



NIGHT  
OF  
MASKS  
AND  
KNIVES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LJ ANDREWS

# NIGHT OF MASKS AND KNIVES

J. ANDREWS

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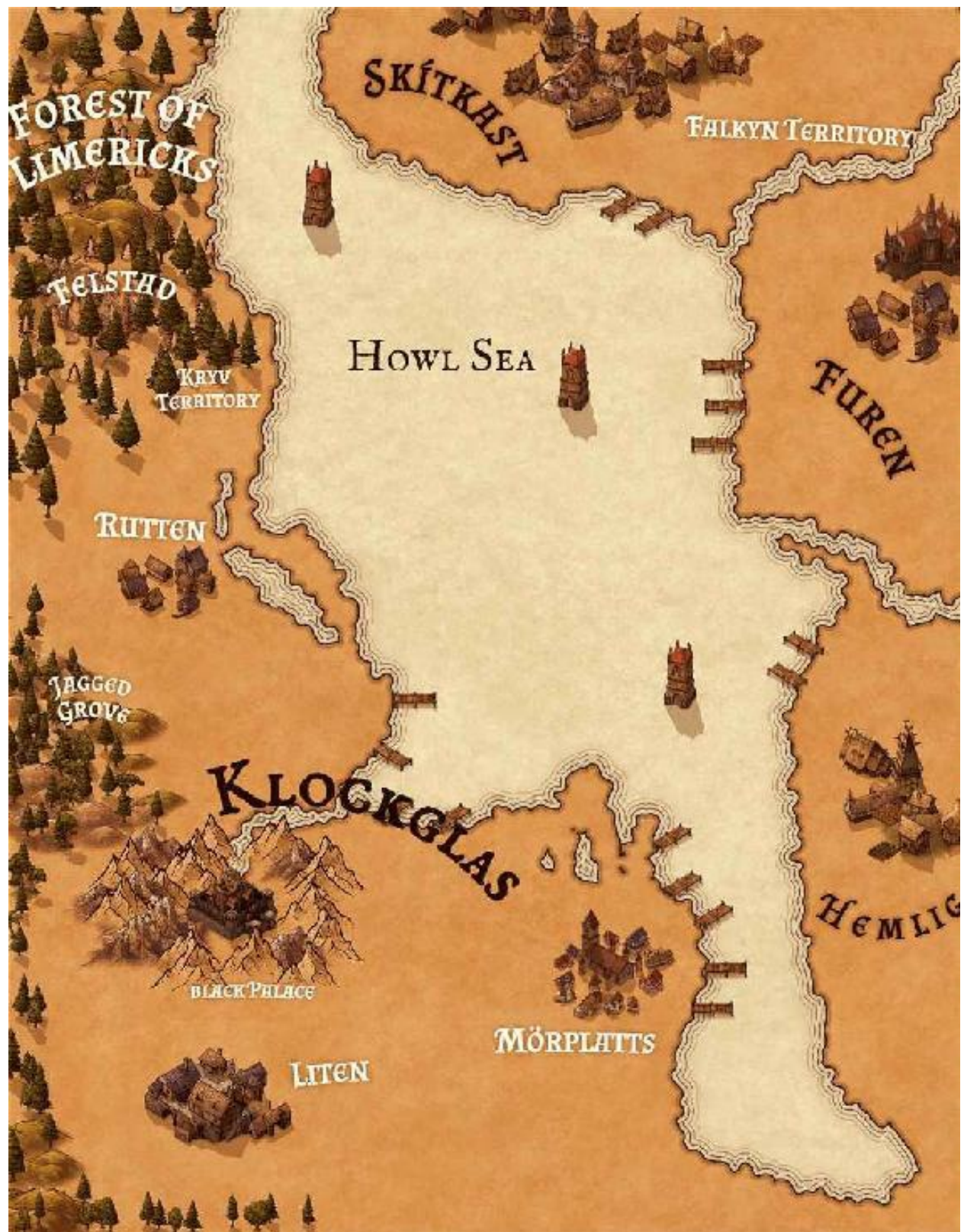
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*Dedicated to Scottie Lynn.  
You weren't here for long, but you fought to the end. Just like a Kryv.*









# GLOSSARY OF ALVER KINDS

## **Hypnotik Kind:**

*Masters of illusion, power found in conscious thought*

## **Profetik Kind:**

*Masters of the senses, power found in sight, taste, and sound*

## **Mediski Kind**

*Masters of healing, power found in natural healing*

## **Rifter Kind**

*Masters of breaking bone, power found in response to pain*

## **Elixist Kind**

*Masters of alchemy, power found in blood*

## **Anomali Kind**

*Masters of unknowns, power found in emotions, and combinations of Kinds*





# THE PAST

HER FIRST BROTHER CALLED them bastards.

Her stepfather called them nothing, preferring to forget they existed.

Her second brother called them tricky. He played long games of seek and find with them in the hayloft and hog pens where the girl and boy worked from sunup to sundown.

When night faded and stars brightened, it was in the hayloft the second brother would tuck them away to dream of new days and new games.

With a simple candleflame to brighten the eaves, the girl would tell the boy tales of the North, the South, to the far reaches of the West.

"You'll keep my secret?" she whispered.

"If you keep mine," he said.

"Promise." She held out her little finger, crooked like a fishing hook, until the boy locked it with his, and they giggled beneath the hay.

Those were the nights when a poor boy and a forgotten girl dreamed aloud of the new lives they'd live far across the sea. Of good kings and gods' magic. Tales where they were not hunted, where they were not afraid.

The sort of tales where heroes never died, and pain did not exist.

Those were nights when the girl told the boy he was valiant and steady like a raven, and he said she looked as pretty as a rose. The boy whittled them, a raven and rose, then tied the raven to her neck, the rose to his, and told her he'd always keep her secrets. Always.

In the loft, under the stars, littles could be little, and first loves could be safe and kind and wanted.

But those tales were fables. In those grand adventures, love stories, and far-reaching kingdoms, no one ever told the boy and girl how the stories ended.

No one ever said the kind brother would be lost to them.

No one mentioned how brave little boys would grow to become killers.

Or how sweet little girls would someday be the trickiest of thieves.



1



# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE BASTARD PLAYED ME.

Between the slat houses, Hob kicked up mud as he dodged morning hawkers and dock men trudging to the fjord. He skirted around the corner of the last shanty, and I ran faster after him, boots sliding over the rain-soaked cobblestones.

I cupped my cheek where he sliced me with a damn shiv he called a knife, the smell of my blood had already wrinkled a few noses.

Blood had a tangy scent, but this was different. Mesmer, what some called mystics or magic, had a fetid aroma. And my blood reeked of it.

