

Chapter Six

"It should never have been mine."

"I'm sorry, did you say banned?"

Eska drew back from the iron-studded doors of the Rhoxanos chapter of Anderra's Supreme Guild of Scholars and Scribes.

"I did."

The man standing across the threshold from Eska smirked openly as he said this. Eska wondered if she ought to point out that the white stole gracing his shoulders—the uniform of Guild members above a certain rank—was stained with a smudge of something that might have been chocolate. It wouldn't help matters, of course, but it might be satisfying.

Eska took a deep breath. "May I ask why?"

The man sniffed and proceeded to lean his torso and head back at a ridiculous angle so he might attempt to look down on Eska. "The Guild is not open to women."

"And yet I was granted entrance four years ago."

"A courtesy to your father and his position."

She could have said a great many things, most of which would have been poorly received, to say the least. Instead, she tried to harness the scholar's twisted logic. "And my father is still my father and his position is still his."

This earned a dismissive one-shouldered shrug. "That may be, but there is also the matter of the circumstances of your last visit."

Eska adopted a frown, though she was fairly certain she knew what was coming next.

"What do you mean?"

The scholar's smirk vanished, replaced by the genuine loathing Eska had suspected lurked underneath. She had witnessed it—been subjected to it—on her previous visit. Though she had found a few friendly faces within the Guild, Anderra's customs still ran deep within both its halls and its members, customs that did not allow women in such spaces.

The man took half a step toward her. “You publicly debated the head of our revered council,” he hissed, “and questioned the founding premises of his theories on the Myonian civilization.”

“Is debate and honest discussion not a hallmark of scholarship, sir?” Eska asked, making sure to maintain a sweet smile despite the scorn roiling in her gut. “Should peers not challenge each other? It is how we all rise to greater understanding.”

“Peer?” The word came out in a strange sort of gasp as the man reared back as though Eska were a scorpion preparing to sting. “Master Arotza has no peer.”

The scorn won.

“Then I pity you all,” Eska said, dropping all pretense of pleasantries. She didn’t give the outraged scholar a chance to respond. Turning on her heel, she strode away from the Guild’s doors and across the empty plaza.

As it happened, the contents of her satchel would likely have gained her entry, regardless of her previous transgressions and trumping even Anderra’s cultural traditions. But Eska was no longer inclined to share those contents with the Masters of the Supreme Guild.

Her steps took her through narrow streets sloping gently toward the harbor until she reached a pretty set of small gardens she had passed on her way to visit the Guild. Pausing amid the pink and white flowers, Eska bent over to smell the blossoms and rolled her shoulders, which did precisely nothing to dispel the frustration knotted there.

She took a seat on a stone bench, determined not to leave and return to the royal residence until she had mastered the desire to write a treatise detailing all the ways in which women—yes, women!—had influenced the course of Anderran history, women who were conveniently forgotten by their own people. Write and then produce enough copies to paper the streets of Rhoanos, of course.

“That’s actually a very tempting notion,” Eska murmured to the flowers, a laugh forming on her lips. “Though it’s not likely to please our dear prince.”

Not that Eska was in a mood to please Frantzisko. The prince of Anderra was delaying their departure, most certainly to punish Eska for her impudent belief that she had a place in a conversation among men. The contracts to employ two of his

men had been written up within a day of that conversation and the prince had even had his experts examine them. He merely needed to instruct the two men in question to sign them, an instruction he had failed to give for four days, claiming too many demands on his time.

Eska's uncle was either unbothered by the delay or was determined to show patience when Eska could not, which was, in her opinion, childish and just the sort of unnecessary behavior to further deepen the wedge between them. But then, Eska could not adequately convey her wish to continue their journey to Sandalese with some haste, not unless she wanted to explain a great many things to her uncle and convince him that an artifact of world-altering power lay hidden there.

