

Chapter Thirteen

"You know, if you kept your teeth to yourself, this would be more pleasant for the both of us."

"Sit."

The woman before Eska gestured down at the ground, the word coming off her tongue with forced precision, an unfamiliar word in an unfamiliar language.

Eska sat, lowering herself to the smooth hide—tawny brown and flecked with spots—the woman indicated. She forced herself to keep her gaze on the woman's dark eyes, though the desire to examine every inch of the hide structure and its contents was knocking incessantly around Eska's mind, demanding attention. Albus would have recognized the look on her face, Eska knew, would have laughed as he watched her brain try—and fail—to catalog everything she saw, in no small part because most of it was unfamiliar. Which is not to say Albus himself would have been immune. After all, neither he nor Eska had knowledge of the Vardini clans beyond what they might have gleaned here and there in their studies and research. But while the librarian would have been content to look from a distance, Eska very much wanted to touch, to feel, to hold—an impulse often considered impolite.

Sitting helped. So did the knowledge that she was currently occupying ambiguous status. Prisoner, yes, of this she had little doubt. But there were no bindings holding her wrists, no injuries upon her person. And she was alive, so that had to count for something.

Eska waited, trying to content herself with admiring the woman's fine features, a long nose, full lips, and a most impressive mane of dark curls. She wore an unremarkable tunic, enhanced only by tiny beads lining the neck. Her belt was merely a strip of unrefined leather, looped over itself and resting on her hips. But if Eska knew anything about the Vardini it was that the clans were matriarchal in structure—and the woman's long silver earrings, long enough to brush her shoulders, indicated she was next in line to lead this particular clan.

Of course, this immediately set Eska to pondering why she had been brought before this woman and not the leader, who would have worn similar earrings with

the singular difference of a loose silver chain connecting the two and draped across her collarbone. Given their inability to communicate, Eska was not sure she would ever learn the answer.

They had ridden until dusk, the plains seemingly endless no matter how swiftly the horses ate the ground beneath them, each gentle roll in the landscape the only change to the horizon. She was ignored throughout the journey, merely a burden occupying space on the warrior's saddle. They made no stops, no alteration to their course, and by the time the sky was purple and grey and they splashed across a narrow stream snaking through the grass and Eska saw the rounded hide structures of the Vardini encampment, her legs were useless jelly and she was so parched she could not find the saliva to wet her lips.

As such, she made a poor entrance, her knees giving way the moment she was asked to support herself. The warrior caught her—without force but equally lacking in any sign of sympathy—and Eska quickly had to summon the will to walk on numb legs, her feet pricking with needles with every step, as she was given no opportunity to recover before being marched through the hide structures—laid out neatly, a clear path, equal spacing between the temporary homes, presumably following an established hierarchy, Eska could not help but note. She was, apparently, something of a novelty and the Vardini, she discovered, were not shy. They approached as she was led along the path, coming close enough to touch, their faces openly curious. A few words, the tone indecipherable to Eska given the differences in inflection between Vardu and Bellaran, were tossed her direction, but these dried up as soon as the warrior spoke, no doubt telling them of her ignorance.

And so she was deposited, somewhat overwhelmed, thoroughly curious, and still with legs full of needles, in the presence of the woman with the long silver earrings.

Eska waited. She was in little position to do otherwise, and besides, waiting gave her the opportunity to work some saliva into her mouth. To her relief, the woman was either a diligent host or perceptive enough to notice Eska's discomfort. She dipped a leather cup in a small barrel and handed it to Eska—no, not handed,

despite the fact that Eska's hands were very much outstretched and waiting. Instead, the woman took great care to place the cup on the hide in front of Eska's crossed legs. Eska filed away this information—incomplete as it was—for later use.