"Hob!" I shouted. He heard me because he let out one of his pitchy whimpers before he curled his scarecrow body through the broken window of an old cask shed.

I tore down a narrow alley but smashed into a tower of caged quail. Vials filled with ashy dust scattered free of my satchel. A curse escaped with my breath as I gathered each one, ignoring the quail merchant's demands for payment for his broken cages.

Back on my feet, with my pack shouldered again, I hopped a small wooden fence and crouched in the space between the fishmonger and a fair-sized goat pen.

The slap of oversized shoes echoed on the stones. My fingers twitched at my sides. A wheeze from his herb-smoke lungs drew closer, and the moment his lanky body came into view, I lunged.

Hob might've been a head taller, a few turns older, but even scrawny as I was, he folded like a wet piece of parchment.

"Malin! There you are," he said with a start. Hob used his shaky thumb to wipe away some of the blood on my cheek. "You ought to cover up the smell. The skydguard is on patrol, and hells, I'd hate for a young Alver to be found out here. Alone."

I curled my fist around the collar of his jacket, dragging him behind the fishmonger's shop. The trouble with being an Alver, a user of mesmer, was most of us ended up bartered and indentured to the Lord Magnate Ivar. A man who'd become a wretched connoisseur of Alvers, whose authority was the most feared *and* most revered in all four regions of the east.

Ivar ruled from the Black Palace a hundred lengths away, and I had no plans to be his shiny new ornament.

With Hob's back to the wall, I held out my hand. "Give it to me."

The hawker freed a nervous chuckle, reached for his leather coin purse, and pulled out a glass vial. "No harm, Malin. You know me, always looking for an opportunity. Buyers are out there, and since you had so many I thought, what's one gone? Only one, that's all."

Once the vial was back in hand, I slapped him.

Hob curled over his knees and held a hand to the welt on his cheek. "Bleeding hells—"

I didn't let him finish before the knife I kept tucked inside my boot was pressed to the sweat-soaked nape of his neck. Weak as he looked, Hob had a nasty streak. He trembled, but still smiled as though he thrived in danger and cutthroat deals.

"I'm hurt, Hob," I said. "It's one thing if you steal from me, but another when you try to get me picked by Ivar's skydguard. I thought we had an understanding. You scavenge for me, and I keep your debts at the game hall managed."

"We do," he said hurriedly. "We have our understanding, it's just I hock things. I could hardly help myself, but I would've split the cost with you. And the cut was an accident. Swear it on my wife's life."

"Ah, Hob, you mean it?" I tapped the point of my knife to his chin, sneering. "I'd be touched except you don't have a wife."

"If I did, I meant. If I did."

What a rat. I withdrew my blade, and Hob slumped against the wall. He watched the vial return to my satchel. Those vials were my currency and infamy. They were my power. Dozens of desirable memories.

Each marked with a tell to remind me of whose memory I'd stolen. Woman with feathered wand. Dragonfly masked man. Captain with gold tooth. Hob had taken one called the 'bloody affair', for lack of a better description.

"You chose a good one," I told him. "Quite brutal. The sort of thing a twisted mind would pay well to see."

As Hob readied to sit on a compost box, I slapped him again.

"Three hells! What was that for?" He ripped off his knitted cap and held the threads to his blotchy face.

My fingers tangled into his greasy curls, wrenching his head back, so he

looked straight at me. “Who did you plan to sell it to, Hob? To anyone but me these are only bone dust.”

Precisely, one little finger crushed into fine powder. All it took was a bit on my tongue and my mesmer unlocked the last breath, the final moments of the dead. I’d seen each memory inside my satchel and was more broken for it.

Hob shirked my hand from his hair, reached for an herb roll, cupping the end as he lit it. He dragged in a long breath, then puffed out a brown plume of smoke. “You can’t be the only one like you. Figured there’s got to be more.”

When he found an Alver like me, I’d love to know. I had questions.

The back door of the shop swung open, and the meaty fishmonger tossed a bucket filled with herring heads into the alley. He spared a glance our way. Doubtless we were an odd sight: a skinny woman with a knife, and a man at her feet. The fishmonger sniffed, brushed a bit of dust from his ratty beard, then slammed the door on us again.

Not such an unusual sight to see in the slums, after all.

Only once the door was bolted did I turn to Hob again. “It’s a good thing you have what I want,” I whispered. “Or I’d be rather keen to play the stunned damsel, and you the vicious thief.”

For the first time something like fear flickered through Hob’s eyes. “You’re gonna get yourself killed.”

“Oh, Hob. Don’t pretend you care about anyone but yourself.”

“Fine then. What’ll you give me for it?”

“Seeing how you stole from me I’d say that you’re still breathing is payment enough.” He didn’t know my mesmer couldn’t kill him, but the way Hob skirted around me like I’d burst into flames sometimes was only to my benefit.

To survive here, thieves and crooks needed to be clever. Vicious, even. I'd simply made myself cleverer. I'd become more vicious.

True, I lived on the hill. True, my stepfather had more pence than he knew how to spend, but what did it mean when I was nothing but a forgotten, unwed, unwanted burden of the man who'd taken on a woman with her infant daughter?

The woman died before I could walk.

I was left with a man who resented me, and two older stepbrothers. One who'd like to slit my throat for the sport of it. The other who loved me well, but had been locked in a Howl sea prison for two turns after a business deal went wrong in a distant kingdom.

I narrowed my glare. "Are we going to have any more trouble, Hob?"

"Not in the slightest." Hob opened his arms and grinned villainously. "As you please, then. Have your way with me."

I rolled my eyes. "It better be good."

Before he could retort, I smashed my lips to his.

A kiss, strange as it seemed, was the swiftest way to take breath.

The same as final moments were scoured from the bone of a corpse, a living memory could only be taken through living breath.

Hob tasted like his sour herbs and sweat, and like always, enjoyed himself as I inhaled the memory. I jabbed my elbow into his ribs when he tried to slip his tongue in my mouth.

He laughed until I could draw no more and pulled back.

Familiar smoke came to my mind. I focused on it, ignoring the way Hob sneered as though he'd gotten the better half of the deal. Colors of white and ash and black twisted into bulbous shapes, sharp lines, and narrow points. Shapes transformed into movements, into voices from moments already gone.

Hob's memory took me to the shore, crouched behind a thick oak tree. Blue moonlight shimmered on the glass of the Howl Sea. A longship docked at a port not fifteen lengths from here. On one side of the ship was a golden emblem of ribbon coiled around a haunting, smiling mask.

My stomach lurched.

"Seeing it now?" Hob asked, his voice muffled like he spoke to me underwater.