Once, she would have divulged all without hesitation. They were partners after all, and he was her uncle, the man who had introduced her to her life's work. But to speak of the discs, to reveal the truth of the godforged to Valentin, would mean sharing what she knew of the Archduke's desire for both the discs and an army of Carriers. And Eska did not know if the long history between the Archduke and Firenzia Company, the patronage and support, would influence her uncle's ability to examine those facts with a fair mind.

Eska sighed and watched a beetle clamber up a stem of a flower and emerge onto the soft pink petals. The delay in leaving Rhoxanos had given her the opportunity to achieve one of her other aims—that is, pay a visit to the Supreme Guild of Scholars and Scribes with a certain item in her satchel, an item that would be of great interest to them—but it seemed she was fated to be thwarted at all turns.

The sound of someone deliberately clearing his throat brought Eska out of her reverie and to her feet. She turned to see a man, another member of the Guild, watching her from a slight distance. He, too, wore a white stole over his shoulders, though it had the added distinction of pale blue trim. A higher rank, Eska knew, though not the highest.

"Lady de Caraval," he said by way of greeting. His voice was light, his Bellaran precise, his figure slim. He was of indeterminate age, his hair showing a hint of grey though his face was yet smooth.

“You have the advantage, sir. I do not know your name.” Eska’s tone was polite—just. She had no desire to engage with the Guild further.

“I am Laurentzi Urzoa,” he said, bowing slightly, but offering no further indication of his rank or status in the Guild. “You seem to have a habit of causing quite a stir at the Guild.”

“I will not refute that.”

A slight smile curved Urzoa’s lips. He gestured the bench opposite Eska. “May I?”

“I’m afraid I have no further time for men who will not accept a woman as a peer.”

“If I were one of those, Lady de Caraval, would I have followed you here? I think it more likely I would mutter something about good riddance and be glad to see the back of you.”

A valid point, Eska conceded.

“What do you want, then?” She did not suggest he sit. “I am expected back at the royal residence.”

Laurentzi Urzoa sat anyway. After a moment, Eska followed suit.

“I was there when you challenged Arotza,” Urzoa said, his voice smooth. His face did not reveal what his opinion of the incident might be. “It was,” he hesitated, to allow himself another small smile, Eska understood, not because he needed to consider his words. “It was magnificent.”

This was pleasing, of course, but Eska was not ready to unfurl her irritation.

“I merely engaged in necessary discourse. Anyone who has studied a bit about the Myonians could have done it.”

“That may be, but Master Arotza is not often challenged. We are,” another hesitation, this one not like the last, “strong in our traditions. And I find my fellows have, even in just the twenty years since my induction, become somewhat reluctant to step beyond the bounds of what they know. The Guild is stagnant.” The scholar’s face showed a hint of unease. “There are those within the walls, in both this chapter and in chapters across Anderra who would have me removed if they knew of this conversation.”

“You have my sympathy, Master Urzoa,” Eska said, “but I have not sought out these admissions from you. You have offered them freely.”

Urzoa gave a gesture of acceptance, his palms opening to the sky as he nodded. “As you say.”

“What do you wish of me, Master Urzoa?” Eska asked, still wary.

The scholar returned his hands to his lap and smiled. “It’s a selfish errand,” he began, his voice smooth. “I wish to plead for your good opinion. While you are aware of and have been subjected to the most conservative elements of our Guild, there is a faction, not large, but strong, that seeks to make change within our ranks and our ways.”

“Am I to congratulate you?” It was, perhaps, an unkind thing to say. Urzoa took it well enough.

“Not at all. You are of Bellara. You have the support of the great Lordican. The changes we seek will seem insignificant to you, though I would argue, if we were arguing, that incremental change can spark a revolution. But I am proud of what we are working toward and I hope the Guild I leave behind to be one worthy of respect on all sides of the Anerrean Sea.”

“An admirable purpose, Master Urzoa.” Eska’s attention drifted to the item in her satchel. Perhaps her purpose could be restored.

“And now I come to the crux of my reasons for following you.” The scholar clasped one hand in the other in his lap, the first sign of nerves. “There will be a gathering of certain Guild members this night, at my home. The guests are all like-minded.” Another small smile, this one inviting Eska to share a secret. Then Urzoa’s face grew even once more and there was a new formality in his voice when he spoke again. “We would be honored if you would be our guest.”

