

Chapter Three

"One or two."

"You want me to be quiet?"

Once, Eska would have laughed at the absurdity of such a notion, made all the more absurd by the identity of the person who had suggested it. But there was no laughter in her voice, no smile in her eyes.

"Uncle, I begin to think you never knew me at all."

Valentin de Caraval sighed and turned back to face the shore that loomed ahead of them and the bustling port of Rhojanos. Eska saw his knuckles whiten as he gripped the ship rail.

"Please, Eska, The prince of Anderra is a rigid man, set in his customs. And you know as well as I do, niece, that women in Anderra do not hold the sort of positions in society that you possess."

"What a lovely way of describing oppression." Eska stared out at the port, seeing not the tile-trimmed buildings, or the roofs painted in shades of brilliant blue to match the whims of the Anerrean Sea—no, Eska had eyes only for the walled enclosure on the eastern edge of Rhojanos, the royal residence of the prince of Anderra, that is, when he deigned to visit his most prosperous port. Word was Frantzisko, fourth of that name, spent most of his days in luxury on an island in the middle of Anderra's most idyllic lake. But he was here, in Rhojanos, somewhere behind those walls.

Valentin seemed determined to let the conversation slide, well, anywhere else. "Remember, we do not know if word of your," here he hesitated, and Eska caught him looking at her out of the corner of his eye, "your circumstances regarding Toridium has spread across the sea"

"You might as well get used to naming it, Uncle. Say it." Eska nudged him with her elbow, though she still faced the port. "The murder of which I am accused."

"Yes, that." The knuckles grew whiter still. "If the story has traveled across the sea, we will likely know soon enough, but I would not be prepared to place a wager on the prince's reaction."

Eska snorted in a way that would likely horrify the prince. “Come now, he thinks women capable of nothing more than spreading their legs and feeding what emerges nine months later.” Eska laughed as her uncle’s face reddened. “The point is, Uncle, I don’t think a man fixed in such beliefs will believe me capable of murder.”

Valentin regained his composure and fixed his gaze on Rhoanos even more resolutely than before, if such a thing was possible. “Let us hope that is the case—or better yet, that he remains ignorant. It would not do to have the prince of Anderra get the notion in his head that shipping you away to Toridium might be to his benefit. Not unless you would rather return to face judgment before the Vismarch than do whatever it is you insist on doing in Sandalese.”

She had not, of course, spoken of her reasons for accompanying her uncle on the journey to the Sandalesean region of Altieri. Partially because she was just as content as he to exist in silence, but partially—well, she wasn’t precisely sure how to explain the godforged to her uncle, or the fact that the Archduke was seeking the discs with the intent of claiming whatever power they held for himself, or her certainty, unproven, that a seventh, long lost disc was hidden somewhere in Altieri.

No, better to say nothing at all.

Eska shifted to face Valentin once more. “I am my mother’s daughter, Uncle. I will be polite, courteous, respectful, a diplomat.” Valentin did not look at her. Such had become his habit during the journey across the Anerrean Sea—and, if Eska was honest, her habit as well. Four days spent at opposite ends of the *Argonex*, four days spent eating meals apart, four days with no more than a handful of words passing between them. Her plea for kindness between them had been honored, at least in letter if not in spirit. But, then, it was easy to be kind if they did not speak. “But if Frantzisko insults me, if he suggests I have no place in the dealings between this company and his throne, I will not be silent,” Eska said, uttering these last words through clenched teeth. Her uncle’s profile made no move to acknowledge her declaration and Eska’s stomach knotted with anger. Lest she lash out and add further fuel to the smoldering embers between them, she moved down the rail to stand near the gangplank.

Evidence of a woman's place in Anderra greeted Eska the moment said gangplank was lowered. She descended first, and while a servant bearing the royal insignia hurried to shelter her beneath an ornate parasol complete with dangling peacock feathers to obscure her vision, the servant's superior turned a deaf ear to her and, with a disdainful purse to his lips and a steadfast refusal to look upon Eska's face, waited for Valentin to set foot on the pier before acknowledging Firenzia Company had arrived. The man had a scholarly look that might have reminded her of Albus were his behavior not such an affront.

"Greetings and most gracious welcome to Anderra, Master de Caraval," the man said, bowing slightly. "My name is Xabier and I am dedicated to your service for the duration of your time in Rhoxanos."