Crewmen from the longship carved through the smoke as they unloaded crates and totes. Even packed away, I could smell the spices, the sugars to be blown into thin candies, the sweet cherry liqueurs.

Through the haze a man appeared. Over his shoulders he wore a blue cloak so dark it looked black.

Wisps of smoke spun in ashy threads around his head, shaping the smooth gold face of his mask, the limp velvet strips of emerald fabric, down to the silver bells on each pointed end. A fool's mask. A trickster.

He was the treasurer of the Masque av Aska.

A fine enough memory to take, but it was the second man who bore a familiar hardened scowl I knew too well.

"By the gods," I muttered.

Hob's eyes gleamed as he lit another herb roll. "Told you it'd be worth it. I know how to scavenge for secrets, girl."

"My stepfather is . . ." Words turned to nothing but breath.

"Guarding the coffers for the bleeding masquerade." Hob chuckled and slapped his bony leg. "Look at your connections. Tell me, Malin. What's it like living in the hog piss while your daj holds enough clout to be trusted with the coffers for this turn's festival?"

"You hired me to find anything about the Masque av Aska." Hob jabbed

the herb roll at my face. “You start picking the pockets of a man like the treasurer, a man like Jens Strom—” Hob dragged in a long puff, holding his breath until he blew out the smoke with his words, ”—might as well slit your own throat.”

All gods. My stepfather was involved heavily in the masque this turn and it was no small feat.

The festival was the most anticipated event held at the Black Palace. Folk from all the regions surrounding the Howl came to see fortune tellers and Black Palace Alvers perform. They came to drink and eat, to watch tricks and illusions. To play the game of queens where wretched folk would try to don a boring glass ring.

Everyone loved to try on the ring that never fit quite right.

Held under heavy guard, they’d play, bending and twisting their fingers, desperate to make it fit. Then when it didn’t, they’d go about their drunken ways, telling fanciful tales of the lost heir to the throne. They’d praise our little plot of land for having the strength to thrive without a king or queen.

Because the one who fit the glass ring would wear the crown.

In truth, Ivar would never allow it. No doubt, he’d slit the throat of anyone who came close. The game was a ruse. A way to take more penge coin from drunken folk and keep them drowning in the revelry of the Masque av Aska.

But buried in the revelry was something more sinister.

Folk entered the masquerade, and some never came back out.

Unbidden, a boy’s frightened screams and ghostly images of the crowds barring me from him came to mind. Then, those screams faded until they were gone entirely. Like always, when I thought of the day I lost Kase, I coiled a few strands of my sunset red hair around my fingers until the unease settled in my stomach.

"Uh, Malin." Hob swatted at my arm, drawing me out of the endless thoughts I could not escape. "If you wanted to dig into the masque, more than the treasurer that is, here come the folk you want."

I followed his gaze to the haggard town square. A vise curled around my chest as folk gathered in tight lines at the approaching beat of rawhide drums. Perhaps the fates favored me after all.

Around the bend a Black Palace caravan rolled into view. Brightly colored ribbons and sashes marked the cabs and charges. Painted masks in silver and gold gleamed across the doors of each coach.

I clambered up a toppled cask, used one of Hob's shoulders as a prop without his permission, then leveraged my legs over the sod rooftop of the fishmonger's. With careful motions, I crept up the slope on my belly and peered into the square.

Ten heartbeats later, Hob's breathless gasps settled beside me as he maneuvered his lanky body onto the rooftop. "What are we watching for now?"

"*I'm* watching there." I gestured at the polished black coach pulling up to the towering rune post. The post was there to name our mangy township of Mörplatts as one officially protected by the gods.

If it made folk feel as if we mattered at all, let them have the runes.

My heart stilled in my chest when a man stepped out of the coach. Much like the Masque av Aska treasurer he wore a fool's mask with black velvet folds bursting from the top. This mask, though, was made of pearl porcelain. Stamps of silver and bronze checkered across the brow.

By the skies—the Master of Ceremonies. The villain behind the wretchedness of the Masque av Aska. He was responsible for every corner, every drop of entertainment, everyone who was lost at the masquerade.



"Hells, this'll be good," Hob said with a twisted smirk. "Maybe your daj has connections to the master too."

I'd puzzle through what connection Jens Strom had to the masquerade later, but now, I needed to listen.

The master stepped to the rune post, flanked by two Black Palace Alvers in shimmering silver cloaks. The color of Rifter mesmer. Wicked magic with the power of breaking bodies. Made a bit of sense such a powerful man would be surrounded by their Kind.

"Good people," the Master shouted. His voice was deep, a low growl, no doubt altered by some type of mesmer from a Hypnotik—the illusionists of the kingdom. "Today begins the gathering for the Masque av Aska."

A few weak hands clapped together. I rolled my eyes. Not like any pathetic folk in Mörplatts would have enough penge to attend the masquerade. Attending for someone like me wasn't always so simple. The reason I used Hob to find any whiff of masquerade folk to give me clues on what happened to Kase all those turns ago.

The Master turned to the rune post and one of his Rifiers pounded a spike through the top of an elegant piece of vellum.

"You might wonder why I've come to announce this turn's masque." Murmurs filtered through the crowd giving enough proof that folk *were* wondering why such a man would descend to the slums. The Master held up his gloved hands, bringing the crowd to a quiet again. "Lord Magnate Ivar is pleased to announce some alterations to the Masque av Aska. The first son of the Black Palace, our Heir Magnate Niall, seeks a bride."

A hum of excitement replaced the murmurs. Why would any woman want such a man? If Ivar was vicious, Heir Magnate Niall was from the hells.

The Master allowed the chatter to go on for a few more breaths before he

silenced the people. “The bride of the heir is a proud tradition of our region, and is open to all folk, common and noble alike.”

Now the hum grew to a few shrill shrieks as girls clung to their maj’s, as spinsters smiled for the first time in turns. All thrilled for the chance to spin and prance in front of the cruelest of fools at the Masque av Aska.

“Ah, this excites you *dännisk* Strom,” Hob said. “Such is the dream of most women folk, I suppose, to steal the hand of the Heir Magnate. Personally, I don’t know what the fuss is about.”

I hadn’t realized I’d been grinning along with every stupid girl in the streets below.

“If the Heir Magnate were bleeding out on the road, I would walk past without stopping, Hob.” I smacked his shoulder, causing him to wince, then slid back down the slope of the roof. Once my feet were planted on the ground, I waited for Hob to slide down the same. “Don’t you get it? I can walk through the gates of the Masque av Aska unhindered. I’ll get back to where it all began.”

Hob arched a brow. “Where what began?”

I waved the thought away. How would I begin to explain the depth of this obsession to a man like him?

“Why do you do this? Why not just leave the masquerade alone?” Hob asked with a bit of exasperation. “It is nothing but a death sentence for Alvers like you.”