Even if it went awry, surely it could be no worse than another evening with Prince Frantzisko.

“Will I be allowed to speak freely, sir?”

Urzoa bowed over his lap. “I assure you, Lady de Caraval, my friends and I desire nothing less.”

“Then I would be delighted, Master Urzoa.” Eska stood. Urzoa mirrored her. “I will make my excuses to the prince.”

The scholar bowed again. “I will send a litter to collect you.”

“Oh, no, Master Urzoa, I have had my fill of litters. I would much prefer to walk.”

Urzoa smiled. “Then I will send a servant to guide you.”

Eska nodded her thanks and made to exit the gardens when an urgent thought brought her to a halt.

“Master Urzoa,” she said, turning back. “I know Anderran tradition often restricts the consumption of wine or spirits when a gathering extends beyond family members. Please tell me that won’t be the case this evening.”

The scholar laughed, delicately, but with enthusiasm. “You need not fear on that account, my lady.”

“And I said, no, that’s the artemius principle!”

The lantern-studded courtyard erupted with laughter around Eska as the cluster of inebriated—this was the key, really—scholars congratulated each other on the outrageous (truly atrocious) joke that had just been told. Eska smiled, taking delight in watching the Guild members relax the standards of propriety they were so accustomed to upholding.

Despite Master Urzoa’s happy belief that the gathering was of like minds who would not balk at a woman’s presence, the garden had grown quiet upon her entrance. Gentlemanly shyness, Urzoa had whispered to her as a means of reassurance. Many of the scholars present were confirmed bachelors, it seemed, dedicated to their work, while those who had sought marriage were not often social with women who were not their wives.

But the quiet had evaporated not long after the first glasses of wine were emptied—strange how that happens sometimes—and Eska had soon found herself fielding questions from the curious scholars. Most asked about the Seven Cities, thirsty for information on a culture and a history they had only read about, but two

were familiar with some of Eska's work, in particular her writings on the customs of the ancient tribes of the Vienisi plateau. At length, the academic subjects gave way to less erudite conversation—and the very bad jokes.

"I hope you find their company pleasing, my lady." Master Urzoa appeared at Eska's elbow. "I will apologize in advance for anything untowardly ribald."

Eska laughed. "My dear Master Urzoa, your friends are delightful. But they are also very tame." The scholar flushed a little. "I'm afraid they would be severely outmatched at most Bellaran gatherings with this much wine on hand." The flush began to slide into a worried frown and Eska hastily continued. "I mean only that I am not easily offended and have witnessed a great many things." She patted the scholar's arm.

Master Urzoa laughed, plainly relieved. "And the wine? Acceptable?"

"You have excellent taste, sir," Eska said. She clinked the scholar's glass with her own and took a sip. "Tell me, what is the traditional Anderran method of gaining the attention of a less than sober crowd?"

And so it was that Eska found herself standing on the edge of a fountain, glass raised overhead, surrounded by scholarly men, as she conducted an off-key rendition of an old Anderran folk song to which she knew neither the words nor the tune.

But when the melody swelled to its final conclusion and the voices faded away, Eska was left with a rapt, silent audience beneath the stars.

"Gentlemen, esteemed members of the Supreme Guild of Scholars and Scribes, and, I hope, from this night onward, my friends," Eska began, using the Anderran word for friends. She had not brushed up on her useful Anderran phrases prior to crossing the sea—there had been no time—but this word, at least, she could employ to some effect.

This was met with polite cheering and hearty applause.

"I consider myself fortunate to be among your company this night. As many of you are aware, my time here in Anderra is but a preamble to a longer journey to the interior of Sandalese. And while your prince vexes me with his delays," Eska smiled, "it occurs to me that perhaps I owe him thanks. Reluctantly given, I assure you,"

here the assembled scholars laughed their appreciation, “and yet were he not set on irritating me, I would not be here tonight.” Eska glanced from face to face, her own growing more serious. “I would not have the privilege of knowing the resistance that exists in Anderran society. I would not know the minds and faces of the men who recognize that the traditions of their elders, while they are to be respected, are not meant to dictate the lives of people generations removed from their origin.”