"Thank you," Eska said, aware that the words might be meaningless. The woman offered no insight on this. Her face remained impassive—but not distant, of which Eska was glad. Eska raised the cup to her lips and drained it in three swallows. It was likely rude to ask for more, but the notion was tempting. Instead, Eska returned the cup to the hide, placing it as close to the woman as her arms would allow. The hint was not taken.

"Which seven?" the woman asked. She, too, had taken a seat, her legs crossed, back straight, forearms resting on her knees.

The fact that she knew to speak her limited Bellaran told Eska that the warrior had informed her of Eska's place of origin. Even so, it took a moment for Eska to understand the question.

"Arconia," Eska said.

A short nod. "Why here?" This question followed quickly on the heels of Eska's answer, perhaps spurred on by the success of the first question.

There was no good answer to that question, certainly no answer Eska could convey in words common enough that the woman might understand.

"Sandalese," she said, resorting to the name of her destination.

A crease appeared between the woman's eyes. "Why?"

"I am looking for something."

No reaction, no reply.

Eska tried again. "I dig things out of the dirt?"

The crease deepened. Eska sensed a touch of impatience in the eyes looking back at her. This was not a woman accustomed to being out of her depth. Eska could not help but feel the balance between them was sliding out of her grasp. She considered, and abandoned, the idea of making digging motions with her hands. Many gestures were universal—come, wait, eat, drink—but there was the distinct possibility of being misinterpreted. Albus would have appreciated her caution.

Sascha, on the other hand, would have been entirely at a loss, the lack of communication hampering his natural instinct to act. The thought made Eska smile.

The smile was not lost on the woman seated opposite her. But the effect was less than desirable. With a sharp exhale that set her long earrings shivering, she spoke a single word.

“Speak.”

The directive was nebulous at best. Speak of what? Or perhaps the woman’s frustration had caused her to use the wrong word all together. She could, Eska mused, mean the opposite. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, silence was not Eska’s nature.

“Well. My name is Eska de Caraval. I am an archaeologist.”

The woman was very still. Eska plowed onward.

“I like to learn about things. Old things. Sometimes very old. Sometimes also broken. I study them, to learn about the people who made them. And then I argue with other people who study them, and we tend to accomplish very little, but a good debate is its own reward, I suppose. And sometimes the things are very valuable and people want to buy them to put on a shelf and display when they want to impress someone. I’d rather they all went to a museum. Or a research institution. Somewhere they can be properly studied and appreciated as something other than a price.” Eska gave a small shrug. “And there’s this item in Sandalese, at least, I think it’s there. I don’t really know, to be honest. A librarian might have told me, either that or I did a very poor job interpreting his letter and am not at all where I ought to be.” She took a breath. Her voice went soft. “I don’t know what you want with me. I don’t know why I was brought here. I only know that I can’t stay. There are things I must do. Or I fear the consequences will be,” she hesitated, “very grave.” An understatement, given that the Archduke of Arconia was seeking six discs last used by the Alescuan kings and queens to dominate, subjugate, and terrorize.

The woman was quiet for a long moment, though whether because she had comprehended some of the words that had tumbled forth from Eska—unlikely—or because she was contemplating what use she might have for a Bellaran prisoner who would not stop talking, Eska could not say. At length, she spoke.

“Give self. Why?”

Why indeed?

Eska saw her uncle’s face once more, saw the plea etched into Valentin de Caraval’s very being as she offered herself in his place.

She supposed it was because she loved him. She did, this was no falsehood, despite their differences. But that particular answer felt unsatisfactory to Eska—and yet she had no other.

“My uncle,” she offered by way of an answer. “Father’s brother,” she added, trying to clarify. This seemed to register for the woman, who gave a nod, slow and solemn. Family ties were important to the Vardini, Eska knew. Perhaps she had earned some good will.

The interview, however, was at an end. At a sharp word from the woman, the warrior Eska had ridden with pushed through the hides draped over the entrance. Taking her by one arm, he pulled Eska upright and marched her out. The encampment was quiet, or so Eska thought at first, until she saw—and smelled—the gathering close to the stream.

