

## Chapter Nineteen

*"If you let me die, I'll come back as a crow and peck out your eyes."*

"She wants me to trespass on an ancient burial ground?"

Eska glanced from Lucullus Vorianus to the young matriarch and back again. Darkness had reduced the woman to the silver of her earrings and little else. Vorianus and his ever-present handkerchief were closer and easier to make out. Eska could see the words were just as astonishing to him.

"Believe me," he said, in a voice that suggested he did not believe himself, "the translation is accurate. This is the favor she asks."

The matriarch had come to ask her favor bearing gifts. Food, to be precise. A bowl of steaming grains with a pale brothy sauce spooned over the top. The scent and tendrils of steam had driven Eska to distraction the moment she caught sight of the matriarch, Vorianus at her heels. They had come to Eska after moonrise, after a day spent curled in a nest of grass trying to will her body to forget its hunger and thirst. In Cedo's absence, she was alone when the Sun Behind the Grass matriarch arrived with an extensive entourage, an event Eska heard rather than saw—heard the drumming hooves of approaching horses, heard the exchange of formal greetings between the two matriarchs. She had expected a visit, an inspection, a chance to set eyes on the matriarch of one of the four most powerful clans in the grasslands. But the Sun Behind the Grass matriarch apparently had no such similar curiosity toward Eska. If she wasn't so miserable, she might have been insulted.

But she was miserable. And starving.

And so, when the Wind at Dawn matriarch offered her the bowl of food, again setting it on the ground rather than handing it directly to her, Eska had seized it and taken an eager spoonful—promptly burning the roof of her mouth, which caused an instinctual inhale. The result was an extended moment of choking and coughing and eye watering, which the matriarch had observed with patience.

That patience lingered while Eska ate and drank from a skin of water Vorianus had produced, until at last the bowl was empty.

And then the matriarch had asked Eska to do what Eska did best—that is, dig something out of the ground. Which ought to have been a refreshing turn of events. Only this particular thing was a sacred staff buried in holy ground and digging it up was most definitely not likely to endear her to a certain matriarch of a certain very powerful clan.

“I accept,” Eska said.

Because Eska de Caraval did not turn down opportunities to dig up rare, priceless artifacts.

Vorianus and the matriarch conferred briefly, and then the Parnaxoan turned to Eska once more. He looked uncomfortable, the nervousness he wore so well now something more than a deception. “I am to accompany you. And we are to leave. Now.”

The matriarch nodded at that last word, emphasizing it for Vorianus.

Taking a breath, he plowed onward. “She will mask our departure and absence. You are ill, and will be concealed in her shelter. And I, it seems, am your physician. The ruse will buy us time, but she impresses upon me the importance of speed.”

“How are we to find this burial ground? Do you know it?” Eska asked.

Another quick exchange between them. Then, “We are to have an escort. A boy. Some sort of troublemaker, I gather.”

Eska smiled. “Cedo,” she said quietly. The matriarch glanced at Eska at the sounds of the name, her eyes sharp, then softening. She nodded.

“And tools?” Eska pressed. She indicated herself—her bound limbs and unwashed clothing. “I have nothing with which to work.”

Vorianus relayed the question and the answer. “She says the boy will be here in a moment with spades.”

Spades. They had a certain usefulness, but were crude tools, not meant for any fine delicate work. Eska supposed, though, the alternative was digging with her hands.

On cue, a small figure emerged from the shadows. Sure enough, Cedo carried two spades. His face was alight, his grin wide, no doubt excited at the prospect of a midnight adventure.

Eska took the spades from him and looked them over. Sturdy, the handles well fitted to the iron. Larger than some. She was running her hand along the bone handle when Vorianus let out a yelp. Eska looked up to see the man holding his palm against his neck. The matriarch, her face as calm as ever, stepped away from him, something small between her fingers.

Vorianus spoke, the question clear even though Eska could not understand the words. And then Eska watched the rosy spots of his cheeks drain away to white as the matriarch answered him. When she finished, Vorianus seemed robbed of speech, his hand suspended over his shoulder. There was no sign of blood or injury that Eska could see. The matriarch turned to her next, and Eska took a step back, which drew a smile to the woman's mouth. But there was no malice or cruelty in it, and when she spoke, her voice was soft.

"Bond," she said. Which could have conveyed a variety of things, but Eska did not need to dwell on that. She understood. Their futures were bonded.

Lucullus Vorianus's future, as it turned out, was in peril. The matriarch slipped away in the darkness, leaving Eska to ask what had happened and what was said.

He touched at his neck once more. This time Eska saw the faintest smear of blood come away on his fingertip. Vorianus stared at it.

"She poisoned me." The words were stiff and slow, his disbelief apparent. "To ensure our return. She will give me the antidote when we give her the staff." He looked up at Eska and blinked rapidly. "If we do not return by nightfall tomorrow, I will be dead."