"Please thank the prince for his thoughtful hospitality," Valentin said. He gestured to Eska and Xabier at last looked her in the eye—fleetingly. "My partner in Firenzia Company, the lady Eska de Caraval."

Xabier bowed again, this time with an elaborate flourish that rather reminded Eska of the very elaborate parasol. The desire to roll her eyes was very nearly overwhelming. "A jewel for the prince to look on. You honor us with your beautiful presence, my lady," Xabier said. When he rose from his bow, his gaze darted over Eska's shoulder once more.

She put on a smile—the smile her mother had taught her, the smile even her uncle could not see past. "How charming. I am delighted to be in Anderra."

It was not her first visit. Valentin knew this, and Eska did not have to look at her uncle to know he was desperately hoping she wouldn't mention that she had once slipped into the port of Rhoxanos on a merchant's boat—for the express purpose of avoiding the royal welcome and meeting a prominent member of Anderra's academic guild, a guild tolerated by the prince out of necessity, not out of any great passion for learning in his heart. While it would have given Eska much pleasure to inform Xabier of this prior visit—she could just imagine the way his eyes would go wide, his mouth slack, and the ensuing sputtering of indignant insistence that surely such behavior was an oversight, not a deliberate slight against the glorious prince—Eska was willing to keep that particular story quiet for the moment.

Xabier indicated their transportation to the royal residence waited just off the pier. As Frantzisko's servant ushered Eska in that direction, Valentin lingered behind to pass a few last instructions to Captain Montmere, who would oversee the offloading of the *Argonex's* cargo in preparation for the land journey that would follow, and to Feliciano, his dig master. Eska looked away as he uncle spoke to Feliciano, feeling a sudden pang of grief for Gabriel. The engineer would have jumped at the chance to travel to Sandalese. Eska blinked away the memory of his final plea as he turned to dust before her eyes. She had not yet found the words to tell her uncle of Gabriel's death. Not because Valentin and the engineer had been close, but because she did not trust herself to describe what she would have thought to be the impossible. Worse, still, the only other witness to Gabriel's death had vanished, stealing away with the mysterious bronze disc and leaving Eska to question everything he had ever said to her.

She had not allowed herself to think of Perrin Barca on the journey across the sea. Perhaps it was due to Xabier's obsequious patronization, perhaps it was her frustration with her uncle, Eska could not have said, but whatever wall she had constructed to keep thoughts of Perrin at bay was thoroughly demolished by the time she reached the litter that would carry them to the royal residence.

As such, she was the very image of a demure, silent woman when she stepped out of the litter into Franzisko's courtyard—no doubt to Xabier's immense delight.

She was brought back to herself sharply, first by the arresting mosaic stretching the dimensions of the courtyard—remarkable workmanship—and second by Xabier hissing in her ear for her to curtsy. It was, she was aware, not her most graceful moment, but she executed the curtsy while managing to note the detail in the scales of a half-fish, half-man figure at her feet and as such did not have difficulty keeping her eyes down until a pair of embroidered boots trod upon the fish-man's lustrous flowing hair—her cue.

Eska looked up at the prince of Anderra, smiled somewhere in the depths of her eyes, and let herself be raised up by his offered hand.

"My Lady de Caraval," Frantzisko murmured. He nodded slightly over her hand, immaculate in a deep blue tunic threaded through with so much gold at the collar

that he gleamed in the high sun. His only other adornments were two rings on the hand that grasped Eska's fingers, but it was his hair that was perhaps the most striking piece of his appearance. Thick and dark, the mane framed his austere features—a face suited for sculpting if Eska had ever seen one—while a streak of silver extended back from one temple. “You are welcome to Rhoxanos and Anderra. My humble city can offer little in the face of your beauty, but I hope your time here pleases you.”

“Rhoxanos pleases me greatly, Prince, but I'm sure its many delights will pale in comparison to your kind attention,” Eska said. That Frantzisko enjoyed looking at her was readily apparent. Perhaps she could use that to gain some manner of foothold in the conversations that would follow—conversations he no doubt meant to conduct in her hearing, out of respect to her uncle, but not with her participation.

