

Chapter Eleven

"I told you we should have gone around."

"It's nothing you need to worry about, my lady. You are perfectly safe while I live."

As reassurances go, this one was not particularly satisfactory to Eska. Especially considering the grim expressions on the faces of the thirty-odd mounted warriors surrounding Eska, her uncle, the Firenzia crew members, and their Anderran escort—which was, incidentally, fewer in number than thirty.

"And if you are no longer living?" Eska asked, not bothering to do so under her breath.

The Anderran captain smiled as though his teeth alone could protect her. Admittedly, it was a good smile, brilliant, charming, and easily given, and the face behind the smile was the opposite of unpleasant. However, the man attached to that face had made it clear in the days since their departure from Rhoanos that he viewed Eska as nothing more than a luxurious ornament, something to admire but not respect. It was now apparent that he also did not consider her capable of sarcasm.

"Your fear is touching, my lady," he said, "but these warriors are no match for me or my men."

The arrow that sprouted suddenly in the dirt very near to his horse's feet was the sort of thing that might give a more pragmatic man some reason for concern. Captain Txatu, to his credit, did not flinch, but Eska was fairly certain this was more due to stubborn and willful misinterpretation of the situation than bravery.

Txatu dismounted and stepped forward to pluck the arrow from the dirt. He snapped it in half and addressed the warriors in a combination of Anderran and Vardu, the language of the tribal lands that spread north and east of Anderra. His respectable vocabulary in multiple languages was no doubt part of the reason he had been chosen by Prince Frantzisko for the task of escorting the Firenzia crew in their journey to Sandalese, but given that his attitude suggested incompetence in other areas, Eska did not trust him to properly treat with the Vardini warriors. A

few wild gestures and forceful words later, Eska turned slightly in her saddle to Valentin de Caraval.

“I told you we should have gone around,” she said quietly.

Her uncle’s lips compressed slightly, but he said nothing, his gaze fixed on Captain Txatu. They had debated the route since leaving Rhoxanos—take the straighter path through the verdant Vardini plains, which were full of game, fresh water, and, incidentally, Vardini, or add three days by traveling around to the north. The longer route through drier, harsher (and emptier) grasslands was not without its difficulties, but they were well-provisioned and Eska knew the Vardini to be quick-tempered and unpredictable in their reaction to travelers crossing their lands.

“I don’t suppose you have anyone who speaks Vardu on your crew?” Eska asked. She was fairly sure he didn’t. While the Seven Cities attracted people from all sides of the Anerrean Sea and beyond, the Vardini were small in number and not known to travel outside of their ancestral lands.

Valentin shook his head slightly.

“At least the Vardini have more respect for women than our Anderran friends,” Eska said. “If we are taken captive, I’m likely to survive, at least for a time.” She said it lightly, not yet willing to show her uneasiness, but Eska’s heart raced and the sweat beading on her hairline was not solely the result of the hot sun. The truth was they were outnumbered and surrounded and Eska did not much care for those odds—especially when the outcome of the confrontation was largely out of her hands.

Captain Txatu turned back to Eska and Valentin. He was no longer smiling. “The savages are insisting on a toll,” he snarled. “For the privilege of crossing the plains unaccosted.”

“Captain,” Eska said, her voice sharp, “might I suggest refraining from such derogatory language.”

Txatu turned his snarl on Eska. “They are insisting that we killed one of their sacred antelope last night. I will call them what I wish.”

“You and I both know we did not do as they say. And yet,” Eska said through gritted teeth, “in light of the thirty arrows pointed at our heads, perhaps we ought to adopt a more conciliatory manner, Captain.”

They had not so much as seen any of the pale, horned antelope the Vardini believed to be the form their gods took when walking the world of men. Plenty of their tawny-colored cousins had loped here and there as Eska and her party began their foray into the knee-high grasses that morning, but even those they had refrained from hunting, choosing instead to take a few of the long-eared hares that burst from hiding at their approach.

Captain Txatu remained unmoved. “Their bows will not withstand our steel.” He turned back to the warriors, but Eska urged her horse forward until she was level with him.

From her vantage point, Eska glared down at the Anderran captain. “Captain. You are charged with escorting us safely to Sandalese. Please consider how your current course of action is meant to keep us safe.” With the sun flaring behind Eska’s head, he had to squint to look up at her, and Eska was fairly sure half of his grimace was due to not being particularly fond of being looked down on by a woman. But she could also see that, despite the enormous lack of prudence he had so far displayed, her words were having an effect. She pressed her advantage before it slipped away. “Perhaps we could ask them about this toll. Politely.”

“You wish me to admit that we shot the beast?” This was clearly a distasteful notion to Captain Txatu.

Eska closed her eyes so as not to make the rolling happening beneath her lids quite so obvious. “Did those words leave my mouth?” She took a breath. “See if you can avoid further talk of antelopes entirely. Just find out what they want before one of them gets a twitchy finger.”

As though on cue, the Vardini chose that moment to run out of patience.

It was all very neatly done. A few arrows here, a tightening of the circle there—
Eska fell to the ground, her shoulder compressing painfully, only partially aware that a hand had dragged her from the saddle. Captain Txatu’s hand, apparently, in an effort to spare her from the arrows streaking above, only now the

captain was struggling to breathe and four arrows were embedded in his chest. Blood bubbled from his lips as he swayed for a moment, then he toppled into the grass and fell across Eska's legs, pinning her to the ground.