A few voices murmured their agreement. Eska caught sight of Master Urzoa at the back of the crowd. He wasn’t watching her—instead, his gaze roamed among his compatriots and what he saw there suffused his face with pride.

“May I tell you a secret, gentlemen?” Eska went on. “This will be shocking to you.” She dropped her voice to a false whisper. “I am not known for my patience.”

Laughter, again. Eska grinned.

“Oh, to be sure, when I have an interesting text in front of me, or an artifact fresh from the ground, I have all the patience in the world and my attention is undivided. But away from my work, I have been known to ruffle feathers. In other words, I would not have the forbearance to wage this silent, slow war in which you are embroiled. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, you have my respect and admiration. Master Urzoa has told me a little of the cracks you have established, cracks that will spread and open the minds of your people, and of your hopes for the future. And you have my support.”

The scholars cheered and a few called for more wine, but Eska held up a hand to quiet them. Her stomach pulsed with her heartbeat at the thought of what came next.

“I think there comes a time in every academic’s life and career when she or he questions the purpose of the work, indeed, even his or her own purpose. By some of your faces, I can tell you there are those in this room who feel the truth of that statement. If you do not, consider yourself lucky, though I think your time will come. Let that not be the dire warning it sounds, let it instead be a reminder that change within the self, much like the change you seek to enact in Anderra, is vital. And while we all love our work, sometimes I think we love it too fiercely, and this

blinds us to what lies beyond the books and the objects that speak to us from history.”

She hadn't planned this speech. Hadn't thought to imbue this moment with self-reflection—indeed, these words drifting on the night air in a courtyard in Anderra were not even words she had voiced within herself, not when the first glimmering, nebulous notion of this moment had manifested within her mind, not when she lay awake at night on the *Argonex* as the ship rose and fell with the rhythms of the sea. And yet every word seemed to chime with certainty, like a bell tolling truth.

“Since my uncle founded Firenzia Company thirty years ago, it has contributed more to the study of the history and peoples of Bellara and many lands beyond than any other entity. I do not say this to boast. I state it as fact. And I am proud of those contributions. Our excavations have allowed for the development of knowledge scholars a generation ago could only speculate over. Through our resources, which are extensive, and through a combination of good fortune and perseverance, Firenzia has thrived and will continue to do so. And as a result, we will continue to influence and drive academic progress.” Eska took a breath. Her gaze fell on Master Urzoa once more. The scholar's face had gone quiet, but Eska thought she saw him give her the slightest nod—of encouragement, understanding, and something Eska could not quite grasp.

“And yet recently I have come to look beyond that work, or perhaps I am looking directly at it still, only from a different perspective, I am not sure which.” In Eska's mind, she was in Toridium once more, in the Hall of the Lions, and a woman name Parisia was kneeling before the empty throne of the Vismarch of that city—as she had for thirty years of her life. “The Seven Cities are home to a great many treasures. Some within private homes and collections, some displayed in the halls of rulers and powerful families. My own home is one of these. My company is responsible for the growth of many of these collections. And I am sure many prominent Anderrans, perhaps some of you, and certainly your prince most of all, possess things that were born under different skies. But the habit of giving new homes to things from far off places is not a new one. The wealthy have been trading

in these things for centuries, following the ebb and flow of empires and commerce and war.”

Eska signaled to the servant waiting in the darkness at the side of the courtyard. He rushed forward, her satchel in hand. The worn leather was at odds with her blue gown, but the familiar weight—and that broken clasp she really needed to have fixed—brought a sense of calm to her mind. Taking her eyes from the gathered scholars for the first time, Eska opened a small compartment and reached inside.

Her hand found the item easily and she withdrew it and held it aloft.