I returned the hood from my jacket to my head, then tossed a copper penge coin at his feet. “There are secrets at the Masque av Aska like there are in memories, Hob. And a girl must have her secrets.”

I abandoned him with an extra copper coin and disappeared into the bustle of the morning.

At long last, I'd step back into the masquerade without skydguard searching for the common folk who did not belong.

I'd find Kase again.

And, no mistake, my first kill would be the one who took him.



2

# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE STROM ESTATE WAS made of a wood and wattle longhouse and a few cottages speckled amongst the surrounding trees. There were gardens made of sweet blooms and thistles with midnight purple blossoms. A fountain in the front was made of tarnished iron and shaped like the raven Huginn. In the back was a stone fountain in the form of Munnin.

It was a grand estate; one the Strom household took a great deal of pride managing.

The perfect place for an invisible stepdaughter to hide and escape to different lands where a boy had not disappeared, and the only brother who cared for her was not locked in a sea prison.

I climbed the ladder in the hayloft, exhausted, a little perplexed on how to take Hob's memory and make use of it.

My stepfather was not the sort of man to give up anything, especially not to me. If I pressed him about the penge, I'd be forced to admit I used my mesmer—a thing he strictly forbade me to do. What was his hand in the Masque av Aska this turn? Would he know what happened to the boy who once lived here?

Ten bleeding turns I'd taken misstep after misstep, never growing closer to learning Kase's fate.

Heaviness lined my gut. A thought came to mind, one I refused to allow except in moments as this when I was alone and weary in the hayloft. What if Kase was dead?

I closed my eyes against the instant sting. *Bleeding hells*. I scrubbed my face until the ache pulled back. In Klockglas, there was no room for whimpering weaklings who fell into despair.

I turned toward the open hatch in the loft, gazing at the soft glow of the main house. There was a row of narrow cabriolets and single-rider horses near the front entrance. My stepbrother, Bard, must've been hosting one of his fetes. All a ruse for Bard to feel more important than he was, and for his friends to descend into debauchery until dawn.

I was surprised he'd not pounded his drunken feet to the stables, demanding I serve his schoolmates he dragged here from the higher academy across the Howl.

Those mates tried relentlessly to snag a peek under my tunic. At the last attempt, I'd split the lip of one merchant's son and was banned from the house for two weeks. If their hands were not wandering, they were pestering me with questions to try to determine if I were an Alver or not. I had yet to discover what would happen if they found out everyone in House Strom was an Alver.

Even their boon companion.

I slammed the hatch closed and locked it. The sight of Bard made me miss my other brother, Hagen, more. Truth be told, I was a little angry Hagen had gone and gotten himself locked up. I didn't know what caused the arrest, but grew more resentful the longer he was away.

With a heavy sigh, I flopped onto my back, staring at the eaves. The damn sting would not leave my eyes.

Boots scraped over the straw in the stalls below. With slow movements, I crept to the edge of the loft and peeked over.

A smile tugged at my lips. "Elof. Favoring the night again?"

The mysterious stable hand lifted his bright blue eyes. Blue was not accurate. These eyes were a sunburst of all colors of the sea. Rich green. Sun gold. The bluest blue. Then, beneath them all was a shadow of dark. Like a deep sea cave.

Elof almost smiled. The smallest twitch in the corner of his mouth hinted he wanted to but thought better of it. "Always, *dännisk*."

He faced the stall, stroking one of the mares before he lifted a few handfuls of hay into the trough. Perhaps I ought to be ashamed the way my chest heated watching the lean, smooth divots of his muscles work. But I had so few pleasures, I could not find it in me to be ashamed over this.

He was an odd laborer, working sporadically, and often arrived after the sun set. I did not know how he leveraged such a schedule with my stepfather.

One thing that could be said for Jens Strom, he did not use serfs. Many noble folk did, but Jens used paid servants. They were free here.

When Elof first came, at the first sight I'd lost my ability to speak.

Not because he was strikingly handsome, more because his face was one plucked straight from my imagination.

A face of one of the many exotic princes I'd created in tales I'd shared with Kase when we were small. Prince Fell. A prince with bright eyes and lean body so enemies underestimated him.

Ah, but our Prince Fell was clever. He outwitted his enemies until, at the end of our tale, Fell claimed the kingdom and rescued the fair maiden locked

away in a dark world.

Elof had the bright eyes, but was more haggard than Prince Fell. His dark hair was tied with twine in a warrior's knot, and on his chin was a patchy scruff of beard that seemed to change every time I saw him. Still, beneath the rugged appearance was Fell.

I'd know my fantasy prince anywhere. As a girl, I'd shaped his face after the boy who slept near me in the hayloft. Different eyes, but if I'd given Prince Fell gold eyes like the sunrise, Kase would've known who'd inspired the tale.

When I saw Elof, sometimes I liked to imagine a grown Kase would look a bit like him.

"Do you know my name, Elof?" I whispered as he blew out one of the lanterns.

My pulse stalled when he cut those sharp eyes in my direction. For the first time, looking at me like he saw me. "I know it. *Dännisk*."

I let out a long sigh. Even to one of the servants I was nothing but a leech to the name Strom. He would not address me. Doubtless, Elof would prefer it if I kept quiet and let him be.

"As long as you know," I said, turning away.

"You should not stay out in the towns so late."

By the gods. This might be the first time the bleeding man had carried on a conversation. I looked over my shoulder. Elof had both hands perched on the end of the fork handle, his eyes narrowed, his jaw pulsed.

Was he . . . reprimanding me?

I snorted. "Concern noted."

"I didn't say concern."

The man had a voice like a bear. Interesting. "My mistake."



"It's foolish, and I thought you had more brains in your head."

Now my eyes narrowed. He had no idea the lengths I could go, how dangerous I could be.

Because I was a woman did it instantly make me a thing not to be feared? Did he instantly think I had nothing but starry eyes and romantic notions in my head? Did he truly think I didn't know the bleeding dangers of this gods-forsaken region?

I sprawled out on my belly and perched my chin atop my fist. "Dear Elof. You might want to consider it a foolish thing for those in town to meet *me* after dark. They are the ones at risk, not me."

He scoffed. No, the bastard bleeding laughed at me. A throaty sound, one rife in derision.

"What?" I propped onto my elbows. "Don't believe me?"

What did I have to prove? Nothing to him, yet here I was determined to prove my value and wickedness when I knew it was more dangerous to reveal my mesmer to someone like him, someone I didn't truly know, than it was to steal memories from a thief like Hob.

"I believe you think you understand how the world works, *dännisk*. But you don't."

"You don't know me, Elof."