The prince turned to her uncle, his manner altering ever so slightly—still polite, still regal, but easier, more natural. A grasping of hands, a laugh. Things exchanged between men. Eska's mother would have cautioned her against letting her prejudice against Anderra's customs convince her eyes of things that were not there, not when there was delicate business that needed her attention—but Sorina de Caraval, Ambassador-Superior of Arconia, was not there, nor had she spent time in the prince's court, and Eska happened to place a great deal of trust in her own observations.

Frantzisko shifted slightly as he spoke to her uncle, placing Eska somewhere off his right shoulder and therefore relegated to the periphery of his vision. She swallowed back the irritation that threatened to overtake the pleasant expression she had adopted and entertained herself by admiring the mosaic yet again. There would be time later to challenge the prince and assert herself—and besides, the mosaic was really quite astonishing, both in the details and the larger composition, not to mention the quality of the tiles. The richness of color, the impeccable cutting and placement, were as fine as the great mosaics of Ikarios. Eska was beginning to muse if the artist and craftsmen had studied under that city's masters when the prince interrupted those thoughts by inviting her to take his arm so they might retire for refreshments out of the cruel sun.

“You honor me, Prince,” Eska said, smiling as she placed her hand on his forearm. “I confess I cannot determine which is greater, your magnanimity or your noble bearing.”

It was a bit thick, as far as flattery goes, but she could see Frantzisko neither heard nor felt the current of sarcasm swirling beneath the surface of her smooth words—and brilliant smile. Valentin, of course, would recognize it for what it was. Eska snuck a glance at her uncle as the prince led her from the courtyard and was pleased to see his wariness warring with reluctant humor.

False flattery was not necessary, however, when Eska emerged, after the prince gave them a brief tour through his receiving room, his glass gardens, and the apartments granted to them for their stay, onto the large balcony in the southeast of corner of the compound. High above the rocky shore and foaming waves, far removed from the bustle of Rhoanos, Eska was transported into a realm of sparkling blue and soaring sea birds, of sweet-smelling flowers and warm white stone.

“It is a view without equal, Prince,” Eska said. Frantzisko smiled and deposited her beneath a painted silk awning—though she would very much have preferred to lean out over the balcony and watch the sea spray below.

“It is nothing, my lady, compared to what you would find at Esmera. Perhaps I can convince you to honor my lake and my island home with your presence. Surely your uncle can achieve your business in Sandalese without you.”

Eska looked up at the prince. With delightful timing, the sea breeze lifted a strand of her hair so it brushed across her neck and collarbone. “Perhaps on our return journey, if you have not already forgotten me.”

Eska was quite sure a woman had never spoken to the prince of Anderra so boldly in all his life, and for a moment she thought she might have pushed him too far.

“Does the sun forget the sky?”

Apparently she had not.

When the prince sat, he did so as close to Eska as their chairs would allow, but for all his talk of suns and skies, his attention remained fixed on Valentin as

servants paraded forth with platters of beautiful food—fruit and honeycomb, spiced nuts, and smooth wheels of soft cheese. Her uncle and the prince discussed and selected a wine for the meal, without so much as a thought to Eska's preference, and it was only once the men had shared a drink in honor of their business arrangement that Frantzisko nodded for a servant to fill Eska's glass with the pale golden wine.

And still Eska smiled as she raised the glass to her lips—though she was sure to catch her uncle's eye above the rim. The speed with which he downed his wine suggested her discontent had been adequately conveyed, but this had the unintended consequence of causing Valentin to steer the conversation in all directions but the one that most needed discussing. He and the prince spoke of Frantzisko's latest building project, the marriage of the prince's cousin, and—by all the dead librarians—the unusually hot weather, until Eska's patience vanished as surely as Perrin Barca.

"Uncle," Eska interjected into a brief pause, "perhaps the prince would like hear about our suggestions for circumventing some of the more stringent laws pertaining to partnerships of this nature."

The flicker of annoyance—hastily smoothed over—in the prince's expression did not go unnoticed, but that was to be expected. A moment of silence followed Eska's interruption, but Valentin, to his credit, filled it swiftly, as though the idea were his own.

"My niece is correct, Prince," Valentin said. "You'll remember that not long before my most recent visit to your shores, the Seven Cities limited the exchange of goods and services to and from Anderra."