Eska watched the fear work its way across his face, saw him swallow—or try, his throat catching twice. "Why not me?"

A laugh burred up from Vorianus's chest, a wild, unharnessed thing. "Because, Eska de Caraval, I imagine she suspects I wouldn't know the first thing about digging in a burial mound, which makes you rather more valuable. And she's right. No point in risking poisoning you when she's got this chubby donkey to play with."

"I won't let you die," Eska said. She was aware of Cedo watching the exchange between them.

“No, indeed, you won’t,” Vorianus said, regaining some of his bluster. “I’ve been away from Bellara a long time, young lady, and I’ve learned a thing or two about death and spirits. If you let me die, I’ll come back as a crow and peck out your eyes.”

He was, Eska saw, utterly serious. She might once have offered an argument against such a statement—citing the scientific permanency of death and the failure of numerous studies to produce evidence of spectral and spirit forms—but the Lordican was very far away and this man’s life was very near. Besides, she’d told Sascha often enough that she never expected to be able to explain everything with facts and logic and science, that there was wonder in the world, and things unknowable, and this, too, thrilled her mind.

If Lucullus Vorianus wanted to believe his essence could be born into a crow at the moment of his death, well, it was fitting. A clever bird for a clever man.

“Understood, Master Vorianus. I have no wish to have my eyes pecked out.” Eska offered him a smile. “We should go.”

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“Do you know her name?” Eska asked. “The Wind at Dawn matriarch?”

They had been walking long enough for the moon to travel from somewhere off Eska’s right shoulder to roughly directly overhead. North, then, or at least close enough, though the height of the grass made orientation nearly impossible. No doubt this was intentional. If Eska could not see, Eska could not run. She had, of course, considered it, but if she was being honest, the prospect of unearthing a sacred staff and learning something of its meaning was rather like a slab of meat dangled in front of a hungry dog—she would follow where Cedo led.

Much of the journey had passed in silence, in part due to the fact that only one of them could speak to all members of the party, and that one was walking with the sort of morose expression one might have when one is contemplating one’s death. But Eska’s question pulled Vorianus out of that contemplation long enough for him to answer.

“Nadezha,” he said.

“And do you know why she wants this staff?”

“I can guess at her reasons, yes.” He went silent, plodding along, both of them following Cedo closely lest they lose each other in the grass.

“Care to share?” Eska said. She smiled when Vorianus glanced over at her. “Or perhaps we could start with another history lesson? What is the significance of the staff? And whose grave are we disturbing? And why can’t she do it herself?” The questions rattled off Eska’s tongue quickly. Vorianus put his fingers to his neck. He had done this periodically as they walked. The tiny needle imbued with poison had left the faintest red bump on his skin—visible only when Eska insisted on peering closely at it in the darkness, an insistence Vorianus had acquiesced to with a woeful sigh. “Please, Master Vorianus,” Eska said, “your last lesson was so very good.”

Another sigh. “Your flattery is very obvious. And you ask a lot of questions.”

Eska nodded. “I do, yes. Thwarted many a governess and scholar with my questions.” She made a helpless gesture with her hands. “And, really, you’re partially to blame. You did call me clever earlier.”

The smile came slowly to Vorianus’s face, battling through his determination to remain in a state of melancholy, but it did come, bringing a bit of life to his eyes once more.

“The burial mound we are visiting,” he began, “is the eternal resting place for the physical forms of three people. They all died, according to the story, on the same day.” Vorianus paused and screwed up his nose in thought. “One hundred and twelve years ago, I believe. One of those three people was Mihaela, who is one of the most revered of all Vardini matriarchs. And it is Mihaela’s staff we have been sent to retrieve.”

Ahead of Eska, Cedo swished on through the grass. How he knew the path to take when there were no paths at all and a clouded sky above was a mystery to Eska, but he walked with unerring certainty, as though the earth spoke to his feet and told him the way. Perhaps it did.

Vorianus continued. “Mihaela did what no matriarch before her, or since, has done. She achieved unity between the clans. The Vardini then and the Vardini now say that she was blessed by their holy spirits, blessed by the earth and by the moon.

Some even believe that she was born from a union between mother river that flows through the grasslands and mother moon in the sky. And they believe her staff held the powers of spirits and that this is why she could bring peace across all the clans.” Vorianus cleared his throat. “But as you can probably imagine, there were those who resented Mihaela and her peace. Who saw fractious feuds as a means of gaining power. Who saw the ever-shifting balance between the clans as the way of the Vardini. But she had deprived them of that petty power and they could not stand their own insignificance. They were few in number, these dissenters, but they knew one very important thing.” Vorianus brushed a particularly tall clump of grass from his face and looked at Eska. “Can you guess what that was?”

“They knew the peace was held together by Mihaela’s life. And that her death would end it,” Eska said.”