The Vardini were gathered for the evening meal, which was currently sizzling on a spit over an open flame. Eska’s mouth promptly began to water. A woman plucked at a stringed instrument, the notes carrying into the growing night. Above, the stars filled the sky, strewn like gems across the blackness.

The warrior deposited Eska within the questionable shelter of a short, small, three-sided structure and withdrew a length of rope from his belt, the same rope he had bound about Valentin’s wrists that very day.

“I won’t try to escape,” Eska said, which was, she knew in her heart, somewhere between a lie and the truth. She had no immediate plan to sneak away—after all, she had little notion of where she was or where she ought to run, and she was very hungry—but she had done more dangerous things and she could not deny that her mind had been churning away at that very problem ever since she dropped Perrin’s knife in the tall grass.

At any rate, the warrior neither understood her nor paid her any mind, and Eska was soon leashed—each arm separately, so she still had use of her hands—to

one of the supports holding up the hides that were meant to protect her from the elements. She offered no complaint, however, and was glad to receive, after the clan had divided the antelope and rabbit meat and after Eska was quite sure her stomach was about to clamber forth and go in search of something resembling sustenance, a clay bowl containing a few lumps of meat and a chewy, thin—and unexpectedly spicy—wafer of something she supposed was not unrelated to flatbread.

It was, frankly, delightful.

Less delightful was the scratchy nature of the grass—which lay flat for Eska after a thorough stomping—and her night consisted of a great deal of tossing and turning as she sought a comfortable position and rather more shivering than she had anticipated given the heat of the day.

Then again, when one is expecting to be put to death for the crime of killing a sacred antelope—despite the fact that one is innocent of said crime—prickly grass and a bit of cold were, truth be told, more than tolerable.

“You know, if you kept your teeth to yourself, this would be more pleasant for the both of us.”

Eska snatched her hand away from the horse’s exploratory swipe and took a step back to reassess the situation.

She had been woken at dawn and brought to the stream to wash her face—an apparent requirement that was conveyed to her by the vigorous gestures of the boy who had been staring down at her when she opened her eyes that morning. This accomplished, unsatisfactorily, if the boy’s face was any indication, she was brought to the cook fire and given a bowl of sweet porridge. The boy had proceeded to mime eating, which Eska tried very hard not to laugh about, and they ate in a silence Eska liked to think was companionable while the encampment stirred into wakefulness around them. This pleasant scene was cut short by a rebuke to the boy—offered by a stern voice and sterner countenance—and the sulky expression

on his face told Eska that he was less her custodian and more her partner in punishment, assigned to the ignoble task as a result of some transgression. The sulk turned to a scowl and as such, his gesturing was reduced to unhelpful motions when he had led Eska away to what she came to understand was their task for the morning—grooming horses.

“What would you think if I told you that horses are far more polite where I come from,” Eska muttered at the horse, he of the eager teeth. “What would you think of that? Hmm?” The horse swished his tail at her. She had commenced the work without complaint, but this attitude was swiftly curtailed as she spent more time dancing away from his mouth than brushing dust from his black and white piebald coat. The boy, meanwhile, was nearly finished with his charge, a placid white thing with sleepy eyes. He worked efficiently, with the rhythm born of long practice, and only occasionally snuck glances in Eska’s direction.

Seeing her horse’s attention narrow on a fly, Eska took the opportunity to comb her bristled brush through his mane, which earned her swift retribution. The horse snaked his neck around, the teeth snapping perilously close to Eska’s arm. She darted out of reach once more and took a deep breath, and then the boy was there, his face exhibiting the full force of childhood exasperation. He held up a hand, palm facing Eska, and then shooed her away. Turning to the horse, who eyed him with the same interest, he rapped his knuckles once on the creature’s nose and spoke a single word—surely dripping with such disdain for Eska’s benefit. The horse gave a shake of his head, mane rippling, and immediately shut his eyes as though this was all he wanted all along.