The scholars shuffled closer as one, each man trying to get a better glimpse.

“Does anyone know what this is?” Eska asked.

Urzoa knew. She could see it in his smile. But he made no move to speak.

“It is a band of Intxike.”

The voice—quiet and with more than a little reverence—belonged to one of the oldest scholars present. He stepped through the crowd, which parted to allow him to approach where Eska perched on the rim of the fountain. One hand strayed to his long grey beard as he stared at the wide band of gold Eska held between thumb and finger.

“It is,” Eska said.

“I have studied them all my life,” the man said, his voice hardly more than a whisper now. “I was fascinated with them as a boy, not least because none have been seen within the borders of Anderra in nearly one hundred years.” His gaze drifted from the gold bracelet to Eska’s face and she saw that his eyes shone with tears. “We know them only from scrolls and drawings.”

Eska smiled and stepped down from the fountain. She held out the ancient Anderran artifact. “Take it,” she whispered. “It should never have been mine.”

The old scholar hesitated. Eska took his hand with her free one and, her eyes fixed on his, pressed the bracelet into his palm.

For a moment, there was only the old man’s joy, and Eska felt her own eyes grow hot with tears as she watched him stare in wonder, his thumb caressing the intricate forms carved in the gold. But then she took a breath and addressed the scholars once more.

“Friends. My uncle gave me this band of Intxike when I was a girl. He had no knowledge of its name or origin or meaning. He bought it from a collector in Sarento and thought it pretty. When I was older, I researched it at the Lordican and came to understand that I had been given a holy relic that was priceless to the earliest ancestors of Anderra to wear as a trinket.” Eska raised her voice. “Who am I to possess such a thing? What gave my uncle the right to determine its value? How many beautiful things have been ripped from their homes that gave them meaning, from the cultures that cherish them, taken by the powerful from those they deem inferior and weak, all for the sake of displaying behind glass for others to admire and covet?”

It was a question without answer. The courtyard was quiet but for the song of a lone cricket.

And then Master Urzoa spoke.

“Lady de Caraval, you do us a great kindness.”

“This is not kindness, Master Urzoa,” Eska said, shaking her head. “I merely seek to right a wrong.”

“And yet countless others would not have found the courage to stand before us and do what you have done. Countless others would not have seen the wrong you strive to right. I consider myself fair-minded, but I do not know what I would have done in your stead. You have taught us an important lesson.”

Other scholars joined in, murmuring praise and thanks. Eska bowed her head in acceptance, though she felt an awkward clumsiness, and sought out wine to refill her glass. As the members of the Guild passed the band of Intxike among themselves, their conversation swelled around her, and she took the opportunity to slip from the crowd.

There, on the edge of the light, Urzoa found her. Eska wrapped her arms about herself, suddenly aware of the night’s chill.

“You have made them very happy,” Urzoa said. “Particularly Master Elazar.”

She had, she could see that, and she felt her own relief—at their happiness and at having the thing done—as a lightness in her chest. And yet, there was something else there, something shadowing over the scene before her. The godforged, she

supposed. She was nearly sure she had begun to dream in bronze. “I am glad the Guild refused me entry today,” she said. “If they had not, your Master Arotza would have been the one to receive the band. Not that,” she added hastily, “I expect you to keep this a secret from him.”

Master Urzoa smiled. “In that you are correct. And while Master Arotza might not appreciate dissenting opinions, he does appreciate and take pride in Anderran history. He will be very pleased that the Guild has recovered one of these priceless relics. We have long supposed them all to be destroyed, or at least flung so far from Anderra so as to be forever out of our reach.”

“What will you tell him?”

“How it came into our possession?”

Eska nodded.

Urzoa sighed, a graceful thing that seemed to slide off his slender shoulders. “I am tempted to tell him the truth,” he said, a hint of a grin cracking the smooth composure he wore so well. “There would be a tirade, of course, and then silent indignation, but eventually he would be too pleased by the notion that he would be the one to present the band to Prince Frantzisko.”