Vorianus gave a slow and solemn nod. “Indeed. Had she lived longer, she could have knit the clans together with unbreakable bonds, but the unity she built was still fragile, still supported by her name and strength and sheer will.”

A bird burst from the grass in front of Cedo, calling its alarm to the stars. Eska ducked, as did Vorianus. Cedo laughed. Eska listened to the sound of its wingbeats fading away into the night.

“What happened to her?” The question was a heavy one, the answer anticipated, the bird somehow a herald of Mihaela’s fate.

“The stories vary in the specifics. Some say the spirits in her staff turned on her. Others say her foes shot a sacred white antelope to draw her away from safety. And then slaughtered her like the beast. And still others believe her lover was tricked into killing her. What is certain is that Mihaela died and with her died the dream of unity.”

Eska was quiet for a moment. “A tragedy,” she said at last.

“Aren’t all the best stories?”

They walked on, the grassland around them filling in the silences with a chorus of unidentifiable sounds.

“I don’t make a habit of raiding tombs, Master Vorianus.” It seemed important to say this. “I conduct sanctioned, legal excavations.”

“Your business is your business, Eska de Caraval. I didn’t ask.”

“I appreciate that,” Eska said, “but if we both get out of this alive, I would not have it told that I am nothing but a greed-driven treasure hunter.”

Lucullus Vorianus stopped walking, the first any of them had come to a halt in some time. Eska did the same and turned to face him. Ahead, Cedo carried on, then stopped and stared back at them with undisguised impatience.

“And I believe you,” Vorianus said, “but we are not often at liberty to shape the opinions others have of us. Our names are the world’s to do with as they wish.” He gestured to the grass at his feet. “You dig things out of the earth. Some will hear that and judge you for it. Would you reprimand them all?” A small shrug rolled off his shoulders. “No, it would be impossible. If I may offer some advice, Eska, do not live and die by the falsehoods others speak about you.”

And with that he continued on, patting Cedo on the shoulder with a great deal more vigor than was strictly necessary, leaving Eska to hurry after, his words ringing in her ears—and the name of Manon Barca whispering in their wake.

Naturally, thinking about Manon Barca involved thinking of the moment Eska had understood the woman was trying to blow up her ship in the Toridium harbor. She could still smell the black, acrid smoke, could still see Manon tumbling over the ship rail into the sea—only to be fished out again. And she could hear Alexandre de Minos speak a lie. Because Manon Barca had not been brought back to Arconia to face justice. Rather, she had been freed, a piece of the Archduke’s scheme falling into place, along with the other Carriers he was collecting. And Sascha had played his part.

How framing Eska for the murder of Chancellor Fiorlieu of Toridium fit into that scheme, Eska had to confess she did not quite understand—beyond the obvious. While Arconia was littered with glittering luminaries of political standing, men and women whose influence and power orchestrated the workings of Arconia and extended far beyond the city, few families could claim to match the power of the house of de Caraval. That Valexi Arcturos de Vacquelin-Preux might seek to diminish that power was not entirely extraordinary.

And yet it was extraordinary. The Archduke embodied the essence of the Seven Cities—that is, the belief, born out of the cruelty and destruction of the Alescus, that one man or woman could not, should not, govern alone. That the Seven were strong because they were seven. Arcturos had lived this philosophy his whole life and it was woven through each and every decision he made as one of the seven brothers-and-sisters-in-rule. Eska knew this, had learned it from her mother and father and her own observation. And she also knew that undermining Maximilian and Sorina de Caraval undermined the very foundation of Arconia.

Of course, Eska ought not to speak such a thought aloud. There was an arrogance to it, and most certainly a bias. But even the pettiest government official with a grudge knew it to be true. Which meant the threat against her family was a threat to her city.

And there was the matter of the godforged. The Archduke wanted them, of this Eska was certain, but without knowing the history of the discs, or how they were used, she was unwilling to piece together a flimsy theory speculating about his intent. Less speculation was required in the case of the matriarch Nadezha.

“Master Vorianus,” Eska called out, “why has no one dug up this staff already? One hundred years is a long time for something precious to stay buried, especially when all who might lay claim to it know exactly where it is.”

Vorianus took a swig of water before answering. He wiped at his mouth with his heavy sleeve. “Those who revered Mihaela protected her burial mound in the first years after her death, when war parties raged across the grasslands. When the previous state of balance between the clans had been restored, more or less, those who had decried Mihaela’s beliefs and actions came to either fear her burial mound, claiming it writhed with ferocious spirits, or avoid it out of contempt. Those who followed her considered it too holy to be disturbed. The Vardini today are a mixture of all three, but I’ve come to know them as a practical people. Mihaela tried to unite the clans—and failed. To try again would be folly. Better to keep things as they are.”

“Until now,” Eska said. “Until Nadezha.” Eska walked on in silence for a moment. “The subterfuge is clever. If we are successful, the staff will appear in Nadezha’s



possession, as though by the will of the spirits or the moon or Mihaela herself. A powerful image. And you and I are pawns in her play for a legacy her people have avoided confronting for a century. Fascinating.”