The boy, his face struggling to conceal his triumph, pointed behind Eska to where a third horse waited, then went to work, a string of words trailing from his mouth. Smiling a little, Eska turned and did as she was told—with much improved results.

Fourteen horses later, Eska was no longer smiling and the porridge was nothing more than a distant memory.

She straightened, arched her back, and scanned the small herd. By her estimation, they were perhaps halfway through. At least she had yet to encounter another so fond of showing his teeth as the first.

“I don’t suppose,” she said to the boy, one hand on her hip, “we might be allowed a respite?”

The boy’s glance darted over the horses, then back to Eska. To her surprise, his face split into a wide grin, and then without warning, he dashed through the horses, ducked under the thin cordon keeping them from roaming free, and disappeared into the grass.

Eska put her other hand on her hip. Surely things would not go well for her if she were found without her miniature guard. Surely she ought to follow. Surely.

As logic goes, it was not a solid case.

Eska raced after him, vaulted the twine, and followed his path through the grass—until she nearly ran headlong into the stream. It was wider here, the current so slow it hardly seemed to move at all. And the boy was floating in the middle, face to the sun, his loose tunic billowing around him.

He lifted his head at her approach and smiled, the impish grin replaced by something far more content. Eska smiled back.

He ignored her after that, paddling around on his back, wading to the opposite bank, weaving grass into braids and letting them float away. While the prospect of floating, of full immersion in the cool water, was enticing, something told Eska she was not likely to be granted dry clothes, and so she resigned herself to soaking her feet and thinking of summers long ago, in a green valley where she had watched hawks soar across cloudless skies, where she had learned to pick berries at their ripest, where she had chased rabbits and sung songs to shy deer at twilight.

Eska was pulled from her reverie as the boy waded out of the water. He sprawled on the grass not far from her, but within a moment—spurred by boredom, perhaps?—he was sitting facing her, legs crossed, elbows on his knees, chin on his hands, gaze fixed on her in that way children have.

“You have a lovely swimming hole,” Eska said, moving her arms about her in a swimming motion.

The boy wrinkled his nose and raised one eyebrow, clearly unimpressed with her gesture.

“Yes, well, we can’t all be so skilled with non-verbal communication,” Eska said, laughing. She looked him in the eye and pointed at her chest. “Eska.”

His drew his head back from his hands, alert now.

She repeated the motion. “Eska. My name.”

The boy frowned slightly, then tentatively poked at his own torso. “Cedo.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Cedo,” Eska said.

The frown deepened, but not, Eska thought, because of her. He tried again, jabbing himself with more force. “Cedomir.”

“Ah,” Eska said, smiling and nodding, “you are Cedomir, but called Cedo.”

The sound of his name in both forms was met with an enthusiastic nod and he began to look about himself, as though eager to share more words.

Alas, the opportunity was denied by the approach of the same stern voice from the morning. Approach was putting it lightly. The woman churned through the grass, emerging to loom over Cedo, who looked down at his toes with a face full of regret as she admonished him. Eska, on the other hand, was pulled to her feet by a pair of strong hands, at which point a second pair of hands latched onto her other arm and she was half dragged, half carried back to the encampment. They deposited her next to the three-sided structure under which she had spent the night, then returned the ropes to her wrists and secured her to the support once more. It was not especially cruelly done, but the speed at which she was hitched in place like livestock left her with raw skin on both wrists—and a bruise or two on her ego.

As the men who had trussed her up moved away, Eska caught sight of the woman with the long earrings through the small crowd that had gathered. She was a picture of dignity, tall and long-limbed, her hands clasped before her, but Eska was fairly sure she saw the woman’s lips compress, saw a stiffness in her shoulders. Again Eska wondered at the absence of the clan’s matriarch, but, though the woman lingered after the other onlookers had dispersed, there were no answers on her face.