He stabbed a thick pile of hay, shaking his head. "Perhaps not, but I know when someone is being brainless."

My teeth ground together. He sounded like bleeding Kase. My old friend always told me how stupidly empty my skull was with the risks I took. Then again, he was right there taking risks with me.

"You know, Elof, I think it was better when we did not speak."

"Agreed, *dännisk*. Go to sleep in your warm little bed."

Oh. I did not care much for oddly handsome Elof anymore. My mistake breaking the façade of his princely face by causing him to speak. Dozens of sharp remarks danced on my tongue, but none suited. No doubt, each would find a way to somehow make me look a fool rather than clever.

I kept my glare on him as I backed away from the ledge. The man had the audacity to smirk—bleeding smirk—until I could no longer see his awful face anymore.

That was what I got for trying to find a new connection with another person.

Best to keep to the ghosts of the past and a brother I did not know when I'd meet again. There was Ansel, Hagen's friend and master of the grounds for the estate, but he had his own family.

The Norns had arranged a lonely path for me. Fine. I would walk alone until I found a way to save the ones who mattered. The only ones who mattered.

I scurried to the back of the loft where I'd shaped a small nest to use as that warm, little bed. On instinct, my fingers dug through the dry hay until the tips curled around a scratch of burlap. I pulled the stuffed horse from beneath the hay and fiddled with the mane made of yarn, twisted the lone button eye. The other had been lost six turns ago. A single, unbidden tear splashed onto the chipped black button.

I sniffed and hugged the horse against my chest. "We'll find him, Asger," I whispered. "Want to know something? I think even as a man, he'll keep you beside him."

I snickered at the thought. Would grown Kase be broad and strong? Or would he favor a lean height by now?

As a boy he'd worked fields, scrubbed the stables, saddled mares. Hagen

always teased him, saying Kase would outgrow him if he kept at it.

Hagen was no small man.

I hugged Asger, recalling the day I gave the horse to Kase. If I'd known it would be the last gift I'd ever give him for a birth fete, would I have done more, said more?

Or would we still have bickered because there were few days that passed without us bickering?

*I'm not a bleeding little, Mallie.*

*You're not a man either, you sod.*

*I'm older than you, and I don't need this kind of stuff no more.*

My smile mingled with tears in the mane.

Kase had whined and complained over getting a stuffed toy—one I'd spent the better half of a month scrimping and saving for the stuffing to make it—but there wasn't a night he didn't sleep with Asger beside him.

When my eyes grew heavy, I clung to Asger against the chill of the night and against the shadows that always thickened in the stables when the stars brightened.

Strange and heavy, as if the shadows were more than night. Sounds of Elof working below tangled in the dark. Did he not notice the mists in the stables? The way he kept working, sometimes I thought the darkness belonged to me alone.

Perhaps I was slipping into a bit of madness.

Turns of desperation and now I was imagining a presence unseen to everyone else. In truth, I'd grown more accustomed to the darkness, even

found some comfort when it came. Shadows were only bothersome when the eeriness of eyes watching in the dark prickled up my neck.

I winced and drew my knees up to my chest, refusing to look over my shoulder, and fought the urge to ask Elof to light a few lanterns.

Perhaps there was a ghost in the loft.

I simply hadn't puzzled if the ghost was friend or foe.



3

# THE MEMORY THIEF

“UP. MALIN, GET UP.”

I groaned against whatever nudged my hip. A bump, then another. Something firm and hard kept tapping at my bones. I’d cut it to pieces should it touch me again.

“Leave me,” I mumbled.

“Bleeding skies.” Thick, strong hands were all at once curling beneath my arms. A little shriek scraped out of my throat as instinct demanded I thrash and fight. Until a throaty chuckle rumbled through my blood. “By the gods, girl. Do you wake like a feral cat every morning?”

“Ansel.” My eyes adjusted to the dark and I shoved him back. With an irritated sigh, I brushed off the pieces of hay stuck to my trousers and hair. “What are you doing here?”

One look outside showed the sun had not even considered waking yet.

“We have work to do.” Ansel dropped a spade at my feet. He was Hagen’s closest friend, to the disappointment of my stepfather, and had the bulky shape of a berserker warrior. But his heart was kind and good.

Since Hagen's arrest, Ansel had stepped into a position where he took pride in treating me like a helpless younger sister.

"What?" I scrubbed the sleep from my eyes. "Why now?"

"Master Strom received word a prison transport is arriving today." Ansel's white smile broke the darkness.

My pulse pounded in my skull. I forgot to breathe. Little by little a smile—one of both relief and disbelief—cut over my mouth. "A prison . . ." I curled my fingers around Ansel's wrist. "Is it Hagen?"

Ansel laughed softly. "I'd daresay it is, Mal. Your stepfather wants the grounds prepared for his return."

Hagen. My brother. The only man in House Strom who cared at all if I lived was returning home!

Most of my life he'd traveled to the Northern Kingdoms on foreign business for House Strom. I didn't know what sort of business, he never told me, never let me ask much, but I didn't care. So long as he returned.

Until two turns ago, he didn't.

To have him come home . . .

I hurried and smoothed the ratted mess of my hair, tied it in a loose braid, then tugged on my only pair of boiled leather boots. In moments I slid among the groundskeepers and followed Ansel's orders.

By the time morning light chased away the mists of dawn, I'd cut down wild grass along the front path, fed goats, the mares, and managed to catch a goose for Cook to roast. Beads of sweat gathered over my brow as I plucked a few bitter roots and turnips for the feast my stepfather would surely demand tonight.

"Malin, get to the hogs, girl. The damn pen broke open." From the front of the longhouse, my stepfather locked me in a hard glare.

I nodded and used the back of my hand to wipe the grime from my eyes.  
“Yes, Daj.”

Jens Strom had a powerful voice like the waves on the Howl. The sound of it carried in every movement of the manor. From the shudder of the breeze in the branches, to the clatter of wooden plates in the cooking rooms. When my stepfather spoke, the estate listened.

A burly man with thick arms, strong as stone. His beard was braided in the center, then to show his rank as a nobleman, the sides of his russet hair were shorn to his skull, a long ridge of a braid ran down the middle. Runes were inked into his scalp and cheekbones. Protection. Strength. Prosperity. All the markings of a nobleman.

I was glad for the Strom wealth, though. Without it, Jens would be an Alver pup at the masquerade with the rest of us.

He was an Anomali like me. A name for mesmer that was unknown, strange, powerful.

From clues he left, I’d deduced my stepfather had some kind of gift with lies and truth. Something about controlling what words were spoken and what tales were told.