Vorianus made a sound of contention, something between a derisive snort and a grumpy laugh. “You sound as if you are studying a piece of ancient history, not living it without the certainty of continuing to live after it.”

Eska pretended to curtsy with skirts she—thank all the dead librarians—wasn’t wearing.

“Eska de Caraval, scholar and archaeologist at your disposal.” She glanced at Vorianus. “With a smattering of adventurer thrown in for good measure, I’ll admit. Surely you can admit the same, Master Vorianus? You who have been so far from home all these years?” It was, as such things go, a relatively poor attempt at fishing for information.

And Lucullus Vorianus wasn’t falling for it. “Is this the part where I reveal my life story? I think not.” There was a sharpness to those words, hastily smoothed over a moment later. “I can assure you it’s of no interest at all to the likes of you.”

“I think I should be the judge of that. But, very well. Keep your secrets,” Eska said, flashing a smile into the moonlight. Let Vorianus think she was satisfied—or too distracted to pry further. In truth, she was tired. Restored by the food, Eska had begun the journey with a degree of optimism, buoyed by her curiosity and the prospect of excavation—however brief. But the hours of walking with nothing more than waving blades of grass and the back of Cedo’s head to look at had served to remind her that she had spent the better part of two days dehydrated and undernourished.

“Cedo?” Eska called ahead to the boy. He turned and began to walk backwards. “How much farther?”

Vorianus relayed the question. The boy thought for a moment and answered with a grin. “He says if you talked less we’d be there already. I’m inclined to agree.” Abruptly, Vorianus thrust out one arm in a crooked shape and brought the other up to his nose, his fingers pressed together to form a point. He began to flap about with the extended arm and made as if to peck at Eska with his makeshift beak.

Eska laughed. "You've made your point, Master Crow. Tell me, what sort of poison did Nadezha prick you with?"

"The deadly sort, I dare say," Vorianus said.

"Very amusing. I ask because I'd like to know if I'm going to have to carry your comatose body back through the grass."

Vorianus harrumphed, his face settling back into a heavy frown. Eska made a mental note to enquire later if the poison in question also elicited swift changes in mood. "A mixture of plumfoot and Liara's Sleep. I'll be very alive up until the moment they kill me."

"Plumfoot and Liara's Sleep?" Eska repeated. "Those are difficult to come by, are they not? I can't imagine Nadezha has a great supply of either." Vorianus didn't answer. "She's staking a great deal on this venture."

"And now we've reached the point where you," Vorianus said, his voice souring with every word, "using your vast trove of amassed knowledge and your skills of observation and deduction, offer your superior Bellaran insight on the foolishness of Nadezha's plans."

It was Eska's turn to frown. "Why would I do that?"

The bitterness didn't fade when confronted with Eska's obvious confusion. "Because that's what scholars do. Especially Bellaran scholars. You frame everything you encounter, people and places and beliefs, in the light of what you know, what is familiar. Government is not government if it does not consist of a man or a woman dressed up in regalia and busy bureaucrats admiring their fancy paperwork. Culture is not culture if it does not sound like you or sing like you or paint like you or eat like you. Civility is not civility if it does not include the manners and rules you learned as a child. Divinity is not divine if it is not worshipped in a pretty temple with a host of priests telling you how to live. That which you do not understand you deem beneath you, inferior, the product of less civilized minds." Vorianus stopped to breathe. He would have gone on had not Eska interrupted.

"Master Vorianus." The sharp use of his name brought them both to a halt. "I am prepared to offer you some leeway given your current predicament, but I will not

stand accused of such, not without defending myself. I will not and cannot defend all scholars, because I know this behavior of which you speak. I know what it is to see learned men and women, bright and resourceful and astoundingly insightful, blindly bring the full weight of prejudice to their work. Or worse yet, discuss theory and facts with willful ignorance and a belief in the superiority of Bellaran culture, or cultures stemming from the same family tree and history. They sing the praise of those they deem inferior, call them noble and earnest and beautiful, and they shake their heads with sadness, fully ensconced and comfortable in their belief that they sit upon the pinnacle of what it means to be human and alive and that these different peoples, no matter how valiantly they strive, are incapable of replicating that. All the while it never crosses their small minds that perhaps none of these people they demean so easily even want what they have." It was Eska's turn to take a deep breath. "They are a disgrace. And I would rather die than be named among them."

They stood in silence for a moment. Eska tall and fierce, with more than a little fury coursing through her. Vorianus wide of stance and angled like a wrestler bracing for impact.