Eska was left to ponder this for rather longer than she would have liked. Normally pleased with the opportunity to think without interruption or disturbance—her own mind created enough disturbances, as Albus wont to remind her—hunger and the heat of the sun, its path through the sky conveniently allowing it to shine directly on Eska no matter which corner of her shelter she attempted to cram herself into, proved to be insurmountable foes. As the day wore on and there was no indication of what might befall her next, Eska found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on anything other than the muscles aching in her back and the dryness in her mouth, and even the latter won out against the former in the end.

Relief came in the form of clouds swiftly rolling in from the west across the wide sky. They swallowed the sun, driven on by stiff winds, granting Eska the luxury of shade, but her reprieve was short-lived owing to the fat drops of rain that began to pelt her meager shelter. Eska turned her face to the sky, lips parted, and managed to catch a few drops, but the rain soon turned to a torrent, striking the grass and Eska's face as though the storm bore a grudge against them both, and Eska was forced to retreat as deep into her shelter as she could. It mattered little. As the ground around her grew saturated, the rain began to pool in the flattened grass, and the wind drove the rain into the shelter at an angle. She was soon soaked. And shivering. The encampment grew quiet as the clan sheltered from the storm, the carefully cured hides standing bravely against the elements, the structures merely faint shapes in shades of grey against a grey world.

It was, the argument could be made, not a bad time to attempt to flee.

Eska forced one, two, three deep breaths in and out of her lungs, trying to still her chattering teeth and waken her reluctant mind. She wished for the packet of harrow root powder, wished for the strength, both of mind and body, that it could offer her—but that was far away, packed in the belongings she had last seen as the blood of a man with a knife in his skull dripped down her face. She wondered where her uncle was, whether he had turned back to Anderra or was searching the grasslands for her. Did he mourn? Was he trying to assemble a rescue party? Or was he continuing north and east, pushing on to Sandalese without her? The last

was a cold thought that nestled somewhere in Eska's stomach. She did not trust it, knew it to be false, and yet it burrowed there nonetheless.

The prospect of wandering the grasslands in such weather was not to be relished, but Eska knew there was no certainty she would have such an opportunity again—not a Vardini warrior in sight, the horses just steps away. She could ride bareback, had done so before. And she knew vaguely which direction would take her back toward Anderra. Of course, she might get lost, especially without sun and stars to guide her, or the horse might stumble in a hole and break a leg, leaving her to wander onward on her own two feet. Despite the fact that Eska was not short on confidence in herself, she had no lofty impressions about her chances of catching rabbits with her bare hands or finding fresh water amid the endless grass.

The alternative was to wait. Be patient. Develop an understanding of her captors and what they wanted. This was the more prudent option, of course, but unlike being accused of murder in Toridium, Eska had taken a Vardini life in front of plenty of witnesses. The fact that she was yet alive was notable, but Eska did not much feel like waiting around to discover the extent of their clemency.

She began to work at the ropes binding her wrists to the wooden pole holding up her—drenched—hide structure, first with her fingers and then her teeth, which earned her nothing more than a few rope fibers stuck to her tongue. Frustrated, she tried her fingers a second time, but this only resulted in the loss of more skin around her wrists and a raw feeling on the pads of her fingers.

With a degree of healthy optimism, Eska moved her hands up the wooden support, where water poured through a gap in the hides, reasoning that the ropes, if well and truly soaked, might stretch and loosen. Raindrops splattered on her hands, harsh and relentless, stinging her skin, but it was the chill that tested Eska's resolve. Her hands ached at first, then grew numb, and they hardly responded when Eska deemed it time to test the elasticity of the knots—which left much to be desired.