Such a gift could be useful if you swindled your way to nobility. If victims could not speak the truth, who could stop you? I must’ve been a little wicked myself because I cared little if Jens rose to wealth dishonorably. His purse kept the lot of us free Alvers, and he had enough influence to keep the truth of my mesmer hidden.

For some reason, he did.

As far as I knew, Ivar had no idea the stepdaughter of House Strom was anything but utterly ordinary.

Jens did not love me, but he gave me his name, kept me with a roof over



my head, and meals in my belly. By law he did not need to. As his dead wife's daughter, Jens was not bound to me; he hadn't been bound to me for nearly my entire life.

Most days I resented him, ached for him to break his back doing endless work like the rest of us, but part of me loved him for keeping me from a life at a cheer house, or skin and bones in the gutter.

And on a day like today, he could ask me to do anything, and I'd do it without a second thought.

Hagen would be here soon.

"Malin," Jens snapped as I handed the basket of vegetables to another servant. "When you finish, I want you to keep to the stables. Understand?"

My mouth parted. "But I had hoped—"

"Is there a problem?"

"I hoped . . . I wanted to meet with Hagen, Daj. It's been so long, I thought I might join tonight at the main house."

A wicked sort of laughter echoed across the grounds. "The little mouse? Inside with us? We wouldn't shame my dear brother with such a sight his first night back."

Bard emerged from the longhouse and bit into a ripe, red blood apple. Juices dripped down his strong chin. To some, Bard was handsome. Dignified. The heir of House Strom.

To me he was cruel and spoiled to the fibers of his bones.

An embarrassing knot tightened in my throat. "I did not mean any disrespect, but . . . I am Hagen's sister too."

Bard laughed and took another bite. "Tell me, little mouse. What claim do you have on anything in this house? You're lucky to have a roof to call yours."

"I am entitled to my mother's portion of House Strom." By the hells, what was I doing? I blamed the rush of delirious pain on the thought of being banished from Hagen a moment longer.

My outburst stopped more than one servant to pause and watch. Some with horror, others with a thrill in their eyes that something interesting might happen at House Strom at long last.

"Your mother?" Bard tossed the half-eaten apple and took a step closer, his voice rife in petulant irony. "Oh, poor little sister. Do you not realize your whore of a mother is dead?"

"Enough," Jens snapped. His eyes narrowed in a look of . . . disgust, maybe disdain. Perhaps something else. "Malin, you will do as you're told. I do not want to see your face near the main house. That is my final word, girl."

Bard winked. I'd like to ram the point of my knife into his leg to wipe the grin from his face. Instead, like always, I nodded. I bent to the word of my stepfather, picked up the spade, and turned away toward the hog pen.

The cobbled path wrapped around the main longhouse. Jens didn't need to have stock or pens of hogs. He was a man of weaponry. One of the trusted forgers of the Black Palace armory. If I believed him to be a kind man, I might think my stepfather added smelly pens and lush gardens to have more work for his servants, so he could justify keeping them paid and off the streets.

But he was not a man I'd call kind, so he must simply like the presence of stupid creatures like escapist hogs.

At the pen my throat dried until it was hard to swallow.

Elof stood inside, adjusting the broken latch.

Guilt plunged into my chest like a knife whenever my heart skipped at the

sight of the man. As if I were betraying the only boy I'd ever loved by this unseemly attraction to another. Another who was irritable and, frankly, rude.

Elof lifted his eyes. "Need something *dännisk*?"

"Not from you."

Elof didn't pause his work, but that intoxicating twitch played at his mouth again. "How could you know such a thing?"

"Hmm. Call it a bit of indigestion telling me you would never have anything I want."

"You speak in such definitive ways. I've been told by many I have a talent at delivering one's deepest desires."

My insides twisted. His words dripped in underlying meanings, and I didn't want to dig into them.

"What an unpleasant surprise to have you here during the day."

"I am needed here today."

I rolled my eyes and hurried to the other side of the gate where one of the hogs had slipped through. The smallest and swiftest. I fought to catch the animal until my lungs burned.

It could not be understated how much I resented being forced to ask Elof for help.

He said nothing, but the gleam in those ocean eyes told me he was shouting all the ways he had something I needed until the animal was safely behind the repaired gate.

"The sun is setting, *dännisk*. You ought to head back to your little bed."

I tucked pieces of my sweaty, dirty hair behind my ear. "And you should go find someone else to torment."

"Well spoke, *dännisk*. No truly, I'm wounded."

"Good." *Hells*. I had less wit than a bleeding stone, and Elof knew it. His

arrogant laughter stuck in me like broken glass as I finished packing the newly straightened posts with mud and clay and he went back to feeding the stupid hogs.

My work had slowed since my stepfather demanded I stay hidden. What was so terrible about allowing me near Hagen? Jens knew we were close; he'd never tried to keep us apart. One of those suspiciously kind acts I didn't understand. But now it was as if he knew something more and kept me in the dark because he didn't want me to be privy to his secrets.

"It is probably for the best you are out of the way tonight, *dännisk*." Elof said, leaning one elbow over the end of his spade.

I glared at him. "What?"

"Tonight, when your brother returns. I think it is wise to stay out of the way."

Did I speak out loud about Hagen? Or did my face merely scream I was a little more broken being unable to see my brother? I ignored him and wiped my muddy hands on my trousers.

Elof's voice turned dark. "In fact, I think you ought to hurry back to your loft. Now."

"You don't get to—"

Words choked off at the shudder of wheels over grit and pebbles. My heart stilled in my chest. I held my breath and turned toward the front drive of House Strom.

By the gods. Black Palace coaches. Hagen. My blood raced, and a watery smile couldn't be held back.

Until the dream turned to a wretched reality.

"Dammit." Elof's curse was another knife in the chest, proof what I was seeing was true.

"The masquerade," I said under my breath. Not Black Palace coaches. These were transport carriages with painted masks on the sides, and bars over the windows. The sort of wagons used to trap and transport purchased Alvers for the Masque av Aska.

If anything proved the Alvers employed at the masquerade were not free it was the bars on those coaches.

My knees weakened when a trio of armed skydguard opened one of the barred doors, and dragged a thin, weak man from the back.

"No," Elof said under his breath. "This is not possible."

I didn't know what he meant, all I heard was my own strangled voice. "Hagen!"



4

# THE MEMORY THIEF

MY VOICE WAS SHRILL as the skydguard forced my stepbrother to his knees.

His hair had grown long to his shoulders. His beard was ratted and knotted, ending just above his heart. He wore rags, and those strong, safe arms were thin and bruised now.

I took a step to rush the drive, to fight off anyone who dared touch him, but was stopped by a firm grip around my waist.

Elof held me against his broad chest, pulling me back.

I struggled against him. “No!”

“Be quiet.”

“Release me!”