"I am an imperfect creature, Master Vorianus," Eska said, making an effort to temper her voice. Not completely, no. Let there be edge enough to show she did not waver. "I have made mistakes. I do not always see my own faults, my own prejudice. But I acknowledge they exist and I strive to overcome them. But until you, with your own eyes, witness me act as you have described, do not judge me with the rest. I don't know what sent you away from Parnaxes. And you may choose to never share that with me. But you do not need to say another word to tell me that your relationship with your city, with the Seven Cities, with all that Bellara is and has been and will be, is fraught. But I am not to blame for that."

More silence. Eska could see beads of sweat on Vorianus's hairline, though the night was cool. Cedo was watching, his gaze flickering between them. And then Vorianus relented, his shoulders sagging, his feet shifting away from his belligerent posture. A single rivulet of sweat dripped down his temple, as though it had been waiting to release.

“Forgive me,” he said at last. “I would say the poison is at fault, but what it raised to the surface has slept there a long time.” Eska had the impression Vorianus would very much like to carry on, to walk away, but this required Cedo and Cedo was, if his wide eyes and slightly parted lips were any indication, rather fascinated.

“Cedo,” Eska prompted. “We had better carry on. I am sure we have a long way to go yet.”

As it turned out, they did not.

Cedo gave a nod, but instead of walking onward, he merely pulled aside the thick curtain of grass directly in front of him—which revealed nothing more than more grass, but then, this should hardly have been a shock.

Eska took a step forward and saw that the grass beyond was ankle-high, a bushier, thicker variety, and it covered a gradual rise in the earth. The mound was shorter than Eska—she could see across the top of it—and perfectly round.

“Ah,” she said. That was all. The place required silence, stillness. Eska could feel this. She crossed the threshold, her boots squishing down the thick grass. Without the constant waving of the taller grass, the night was suddenly quiet, the chatter of small animals and insects seemingly more distant, as though muted by the presence of the dead. Eska wondered if Mihaela, in her final resting place, appreciated the quiet. Or if the matriarch missed the rumble of horse hooves and the song of birds and resented her solitude.

Except she wasn’t alone. Vorianus had said there were three buried under that mound. And Eska had no wish to disturb any more than she had to.

Eska went to one knee where the ground began to rise and placed one hand on the earth.

“I did not take you for the devout sort, Eska de Caraval.” Vorianus’s voice jolted through the stillness, disruptive though not overly loud or harsh. Simple out of place, as Eska knew herself to be.

“Oh, I’m not.” She tilted her head to smile up at him. “But that does not mean I have no respect to offer the dead. What I do this night I do with the mind of an academic. I am extracting an item from the earth. That is all. But somewhere below us are three people who lived and breathed and loved and fought for something

they believed in. And while I may not believe in a life after death, the people who come before us are still with us." Eska spread her fingers in the thick grass. "And now I have learned her story and I will take it with me when I leave this place, and so Mihaela will live on." She stood up and offered a small shrug under Vorianus's scrutiny. "It is a small thing, I know."

More scrutiny Eska could not quite read. And in the wake of the words exchanged between them, she was not sure she wished to.

"If you would, Master Vorianus," she said, switching to the work at hand. "Will you ask Cedo if he knows where we might begin?"

After a lengthy exchange—shrugs and small gestures on Cedo's part and a sigh of frustration from Vorianus—the boy walked up to the highest part of the mound, glanced around, and then took two deliberate steps at an angle down the opposite side. He looked around at Eska and pointed up at the night sky.

*"Vherdo."*

"West," Vorianus said. "He reminded me that he wasn't alive one hundred years ago,"—Eska laughed—"but that when three are buried together, the head of the wisest is pointed toward the western star."

"Good, that's very good." Eska walked around the mound to approach where Cedo stood. She took one of the spades from where she had shoved them—haphazardly—into her belt. "Is there a way we can tell? Before we go too deep?" She addressed Cedo, if only because these were his people, his ancestors. Perhaps he was too young to care, but it mattered to Eska—that some day he could think back on the night he helped a strange foreign woman desecrate a tomb and know it was done with dignity and care.

Vorianus asked the question and Cedo chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. He looked up at Eska and this time his shrug was, instead of the childish sort that suggests indifference, full of shame. He spoke a few words, paused, and then spoke again, this time quieter than before.

"He doesn't know. He was too young when he watched the burial of his mother and father to remember."

Eska crouched once more and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. He sucked in a halting breath through his nose, tears welling in his eyes, the weight of her hand revealing the weight of the task he had been given and his understanding of the enormity of what would take place that night.

Eska looked over at Vorianus. "This is a lot to ask of a boy." He gave a solemn nod and Eska returned her attention to the boy whose mischievous grin was as distant a memory as the sun is to the moon. "Cedo. You were my first friend among the Vardini, even though I was very bad at grooming that naughty horse. And you are perhaps my only friend." Eska waited for Vorianus to translate this and was glad to see, as the boy wiped at his tears, the hint of a smile. "You know what I have been tasked to do."

A nod.

"And I think you understand a little of why."

Another nod.

Eska brushed a tear from his cheek. "I won't do it, Cedo. If you ask me not to."