“And thereby guaranteeing his place in the history of your Guild for years to come.” It was something of a condemnation, of course, and Urzoa would hear it as such, but Eska said it with a smile. “And what will be your place in that history, Master Urzoa? What will young scholars learn of you long after you and I are both dust?”

To Eska’s surprise, the question seemed to fluster the scholar. His cheeks flushed slightly and he looked away, on pretense of gesturing for a servant to bring more wine, but there was no mistaking the fear lurking behind his eyes when he returned his attention to Eska.

“Have I made you uncomfortable, Master Urzoa? If so, I beg your pardon. I am a poor guest, I fear.”

Whatever ease of conversation the Master had previously displayed, he now seemed entirely without words—indeed, without the poise Eska had begun to consider to be his chief characteristic.

A more considerate guest might have changed the subject, made a joke, accidentally spilled some wine to spare the poor man whatever consternation she had caused—Eska did consider this—but there were three Arconian governesses who would claim that Eska had never let anyone off the hook, ever.

At last Master Urzoa seemed to recover, at least in part, his wits. He straightened the cuffs of his elegant robe—already straight—and cleared his throat. “Lady de Caraval, will you follow me, please?”

Decidedly unexpected. For a moment Eska wondered if the man was about to profess his love—he was certainly nervous enough for that—but this was, frankly, absurd.

And in the end, Master Urzoa confessed something altogether more outrageous—scandalous, one might even say.

Laurentzi Urzoa led Eska from the courtyard through a small, tidy study, down a short hall lined with family portraits done in the late Rizolli style Anderra had adopted with unbridled enthusiasm a generation before, and into a larger library.

He stopped beneath a family crest painted on a whitewashed wall, his face framed by a pair of winged lions, and pointed Eska toward the nearest bookshelf, apparently unwilling or unable to go any further himself.

“The one with the red stripe down the spine,” he said, pointing. Eska took the heavy leather-bound book from the shelf and held it before her as she faced Urzoa and awaited further instruction.

“Just inside the front cover,” Urzoa said. His breath had quickened, Eska saw, and there was a paleness to his cheeks that was decidedly unnatural.

She made no move to open the tome. “Sir, are you unwell? Perhaps you had better sit down. I fear you may fall faint.”

Urzoa shook his head, lips pressed tightly together. “That is unnecessary. Please.” He gestured again.

Frowning, Eska turned her attention to the book and opened it. A family tree dating back some four hundred years snaked its way across the page. The great ancestor of Urzoa was, it seemed, a man named Santutxo. A tiny banner had been

drawn next to his name, likely to indicate the grant of lands and a title of some form—or at least the right to adopt a family crest.

“The next page,” Urzoa said, still pale, still rigid as a statue. “Bottom left.”

Eska turned the page. “Ah,” she said, “I have found you.” She smiled, hoping to put the man at ease.

“Indeed.” The smile was returned, but there was nothing genuine about it. “Now, do you see that slim volume, up there?” He pointed to the top shelf. “The dark blue leather.” Urzoa swallowed. “That will be of some interest.”

Part of Eska was utterly delighted—after all, clearly some great secret was at work here—but she could not help but wonder if she ought to do as the man said or if she ought to make some excuse. The delight won.

Stretching up on her toes, Eska could just reach the indicated book. She pulled it down and, much like the other, held it before her.

“There is a paper folded somewhere between the pages,” Urzoa said, his distress lending strain to his voice.

And there was. Eska found it quickly and plucked the parchment free. Her gaze never leaving Urzoa’s face, she set the blue book down and held it out the parchment.

“Open it.”

“Master Urzoa,” Eska said.

“Please.”

Eska gave a nod, then unfolded the paper.

It was a formal document, bearing the royal seal and several scrawled signatures. And it was entirely in Anderran, of course.

This was not lost on Master Urzoa, despite his altered state.

“It is a document of birth. You will see, perhaps about two-thirds of the way down the page, there is a place where a different hand has filled in a name.”