Sinking back onto her heels, Eska sighed, her head spinning with hunger, her body refusing to cooperate, eyelids drooping—which meant she didn't see the Vardini coming for her until their three pairs of legs were looming before her

bedraggled shelter in the growing darkness. A figure ducked beneath the hides, a face she had not seen before, a small knife in hand, and Eska tried to shrink away from his touch. He uttered a phrase, his voice harsh and guttural, and his free hand snaked out and latched onto Eska's left arm with such ferocity she cried out. The other hand brought the knife down on first one rope, then the second, and he sawed away until the sodden fibers gave way and she was released from the support. The ends of the two ropes were swiftly knotted together, restricting Eska's hands to minimal movement.

With a sudden yank, the man hauled Eska out of the shelter. Struggling to get her balance in the muddy, wet grass, Eska blinked away raindrops drowning her eyelashes, but then she was hoisted in the air and slung over the man's shoulder. She felt another pair of hands on her feet, felt a rope cinch around her ankles—painfully tight—and then she was carried away, her world reduced to a view of the man's lower half and the squelching grass beneath his feet.

Hushed voices, hurried words, these things trailed after Eska as the dim shapes of the encampment passed by, and then silence—or as near to it as could be had with rain still pattering furiously on the hides above as Eska was carried into a new shelter. She could see furs beneath the man's feet, a faint glow of light, smelled the smoke of something herbal.

Without ceremony, Eska found herself lowered to the ground in a soggy heap, her bound limbs hampering her as she struggled to right herself on her knees. Her hair hung in a heavy, wet curtain across her face, leaving little room to observe her surroundings. A shadow moved across the light, and then a second light flared to life and was thrust in Eska's face. She leaned back and closed her eyes, spots dancing across her vision.

A spoken command. A hand on Eska's shoulder, holding her upright. Eska could feel the heat of the light source. She kept her eyes shut. Another hand, this one cool of touch, grabbed her by the chin, jerking her head upward. A thumb dug into her cheek and Eska opened her eyes.

The woman looking back at her was of uncertain age and her eyes of even more uncertain color. But what Eska expected to see, at least once her vision adjusted to

the light, was a pair of long silver earrings fastened together by a silver chain draped under her neck—and yet this was not so. This, too, was not the clan’s matriarch. A woman of some import, Eska thought, given the size of her hide structure and the fine furs present, but not the source of authority.

The woman released Eska’s face and stepped back, the light of her small lamp washing over a second figure. This one Eska knew. The woman who had been marked as the next matriarch. She wore the same tunic, the same plain belt, the same austere air. The only change was that her feet were no longer bare—and perhaps there was a new severity in her face. Or perhaps it was only the work of the shifting shadows. The dim light made it difficult to tell.

The two women conversed briefly, the words flowing quickly between them. If there was deference in the younger woman’s voice, Eska could not hear it, but she did hear strain in both voices. Without stronger knowledge of Vardini ways, Eska had no means of knowing who this older woman was, if this was the way of things, or if the two women were at odds. Then, with a short nod from the woman with the earrings, the conversation ended. Neither seemed happy about the result, but the younger woman approached Eska, her gaze narrowed.

“Death,” she said.

Not exactly the word Eska wanted to hear.

But then the woman shook her head, her frustration with herself clear, and her gaze roamed away from Eska, darting here and there around the shelter. Eska held her breath. At last the woman found what she was looking for and stepped across the furs to retrieve a knife from a small table. She approached Eska a second time, the knife resting on her open palm. She looked down at Eska and nodded, her face intent.

It seemed highly unlikely to Eska in that moment that she was meant to take the knife—after all, her hands were still bound and she could not possibly fathom why the woman might offer her a blade. Her confusion must have been obvious.

“You,” the woman said.

The only logical conclusion Eska could arrive at was that she was expected to take her own life.

“I don’t understand,” Eska said.

The woman sighed and grasped the knife’s smooth bone handle and then abruptly raised her arm and brought the knife down on the top of her head—only she stopped just short of actually stabbing her own skull.

“Oh,” Eska said. “That.” She took a breath and held the woman’s gaze. “Yes, I did that death.”