Vorianus hesitated—Eska could hardly blame him. If she had deadly poison eating away at the hours of her life, she would likely hesitate, too, in asking permission of a boy, permission that might dictate the possibility of an antidote. Then again, given the need for Nadezha's support in her upcoming trial, Eska might very well be risking her own life, too. But then the man from Parnaxes spoke, and Eska had to hope he translated her words and meaning faithfully.

Cedo frowned and spoke a question. Vorianus answered. Another question, another answer.

"What did he ask?"

Vorianus touched at his neck. Eska imagined he could feel his heartbeat and wondered if he was counting them. "He says of course you must do this. He doesn't want you to die."

Eska smiled down at Cedo and squeezed his shoulder, then glanced back at Vorianus. "What about you, though?"

Lucullus Vorianus snorted. “Oh, he doesn’t care two antelope scrotums about me.” The jest was there, and Vorianus did an admirable job selling it. But Eska could see the fear in his eyes.

“Well, I happen to care. A whole three antelope scrotums worth, in fact,” Eska said. Vorianus ventured a shaky smile. “Come on, time to dig.” And she lofted a spade in his direction. He didn’t even attempt to catch it, instead sidestepping with a disdainful expression as it went spinning past his shoulder. It landed somewhere in the deep grass with a soft thud that promised a great deal of searching. Eska arched an eyebrow and adopted her most severe expression—and in a matter of moments, Vorianus was on his hands and knees, the grass nearly devouring him as he searched.

Eska turned her attention once more to the mound, eyeing the height, estimating the depth at which the bodies might be found, guessing at whether the staff might be in Mihaela’s right or left hand—or no hand at all. Eyeing, estimating, guessing. These were, none of them, her favorite words. With proper tools and resources, she would be taking measurements and testing the soil in order to ascertain her next steps. If Cedric Antilles could see her now—about to plunge her spade into the dirt without knowing, well, anything—his mustache would curl right off his face.

“The grass,” Eska murmured, “why is it different?” She let the ridiculous image of a Vardini gardener, sent out once a fortnight to trim the grass covering the burial mounds, amuse her for a moment, and then repeated her question, complete with unintelligible gestures, to Cedo, as Vorianus’s backside was the only piece of him that was currently available.

After several attempts at pointing at the tall grass and then the short, Cedo seemed to catch on. He thought for a moment, then made a motion that Eska took to be the scattering of seeds.

“Ah, so it is intentionally planted? Very interesting.” Eska would like to know more—as always—but this was not a mission undertaken for the sake of academia, and she would do well to keep that in mind. This was about saving a life. Possibly two.

“Well, this place looks as good as any, I suppose,” she said. And plunged her spade into the earth.

Several plunges later, Eska was painfully aware of both the inadequacy of a spade for such a task and the complaints her back would not be shy about sharing in the not too distant future. But on she dug, scooping out a shallow dent in the mound—scooping was a very mild term given the strength of the roots and the sweat that soon accumulated under Eska’s shirt—until she had uncovered an area approximately the length of her arm and half as wide over the place where Cedo estimated the body of Mihaela lay.

Vorianus assisted with a few spadefuls, but all in all the task was completed by one set of hands and two sets of eyes.

Eska, wiping sweat from her brow, surveyed her progress and the fine, dark dirt she had disturbed, and attempted to make an educated guess about where to begin to delve more deeply. But in truth, when her spade met earth once more, it was more out of desperation than anything else.

The wide spade proved clumsy for the next step, more so than any amount of perseverance or delicacy could overcome. Eska’s efforts resulted in an angry, uncouth hole in the ground. If she continued in this manner, she was liable to damage the bones resting below.

“I don’t suppose either of you has a knife?”

Vorianus shook his head after he translated and Eska was mid-sigh when Cedo lifted the hem of his tunic—revealing not one, but two small daggers in soft leather on his belt. He looked very pleased with himself.

“Good thing the Vardini equip ten year old children with sharp objects,” Eska said, smiling. Using the larger of the two blades, Eska began to carve out a smoother, less destructive hole, working ever downward with gentle motions and removing the loose soil with the spade when necessary. At length, she had dug out a cylinder wide enough to reach into and deep enough to contain most of her forearm, but there was as yet no change in the soil, and she had struck upon nothing that wasn’t dirt.



“Do the Vardini wrap their dead? Cover them in any fashion?” Eska asked. She stood up, grimacing against the stiffness in her back.

“No, nothing of that sort. They prefer to be one with the earth,” Vorianus said. He handed her his skin of water and Eska took two paltry swallows, mindful that, even though Cedo could likely find them fresh water should the need arise, she did not much care for the notion of running dry.

Returning the skin to him, Eska placed one hand against the muscles of her lower back and contemplated the burial mound. Despite the shallow nature of the mound, she was aware that her exploratory digging had hardly penetrated it. “Well, she’ll be deeper, I imagine. Nothing to do but keep going.”

