. The fifth time, he carried a piece of the thin, spicy flatbread, which Eska had to force herself to chew slowly and savor. When she finished, she expected him to leave, expected him to slink away as quietly as he had come before he could be caught and punished.

But Cedo didn't leave. He sat next to her, legs crossed, finger poking in the dirt—disturbing the spider and its web—glancing up at her only now and then. He smiled once, spoke not at all. And Eska had never been so glad of company in all her life.