“I see it,” Eska said. The ink was more brown than black, and the letters did not match the elegant script of the scribe who had penned the document.

Master Urzoa hesitated, and Eska had the distinct impression she was meant to have experienced an epiphany.

And then, "Oh." That was all, a single exhaled breath in the shape of a word of surprise.

Eska looked up, saw the scholar's face twist with anxiety and relief. She felt her own heart pound in her chest.

"Laurentzia," Eska said. "You are Laurentzia, not Laurentzi."

Master Urzoa—Master Laurentzia Urzoa—sagged against the wall that bore her family's crest. She closed her eyes and nodded—more to herself, Eska thought.

Eska folded the parchment and returned it to the book. By the time she had replaced the book on the shelf, the scholar had moved to a chair. Though she seemed reluctant to look Eska in the eye, she gestured for Eska to sit opposite her, just as they had sat in the garden that afternoon. It suddenly felt like a very long time ago.

She waited for the woman to speak. Waiting went against her nature, but even Eska understood when a story must be released without the incursion of questions.

"As you are surely aware," the woman began, "children in Anderra are kept within the walls of the home for the first three years of life. My father died when I was but two years of age." Each word seemed to calm her nerves and her tone began to take on the feel of a lecturer giving a lesson to students. "My mother made a decision for me at four days after my father's death. A decision that would alter the course of my life. We had no other family in the house and my aunts and uncles and other relatives, few as they are, had not visited Rhoanos since my birth. The servants my mother did not trust were sent away. Those who had been loyal to her for many years remained. And from that day on, I was brought up as a boy."

"A courageous choice."

Urzoa nodded. "Yes. I do not deny this. My mother wanted to give me the chance at a life beyond the traditions of womanhood in this country. I was her only child. One of my earliest memories of her was discovering that she was trying to teach herself mathematic principles in secret. She had dreams, I began to understand, though little real hope of realizing them." There was something left unsaid.

Eska ventured to guess at it. "But it was never your choice."

Laurentzia Urzoa was quiet for a long moment, her face as still as a pond untroubled by the breeze, but the silence spoke of internal debate, one held over many years.

“I would not change it. I do not wish you to think that of me. My mother’s choice set me on the path to indulge my every curiosity, which eventually turned me to the doors of the Guild. And I was welcomed through those doors because I was Laurentzi. But,” and here Laurentzia’s gaze sharpened as she looked at Eska, “it has also meant years of secrets. Of hiding. Of keeping the world at bay lest anyone get too close.” The scholar’s face twisted with bitterness. “Anderra does not have a history of looking kindly on women who have dared to subvert the ideals men have constructed for us. It would not go well for me if I were discovered.”

Eska nodded. She knew the story of Otsana of Ferzanos. For the crime of running her husband’s business after his death—and far more successfully than dear departed Matzinus had ever managed—she was beaten and exiled to a remote retreat for women who sought a holy existence. Eska, just twelve years old at the time, had been horrified when the news spread to Arconia—the horror quickly subsumed by shame as Eska understood for the first time that the freedom she had known all her life was denied in so many places beyond Bellara’s borders. Shame and a strange debt of gratitude to the Alescuan dynasty. For it was the queens among them who had instilled—forcefully, and with tremendous cruelty—the notion that women were the equals of men. Amid the terror and the bloodshed and the fear, this was the single stroke of good in their legacy.

“Why tell me?” Eska asked. “Why take that risk?”

Laurentzia smiled. “Because I have seen you take two risks within the span of mere hours. If this is a mark of how you live your life, if even half of what I have heard of you is true, then I wanted to know what that felt like, if only for a moment.” The smile faded. “Everything I do is safe. Every choice I make is calculated to preserve my secret. It is exhausting. It is a life I would not wish on another. Imagine, then,” she said, her voice going soft, “my joy at seeing you embrace the freedoms you were born into and making the most of them. If you will pardon a bit of melodrama, imagine standing close enough to the brightest star in

the sky and indulging, for just a moment, the foolish notion that some of that star's radiance could be yours."