And despite the pain in her back and the heat burgeoning in the skin of her hands as she worked with the unfamiliar hilt of Cedo’s knife, despite the unease she felt at working blind, with no information to guide her, despite all that, the thrill of discovery, of working in unknown soil, had Eska smiling to herself. Whatever lay ahead, whatever her trial among the Vardini might bring, whatever she might find in Altiere if she ever made it there, whatever the Archduke’s plans for the godforged, this moment, at least, was in her control.

She widened the cylinder, making swift work of it with the spade now that she knew she needed to go deeper, then began once more to dig with the knife, switching to Cedo’s smaller blade after she had doubled her depth—and there, something solid, just nicked with the tip of the blade, easily missed by less experienced hands. Eska withdrew her arm from the hole and looked up at Vorianus and Cedo.

“Is it her?”

“It is, fifth vertebra, in fact,” Eska said, unable to resist a jab at Vorianus’s expectations. He frowned, clearly trying to decide if she was serious. Eska laughed. “Unfortunately, I must disappoint you, Master Vorianus. My powers of deduction require a bit more information. But I have found something, yes. And now we must clear a great deal of dirt, but not haphazardly. Down to a specific depth, no further. Which of you would like to assist?” Eska looked from Vorianus to Cedo and back again. Vorianus pointed at Cedo.

Perhaps she ought to have seen it in that moment. Perhaps she ought to have recognized the gesture—meant to induce smiles—for the decoy it was. Perhaps she ought to have understood that Lucullus Vorianus was a very sick man. The sweating. The odor of harrow root. And now the poison wreaking havoc on his already weakened body.

But she did not. And the shadow of death does not make allowances for perhaps.

Eska was pleased to see Cedo took to the work quickly, needing only a few words from Vorianus to understand his task and the importance of, as he got deeper, angling the edge of the spade in a shallow cut, so as to minimize the chances of striking a bone more than a glancing blow.

In time, they widened Eska's initial work until it was roughly the height and width of a human, and then began the vertical work.

"Do you know the material composition of this staff?" Eska asked.

"I think you mean, are you digging for a piece of wood that rotted away into nothing decades ago," Vorianus said.

"Yes, something like that." The question had wormed its way into Eska's mind the moment Nadezha had made her request, but she had kept it to herself, not wanting to give the matriarch any reason to rescind the tenuous agreement between them. And yet the prospect that what she sought was long disintegrated and indistinguishable from the soil that had once enveloped it was a very real one.

"I don't know," Vorianus said. "But I suppose it's in our favor that wood is as scarce in the grass as iron or more precious metals."

Eska dug on. Sometimes it was better not to think on such things. The grass whispered. Cedo worked. Vorianus, seated rather unceremoniously atop the mound, dabbed at his sweat. The stars shone and shifted in their celestial home. And though a few clouds slid across the sky, the moonlight remained strong.

When one is excavating a burial site, one is expecting to find bones. And Eska did. A pelvis first. A femur next. By then Cedo was watching, at Eska's instruction. She uncovered the base of the spine next—wishing desperately for even the clumsiest of brushes with which to sweep the dirt away—and then moved to the

spine's right in an attempt to find the right arm. Bones, quite a few of them, as expected. Which is why it took Eska longer than it ought to have to realize that what she took for the right ulna was, in fact, not.

Not even close. Far too large in circumference and shaped incorrectly. The obvious giveaway, of course, was that there weren't any finger bones in the vicinity.

"Oh," Eska breathed. "Of course. Bone." She touched one fingertip to the smooth, pale surface.

"Hmm?" Vorianus's wordless question turned into a gaping yawn.

"The staff. It's bone." Eska brushed at the soil with her hand, sweeping it away until she had uncovered enough bone to indicate it was at least the length of her entire arm. "A large one. Very interesting."

"Not just bone," Vorianus said. More alert now, he was peering down from his perch on the mound. Eska followed his line of sight to where the bone disappeared beneath dark soil once more—there, a glimmer of something catching the eye of the moon.

Using her fingers—a heinous assault on her professional standards—Eska displaced more loose soil until the glimmer took the form of a band of hammered gold, tarnished slightly but unmistakable, expertly shaped around the bone to fit like a glove. Taking her time, Eska continued her work, head bent to the earth, shoulders aching slightly—but the sort of ache Eska had come associate with success. Cedo fell asleep eventually, and Vorianus watched her work with that wide-eyed sort of expression that suggested his chin was moments away from slipping out of his palm, which would, of course, send him face-first into the bones of the great matriarch. She pointed this out to him, assuming, correctly, as it turned out, that he might wish to avoid such a confrontation, and he shifted sideways on his ample backside until the danger was past.

He was, however, still awake when Eska, her hands black with dirt, her fingertips tingling, at last laid bare the entire staff to the night sky.