Dragging herself out from under his dead weight, Eska stayed low to the earth, her world reduced to tall grass and blue sky. She heard a horse scream in pain, heard shouts and the clash of steel against steel, dodged a sudden flurry of hooves, and then another hand had her by the hair and Eska was wrenched to her knees. Eyes watering with the sudden pain, she could not at first make out anything beyond the sea of grass swimming before her, but she could smell blood in the air.

It was Valentin's face she saw first, when she blinked away the tears. Her uncle, too, was on his knees. Blood trickled from a cut on his cheekbone and he looked unsteady, his gaze unfocused. A knife rested against his throat, wielded by a Vardini warrior—the one who had spoken with Tzatu.

Around Eska, the dying groaned. She could see only two Anderran guards left among the living, though one looked as though he would succumb to the wound in his belly—one hand attempting to stem the flow of blood, a futile effort—before the knife at his neck could do the job.

The Firenze crew, Eska saw, appeared unharmed, though they were huddled together beside their wagons, hemmed in by mounted warriors.

The hand in Eska's hair yanked her head back and she was given an upside down view of her captor's face. Bald. Bearded. He spoke a few words Eska could not understand, the breath washing over her so foul she flinched from instinct and was rewarded with a tightened grip on her skull as her captor laughed.

Which was when Eska reached up and plunged her knife into his skull.

She didn't remember drawing the knife from her boot—Perrin's knife. She knew only that the bearded warrior had neglected to notice it.

Blood poured down his face, dripping in thick rivulets into Eska's eyes. She was aware, distantly, of shouting she could not understand, but more importantly she was on her feet, the bloodstained blade steady in her hand as the bearded warrior collapsed with a thud behind her.

Silence over the sea of grass. Eska's heart roared in her ears. The blood of the dead man dripped from her chin. She did not dare look at her uncle.

Frowning, the warrior with his knife on Valentin's neck made a sharp gesture and another Vardini man rushed forward. They traded places and the first warrior, who moved with the same sort of prowl Eska had seen Alexandre de Minos employ on the training ground, took a step toward her, then another. His knife remained at his side, and his expression held more curiosity than bloodlust—though that was there, too. After all, Eska had just plunged a knife into his companion's head.

The warrior raised his left hand and held it out, palm up, before him. He looked at Eska intently. She didn't move. He took another step and Eska retreated one, brandishing the knife in a manner she hoped was intimidating. The warrior held his ground, then let his knife roll from his fingers and fall into the grass at his feet. Still he did not look away from Eska's face. The fingers of his left hand crooked once, twice, a beckoning motion. He spoke a word. Beckoned again.

Eska hesitated, her mind whirring. She had no intention of surrendering her weapon, but nor could she fight off one Vardini warrior, much less all of them. Her gaze darted around the trampled grass, but there was no source of aid to be found.

Patience, it seemed, was not a Vardini ideal. With a sudden exhale, the warrior turned away from Eska and strode back to Valentin. He seized her uncle by the hair and began to drag him in the direction of his horse. Forced to keep up, Valentin found his feet, stumbling wildly in the warrior's wake. The other Vardini warriors, acting on silent orders, stepped away from the Firenzia crew and the surviving Anderran soldiers. They remounted swiftly as their leader began to knot a rope around Valentin's wrists. He, too, swung into his saddle, the other end of the rope in one hand, reins in the other. Only when he nudged his horse forward and Valentin staggered to keep up did Eska find her voice.

"Take me!"

At first she thought he meant to ignore her. But then, as one, the mounted warriors turned and wheeled back toward Eska. The leader rode straight for her, pulling up only at the last moment. His horse skidded to a stop in front of Eska, so

close she could see its nostrils flutter as it let out a great breath. Valentin de Caraval sagged behind the horse, the rope alone holding him upright.

“Take me,” Eska said again, holding the warrior’s gaze. The words would mean nothing. “Me,” she said, pointing at her chest.

“Eska, no.” Valentin said, his voice a moan.

She would not look at him. Could not.

Eska let the bloody knife fall. “Me,” she repeated, tapping her chest once more. “Spare him. Spare them all.”

“No, no, Eska, don’t do this.” Valentin’s voice was a cracked, broken thing.

The warrior looked at Eska, his face as still and impervious as the expanse of sky above. After a long moment, he dismounted and walked a slow circle around Eska. She stared straight ahead, determined not to wilt despite the trembling in her knees. Without warning, the warrior snaked his arms around Eska and lifted her into his saddle, her instinctual flailing useless against his strength. He vaulted up behind her and took the reins, and then they were gone, the grasses whispering beneath the horse’s hooves, the steady drumming of the rest of the mounted warriors following behind.

Eska tried to look back, tried to catch one last glimpse of her uncle, wished she could say something, anything, to him, but she could not crane her neck to see past the warrior. She saw only the deep blue cloaks of the Vardini, flowing from their bare shoulders, saw horse tails and a flock of red and black birds burst from the grass and take flight—and then the warrior behind her put a hand to her shoulder, forcing her to face forward. He asked the horse for more speed and Eska had no choice but to twist the mare’s grey mane between her fingers—fingers sticky with Vardini blood—and hold on as the world rushed by.