“Shut your mouth, or I will force it closed.” The fool clung to me like I was his last breath. I hated him. Slowly, Elof walked me back toward the trees. “Malin, you must let him go.”

The bastard *did* know my name.

“No.” The pain in my chest grew too much. I slumped against his body. “It’s the masque.”

“I know.”

“They’ll . . . destroy him. Let me go!”

The door to the longhouse tore open. My stepfather and half the household spilled onto the drive.

“What is this?” Jens snarled.

A skydguard with a silver seax blade stepped forward. The captain, no doubt.

“For your service to the Black Palace, your Lord Magnate has granted those of you at House Strom the opportunity to bid farewell to the second son.”

“No,” Jens said. “I received word he was to be released.”

“Plans have changed, My Lord. From here, Lord Hagen Strom, a known Alver, will be of the employ of the Lord Magnate in whatever capacity he deems suitable.”

“No.” I whipped around in Elof’s hold, but he only gripped my hips until the dig of his fingernails hurt.

“If you want to keep your damn head, you’ll shut up,” he snapped in my ear and pulled us into the shadows near an old supply hut. Darkness swallowed us whole. I hadn’t realized how thickly night came, but I could hardly catch sight of Hagen in the dim.

“My son has served his sentence,” my stepfather insisted.

The captain tilted his head. “Do you question your Lord Magnate, Lord Strom?”

“Daj,” Hagen’s voice—oh, the sound of his voice after so long ached—was rough and lined in a harsh rasp. “Let me go, but . . . go to them. Don’t let them suffer, I beg of you. Free them.”

Let who suffer? Who needed to be free?



Jens stiffened, turning into a silent sentinel. He watched mutely as the skydguard shoved Hagen forward, as they commanded he bid his folk farewell.

I needed to see him, needed to get to him, touch him. Elof was strong, but I was desperate. The heel of my boot slammed over his foot. He cursed me, but it was enough to loosen his grip for a moment.

I snapped free of his hold and raced for the drive, ready to slaughter every skydguard bringing harm to Hagen. Irrational, perhaps, but I would cut as many as I could before they ended me. Hagen would not be taken. Not like Kase. I would not lose them both to the masquerade.

“Hagen!”

He lifted his eyes in my direction and shook his head. “Mal, no. *Please.*”

Damn him. I would not watch him be lost to the world. He’d die at the masque, no mistake.

But those cursed arms curled around my waist again, pulling me back. I shrieked, screamed. Drew a few looks from the skydguard. I was pulled into the shadows before any guards took enough interest to follow.

Elof dragged me straight to Ansel’s cottage. He pressed my shoulders against the door and leveled me in his stare. “Your brother made his choices. He knew the risks. What he would want right now is to make sure you are safe, so that is what I will do. It is what I will always do.”

He made no sense. I didn’t want to hear him or be anywhere else but chasing down the coach taking Hagen into the hells.

But I could. I could step into the masquerade this turn. Burn it to the ground.

Tears dried. Emotion burned up.

Elof must’ve noticed a new darkness in my eyes for he cursed the gods and

sighed. “You will not leave this alone.”

“Never.” The word scraped through my teeth.

“Always the reckless fool,” he said, but it was as if he spoke it more to himself. “You will never find him without help, you do realize this, right? Tell me you are not so foolish to think you can chase him to the Masque av Aska on your own.”

Did it matter if I had planned to do exactly that? No. I would break the ground of Klockglas if it meant I rescued Hagen from the same fate I’d forced upon Kase.

“I would not mock me now,” I whispered. “It will not end well for you.”

Elof gripped the back of my head with such force, I choked on my breath. “And it will *all* end for you if you chase this alone. No one is mad enough to touch the masquerade. Unless you make a deal with the Guild of Kryv, but —”

His mouth shut at once, as if the words slipped out and he hadn’t intended it. My eyes widened. The Guild of Kryv belonged to the Nightrender, a wraith of a man. A crook who hated the Lord Magnate and folk of status. Some called him the dark faerie. A man who’d appear when one’s darkest desires needed to become reality.

I believed him to be nothing more than a killer who thrived in chaos.

“The Nightrender is a killer, not a frequenter of the masque,” I whispered.

“He is a dealmaker.” Elof muttered, running his hands through his thick hair. “Deals are what the Guild of Kryv does.”

“A dealmaker? Ah, so you believe he *is* a fae who grants wishes. I never took you for a stupid man, Elof.”

“Gods, do you know anything about the bleeding world? I’m not speaking of faerie wishes and magic, although, the fae of our neighboring kingdoms

will take offense to your dismissal of them. But in Klockglas, in every bleeding region, power is given through schemes, bribes, and deals. The Nightrender is the best at them, but it doesn't matter. He would not make a deal with a foolish woman like you. You're too reckless."

Fists clenched, I lifted my chin in a way to seem bigger, but the truth was I couldn't stop shaking. "You know a great deal about them. They could help, couldn't they?"

"No. No one can help you. You misunderstood me, *dännisk*. Do not ask again."

I'd lost my brother and my heart to the masquerade. I was finished with the shadows surrounding it. With one palm I shoved against his chest. "Don't lie to me. You brought up the Kryv because they were the first thought to come to your mind. First thoughts tend to be the most honest. Now, tell me true—are the Kryv capable of helping me get my brother back?"

Elof's mouth tightened. He didn't drop his gaze off mine. Didn't blink.

"By the gods, I am not a piece of glass!" I stepped back a few paces. "The masquerade has taken every piece of my heart, and I would like them back. If the Guild of Kryv can be of use, bleeding tell me, or I swear I will confess to every skydguard that I have plans to poison every cake at the masquerade. At least then, I will find Hagen by getting tossed into the masque myself. Do not doubt me, I will do it."

Elof stared at me with a bit of stun for a few breaths, then folded his arms over his chest, shifting on his feet. "The amusing part of your threats is you're dense enough to follow through with them. You wish to make a deal with the Kryv? Unwise, but if you insist *dännisk*—" Elof pointed at Ansel's door, stepping toward the shadows of the trees, "you should ask your brother's boon companion what such deals entail. Then make your choice."

My chest cinched. Ansel knew of the Nightrender? Gentle, overbearing, but a wretched dealmaker? That could not be.

Elof stepped off the stoop, and a grip of panic tightened my throat. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Away. Like you, the masquerade is enough to unsettle even me.” Elof paused before slipping into the darkness. “Don’t be foolish and follow your brother tonight. You are worthless to him if you get yourself killed.”

Then, he was gone.

I stood in the frame of Ansel’s cottage for a long breath. Twice I’d been broken. Twice the Eastern Kingdom had robbed me of a person my heart cherished.