Of a height with Eska, she estimated, the top third curving in the most wondrous manner, reminiscent of a scythe. Six bands of gold embraced the pale

bone, each a different width, placed roughly in the vicinity of where a hand might hold the staff.

At first, Eska had thought the staff to be a single piece of bone—a tusk or massive rib—but as she examined the whole more closely, she understood it was three pieces, cleverly joined together by means of a technique she would need more light and far more delicate tools to discover. Most curious of all, the curve of the staff was capped with more gold—and Eska would have been willing to bet that, once, if no longer, the cap could be removed.

The temptation to attempt to prove this theory was strong. Oh, yes. She had Cedo's knives after all. A blade could be slipped between the gold and the bone. Debris could be cleared away. Leverage could loosen the century-old seal. It could be done.

Eska sighed. That particular discovery was not hers to make. Using as light a touch as she could manage, aware that the oils of her skin would do the materials no favors, Eska lifted the staff from the burial mound.

It rattled.

Eska raised her gaze to meet Vorianus's lofted eyebrow, the staff balanced on her palms between them. Cedo stirred into sleepy wakefulness, his brown eyes blinking up at Eska as he registered the thing in her hands.

"Am I imagining things?" Lucullus Vorianus asked.

"If you are, then we both are." Eska shifted the staff so she held it upright in her right hand. Sure enough, something moved within the curved portion of the staff, settling into silence where the bones joined just above the bands of gold and Eska's hand.

Eska bit her lip.

A slow grin spread over Vorianus's face. "I daresay you're about to explode. Like a child when confronted with the most delectable sweet imaginable, but forbidden to touch it."

"I am capable of resistance, I'll have you know."

"Convince me."

Eska scowled. “Stop smirking. We have a long walk. And you have an expiration.” The scowl was returned, but not without traces of the grin clinging to it. Eska’s heart lurched in her chest. They were nothing alike, not really, but Vorianus’s clever conversation reminded her of Albus. She couldn’t remember the last words she had spoken to him. “But first,” she continued, forcing herself not to dwell on the missing librarian, “we have to cover our tracks and return Mihaela to her dignified rest.”

This was accomplished with relative swiftness, the bones covered with care, the dirt mounded over them, and then at last the clods of grass and root pressed back into place. It was not, Eska knew as she surveyed the work, particularly well done, and there was a decided lump somewhere in the vicinity of Mihaela’s pelvis that had certainly not been present before, but there was nothing to be done about that. Eska trod back and forth a few times, tapping here and there with her heel in an attempt to get things to be as they ought.

“Cedo,” she said, “are there words we might say? Something to honor this place and those buried here?”

Vorianus translated and the boy thought for a moment, then he knelt at the base of the mound and placed both palms flat on the slope. Eska and Vorianus followed suit as Cedo bowed his head. Eska saw his lips move, but his voice was so soft she could make out nothing and Vorianus, on Eska’s other side, would be no better off. Perhaps that was for the best. Perhaps the boy spoke as much to the spirits of his dead parents as to the spirit of the matriarch they had disturbed.

They had retraced most of their path when it happened. The walk had been a quiet one, exhaustion dogging the steps of their small but earnest guide. Behind Eska, Vorianus was nothing more than a steady succession of inhales and exhales, his physique adding to his toil. As for Eska, the staff in her hand acted like a whirlpool on her mind, dragging her, willingly, if she were honest, from thought to thought in that galloping manner it sometimes had. As such, the time passed rather quickly, measured only when the eastern horizon seemed to grow slightly less dark—it was really very difficult to be sure—and she was pleased when Cedo, at

the crest of a small rise in the grassland, pointed ahead. There, a faint glow of firelight, an ember in the last vestige of night.

It was then Lucullus Vorianus chose to collapse.

Chose could be interpreted as an unkind description, but one look at him—Eska whirling as his body thudded to the ground, dropping to her knees next to him, his eyelids fluttering, the pulse in his throat beating far too fast—and she was frankly astonished he had made it that far. She had no doubt he had chosen—demanded of himself—to make it within sight of aid.

There was a moment of indecision. After all, she and Vorianus were meant to be ensconced within Nadezha’s tent and the success of the matriarch’s plan, and therefore Eska’s hopes in the trial to come, very much depended on that charade being maintained.

But the moment passed before the thought of it was even fully formed.

“Go,” Eska said. And though the word meant nothing to Cedo, her intent was clear. The boy raced away, leaving Eska with a dying man.

Eska took Vorianus’s head in her hands and settled it in her lap. His hair and scalp were slick with sweat, indeed, his skin shone with it, and warmth emanated from him as though a fire burned within. Eska touched his cheek and leaned over him. She searched for a response in his eyes and saw nothing looking back at her. Perhaps he saw her face, but it seemed more likely to Eska that he was staring at death—and death was smiling back with open arms.

“If you die, I had better see you soon, Master Crow.”