"Come to Arconia." The outburst surprised even Eska, though the vigor behind her words was perhaps a means of combating the knot in her throat. "Leave these chains behind. You would be welcome in the Lordican. Laurentzia would be welcome, not just Laurentzi."

For a moment, the glimmer of longing was there in Master Urzoa's eyes. The silence teetered between them. And then, resignation darkened the woman's gaze.

"What would become of my friends?" Laurentzia tried to laugh, but the attempt was unconvincing and they both knew it. She took a deep breath. "They may not know my secret and perhaps there is one or two who, out of fear, would turn on me if they were to discover it. But they need me. They are good men, dedicated to change. You are generous and kind, Lady de Caraval, but if I am to have any legacy at all, let it be that I have done some good for my country. And I cannot do that from across the sea."

"Even if no one knows the architect of this change is a woman?"

Master Urzoa nodded. There was no false bravery in that nod, no stoic sense of sacrifice. But there was resolve. "Even so," she said.

Eska returned the nod. "I should like to correspond with you, if this is acceptable to you."

Laurentzia smiled again, this one full and genuine. "I would be delighted. After all, how else will I hear about the other artifacts you intend to see returned to their homes?"

Shocked, Eska laughed. "You know of my intentions?"

The scholar shrugged. "You have confirmed my suspicion just now, but your words in the courtyard tonight were not the words of someone acting on a fleeting whim. They were words from your core, even if you yourself were unaware of their existence."

Master Urzoa, it seemed, had inferred a great deal more from Eska's speech than she had thought possible.

“It is true, I have a number of things I hope to restore to the lands in which they were created—lands between here and Sandalese.”

Master Urzoa nodded. “It is a noble effort. But not all will be as easy, I think, as your band of Intxike. You know this, I hope.”

Eska frowned. “What do you mean?”

Laurentzia spread her hands in her lap. “Only that there may be some who will resent you for your actions. They will think you see yourself as their foreign benefactor, admiring your own benevolence, especially if they are less prosperous than your Seven Cities. It will be a strange mirror image of the very forces that separated them from the item in the first place. Your people, or someone very like you, had the power to take, and now you will show them that you have the power to return. To you, there is a crucial difference between the two. But to them, it will be a display of power.”

The sense of the scholar’s words was irrefutable, so much so, in fact, that Eska could not quite fathom how her own mind, usually a vault of logic, had not managed to conjure them. Perhaps, a very small and rather sly voice in Eska’s head suggested, she had been too busy admiring her own benevolence. Not outright, no. Eska had no intention of seeking acclaim for what she intended to do, and she certainly did not feel herself to be in a position of superiority—but there, in the library of a woman pretending to be a man in order to claim even the most tenuous grip on power, Eska understood her view of the world was perhaps far narrower than she had ever imagined.

To say this realization was somewhat jarring would be an understatement. Fortunately, Master Urzoa seemed to sense this. She stood, knelt before Eska’s chair, and forced Eska to look her in the eye.

“No self-pity, not from you, Lady de Caraval.” The instructions were given with more force in Urzoa’s voice than Eska had yet heard—and more familiarity, despite the use of Eska’s formal title. “Yes, you have power, beyond even that of which you are aware. But you also have a good heart and the mind to understand something of that power. And when you understand it, you will know how best to use it.”

Eska gave a slow nod. “I hope you are right.”

Urzoa got to her feet in a single brisk motion. “I know I am,” she said, simply.

They rejoined the party in the courtyard—after all, the host and the guest of honor could not vanish for overly long. But if the guest of honor was more subdued than before, if she smiled and spoke less, very likely the scholars were too deep in the wine to notice. And when at last Eska slipped from the house of Laurentzia Urzoa to walk the moon-kissed streets of Rhoxanos, though she saw the pale light and the shadows and the way the blue roofs became one with the night sky, she could think of nothing but the way the stars—in that peculiar way they have—vanished the moment she tried to look in their cold blue hearts, leaving nothing but empty voids glaring back at her.