Another nod, this one of satisfaction. Then, “Why?”

A question not easily answered with a single word. Eska made an attempt. “Defense.” The woman shook her head. “Afraid?” No, that wouldn’t do. Eska glanced at the other woman, still trying to read the relationship between the two. Surely the younger woman would not be questioning Eska if the elder possessed any Bellaran. But why question Eska in her presence? And why question Eska at all? They knew what she had done. Eska tried one more answer, returning her gaze to the younger woman. “Fear.”

There it was, a glimmer of understanding, a slow nod. As the woman returned the knife to the table, Eska caught the glance shared between the two. The tension was unmistakable and the older woman raised her chin and crossed her arms in front of her. Eska knew impatience when she saw it.

The younger woman knew it as well. She turned back to Eska, the intensity still there, but diminished by something else. Eska might have named it worry. For her next question, the woman did not even bother to search for a word. Instead, she raised both arms and splayed her hands above her head, the inside of her wrists touching the sides of her scalp, fingers arcing slightly outward, like—well, like an antelope, Eska realized.

“No,” Eska said, shaking her head quickly. “No, not that death.”

The older woman spoke a few sharp words at the next matriarch, who did not bother to look her way or respond. She opened her mouth to speak to Eska again, closed it, her frown returning as she struggled to overcome her limited vocabulary, and then unleashed a torrent of Vardu directed at the stretched hides above her head.

The other woman uncrossed her arms and called out, her gaze on the entrance behind Eska. Two warriors entered, bringing wind and rain with them, and stood at Eska's shoulders as the woman continued to speak.

Her heart racing now, fear climbing from her belly to her throat, Eska kept her gaze on the younger woman, whose face had gone stiff and still as her focus never strayed from a point somewhere over Eska's head, her long earrings shivering, her dissent a palpable thing. But as Eska was dragged from the shelter, the woman offered no protest, and the last thing Eska saw before her face became intimately acquainted with a puddle of mud was the older woman's imperious face.

Eska struggled to rise, was shoved back into the mud, her hands sliding uselessly in search of traction. She tried again, panic rising as she fought to breathe through the mud, and then she was hauled into the air—she fought, her fingers reaching for something, anything to latch on to, her feet kicking out behind her. She struck something with her heel, was rewarded for her efforts with a grunt of surprise and a vicious blow to her jaw that would have knocked her flat were she not suspended in the air. Stunned, Eska clung to consciousness, her already encumbered vision fading in and out, her head no longer sure which way was up.

And then suddenly she was alone. Gradually, her body came back to her—a ringing in her head, arms stretched above her head, something sturdy at her back. Eska tried to breathe, tried to still her pounding heart. She tilted her face to the sky, letting the rain streak down her face and wash the mud from her eyes, tasting earth and blood as rainwater ran across her lips.

Eska tried to lower her hands, felt resistance. Ignoring the pain in her neck, she twisted her head in search of what held her. Her hands were bound to an iron ring, which was fastened to a stout wooden pole, which was, it had to be admitted, keeping Eska upright.

The night dragged on, measured in raindrops and the number of times she jerked out of something that wasn't sleep. Again and again she saw the face of the bearded warrior, felt his hand in her hair, felt the way his skull had given way—so easy, so smooth—to the blade in her hand, felt the warmth of his blood on her

face—only to flinch back to wakefulness, the blood replaced by cold rain, her hands deprived of all feeling.

One other face visited Eska that night. A single visit and gone far too soon, stealing away with the feeble spark of joy kindled within Eska. Alexandre de Minos, smiling, the way he used to while listening to Eska discuss her work in the sort of detail only a fellow scholar would appreciate. Eska smiled, too, or she might have. Her mind seemed separate from her body, aware but distant. But then Alexandre de Minos's face vanished and Eska's mind formed a clear thought, the first since being dragged out of the matriarch's sight: she was never going to see him again.