"Due to your government's persistence in restricting the rights of certain individuals within your borders." Eska kept her tone amiable and even, but she let her smile grow sharp and she did not look away when the prince of Anderra shifted in his seat to meet her gaze. The look in his eyes was not a kind one. The regality was gone. The courtesy fled. "At least," Eska said, letting her smile go shy and soft, "so my uncle informs me."

Let them both chew on that.

Valentin cleared his throat. "As I was saying, the difficult lies in the fact that any items recovered by Firenzia Company in Sandalese are thereafter considered our property." He hesitated until the prince's gaze at last left Eska, then continued. "Now, Arconian laws are not so outdated as to suggest that a citizen's property is the property of the city and our Archduke, but Firenzia does on occasion operate in the interest of the Archduke and therefore receives status in accordance with that relationship."

"What my uncle is trying not to say," Eska said, "is that the city, the official Arconian treasury, has invested in Firenzia Company. And I'm sure you are aware, my good Prince, that when money is at stake, laws tend to be scrutinized. Legally, while we are not part of the Arconian government, the money ties us to said government in ways that cannot be ignored. As such, if we were to exchange any of the property we acquire in Sandalese for services provided by Anderra, and as I understand that we are to have the honor of an armed Anderran escort," Eska smiled and gestured in the prince's direction, "well, you know how it goes when one has enemies who would seize upon any excuse to inflict harm."

Frantzisko was quiet for a moment. He had mastered his initial reaction to Eska's intrusion into the conversation between men, leaving his face a smooth mask.

"And you have enemies, Lady de Caraval?" he asked at last.

Eska smiled again, so sweetly she fancied her lips might taste of sugar. "One or two."

Valentin cleared his throat again—only this time Eska was quite sure her uncle did so to keep from choking on the direction the conversation was headed.

To her surprise, the prince spoke first, and he addressed only Eska. "And do you have a solution for this unfortunate situation we find ourselves in? The road to Sandalese is long and travelers tell stories of bandits operating with astonishing speed and organization, and so well armed as to permit one from entertaining the rumor that they work under the blessing of the king of Navaro. I would hate for you to fall victim to such brigands without the protection of my men."

If he meant to frighten her, he failed. Bandits were not the same as assassins in the dark, knives hired to satisfy the vengeance of a man who did not like to be humiliated. Besides, Eska did, in fact, have a solution.

“We will write up contracts for two of your men to be temporarily employed by Firenzia Company,” Eska said. “It is tradition for our crew members to each receive a portion of the value of the site, which can take the form of an item of their choosing. And as it is a tradition, it is loosely kept, which means there need be no record of what artifacts catch the eye of our two newest employees.”

She smiled and lifted a finger to indicate to a discretely hovering servant that she was in need of more wine. Her glass was filled and she had time to take a sip before the prince of Anderra spoke.

“No doubt you wish to rest after your voyage. I will leave you to enjoy yourselves.” Frantzisko stood and bowed to them each in turn—Eska first. He stepped away from the table and for a moment Eska thought he might be so stubborn as to refuse to indicate acceptance of her terms. But then he stopped at the entrance to the balcony and looked back at her. “Draw up the contracts. My people will examine them.” And then he was gone.

Eska did not gloat. It was a near thing. She wanted to look at her uncle and win some admission from him that she had played her hand to perfection, but when she glanced at Valentin, something stole the words from her tongue. Instead, she found herself looking at the man who had loomed so large in her childhood, who had given her the world when she was young, and could not help but wonder if they would ever repair what was broken between them.

No longer hungry, no longer enamored of the sea view, Eska pushed back her chair and stood.

“I find I am tired, Uncle. I will retire.” Brushing aside the parasol-toting servant who trotted over, Eska gazed at Valentin for a moment. He met her gaze. “It’s been a long time since we traveled somewhere new together.”

A small smile. Then a nod. “Aranghetti, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I remember the tidal pools. The way the algae glowed at night.”

Valentin’s smile quirked into a puzzled expression. “Tidal pools?”

“Yes, we went to the beach at night. There were local musicians.” Eska searched his face for recognition. “Dancers.”

Her uncle shook his head. “I remember the manuscripts we uncovered in the hidden chamber of that long-ransacked tomb. It was a remarkable discovery. But I’m sorry, I don’t remember the tidal pools or the music.”

“I see.”

And she did see. Eska saw then that perhaps she had never understood her uncle at all.