Time for my vengeance had come and gone too many times.

I would take it now.



5

# THE NIGHTRENDER

A COLD WIND CUT through the narrow laths of a supply hut. From hooks on the walls hung spades with splintered handles, scythes with bits of hardened rust on the cutting edges, and forgotten axes once used to shape and build the entire estate.

In my hand, I tossed a gold penge coin. To some it meant a lifetime of scrimping and eating thin gruel, to others it was hardly an amount worthy of note. To me it didn't matter the size of payment, what mattered was the fear and hopelessness behind it when it landed in my hands.

When desperation and need were considered, this particular coin was worth more than the treasury of the Black Palace.

When the door, broken off one of the hinges, opened, I didn't turn. Merely tossed the penge back and forth between my hands, eyes on the cold ribbons of moonlight spilling over the dust and misuse.

"You're late," I said, gathering shadows around my shoulders and hands. Some believed I had power over darkness. In truth, all my mesmer came from fear. Shadows could be credited to those who feared the pitch of night.

There was a great deal of power to be had when terror grew potent. I felt it now, and I was glad for it. The shadows kept me a mystery. Unrecognizable to those, like my guest, who might recall my face from a past life.

If I were a better man, I might embrace a bit of respect for my visitor. He carried fear, no mistake, but it was dulled by a fierce anger, probably hatred for me.

Bold. A little brave.

The door closed with a loud groan. "I had children to tend to."

I scoffed. Always excuses. Littles could survive without fathers. I did.

Then again, I was not the sort mothers hoped their young ones might become, but I could say I survived, and held the power in my hands tonight. More than most pathetic littles could say when they grew into pathetic servants for wealthy houses.

I faced the grounds master of House Strom. The coin he paid me nearly two turns before rolled between my fingers. A flicker of new fear in his gaze at the sight of it was unmistakable. Fear never slipped past my notice.

When my power lived in those rushes of panic, suffocating, tight fear was all I felt.

To the man's credit, he buried his disquiet in a few breaths and leveled me in a harsh stare. "This was not part of our deal."

One side of my mouth curled into a grin. "I did not know you set the rules, Ansel. Our deal was you would owe me a favor if I delivered the tonic your boy needs. Has there been even one month where the delivery was not made?"

Ansel was a tall man. He could be formidable if he did not open his chest so wide and let others see what mattered most to him. When his young son

contracted the Wild Fever two turns back, his heart was forever weakened. But herbs and elixirs with a touch of mesmer were expensive to come by.

I'd arranged for an Elixist—an Alver with a marvelous gift for mixing potions and poisons—to create the tonic for the boy. Saved his little life.

"And I am grateful—"

"You do not sound grateful."

Ansel shook his head. "Why do you need her? What is this scheme? She came to me tonight, knowing things about our . . . interactions only Kryv would know. How?"

"Ah. My business with you does not require me to answer your questions. My deals are simple. Grant my favor when asked, and the tonic continues to arrive every first moon. Do not follow through on your part and it stops. Simple."

A groove gathered between his eyes. "Will you tell me if you plan to kill her?"

"No."

"No you don't plan to kill her, or no you won't tell me?"

"No."

The grounds master glared at me like jagged glass. "You're of the hells."

I chuckled and pocketed his coin. "Am I? Your lovely wife doesn't seem to think so." I reveled a little too much in the way his face shaded a deep red. "Don't look so violent. She's oddly devoted to you. But she's begun to leave us little spice cakes on the night of delivery, and my guild finds them delicious. A woman who knows how to show appreciation."

When he looked away, I made quick work of chasing the space between us.

Shadows spilled throughout the supply hut. My hand pressed against his



chest, absorbing every rapid thud of his heart as I slammed his back against the wall. The grounds master stood taller by half a head, but the look of pure, dripping fear in his eyes powered heady, skeins of night from my body.

Each shadow chilled the surface of my skin, while in the same breath my blood heated with the use of mesmer.

The hut darkened, like I looked at him through a sheer, dark cloth. Inky black covered my eyes. Normally, I could coat my eyes in darkness when I pleased. Tonight, the whites blotted out as emotions heightened.

I hated teetering so close to losing control.

"One penge." My voice was a dark rasp. "That was all you had, so I allowed the remainder of your debt to be paid by granting me one favor whenever I came to call. No questions." I pressed my brow to his. "Curse my name, I care little, but bring the woman to my dealmakers in one piece. Should you fail, I will take the balance of our deal another way. Your wife would be a good place to begin. We could use a pretty serf."

"You bastard."

My hand was light on his chest, but coils of shadows snaked around his throat and wrists, squeezing until he winced. "What is your choice? I truly don't see the trouble. The idea to meet the Kryv was already placed in her head. She will do this with or without you, but this way she makes it to us alive, your debt with the Guild of Kryv will be square, and your boy lives."

Ansel's gaze dropped to the dust on the floorboards, but he nodded.

"May I take that as an agreement?"

"Yes." The man's voice was haggard and broken.

It was perfect.

I released him from my mesmer shadows. My skin burned in the strange icy heat as the darkness recoiled back into my blood. All but my eyes.

I reached into my pocket and removed the penge. With a flick, I let it fall to the floor. “Deliver her and consider our dealings complete.”

In three long strides I reached the door, but stopped at Ansel’s voice.

“She’ll fight you. If you bring her harm, she’ll fight you. She’s an Alver, but you probably know that.”

Hand on the knob, I glanced over my shoulder.

Ansel reached for the coin, then faced me, a broken smile on his face. “There is something powerful about her. I don’t know what, but she will have even less than I with which to pay you. Since she cannot pay, I’m sure you mean her ill. An innocent who has lost too much already. I hope the gods curse you for this.”

“Ah, never fear, they often do.”

If only he knew how much I’d tried to keep this night from unfolding. But no matter what careful steps I took, I failed. Our paths would cross, and it would likely end in death if I did not step back into the past I wished I could forget.

The childish wooden rose scorched where it touched my chest beneath my tunic. I refused to think on it, not even for a moment.

“Until tomorrow.” I opened the door, grinning at him. “Oh, and Ansel, don’t be late again.”



IN THE NATURAL SHADOWS was where the world could stop spinning. The relentless thrum of my pulse could slow, if only for a moment.

It would be a welcome relief to the heat in my chest. I’d stepped wrong, made a mistake, and I did not make mistakes. To slip in a game of knives like

this meant death and blood.

For nearly two turns we'd been searching for, and bribing others, on behalf of those who wanted Hagen Strom. When we found him, we'd worked meticulously to arrange for his release from the north Howl prison.

Our forged release papers were perfect.

But in one night he'd slipped through our fingers. How had the masquerade caught wind of him? Even with the shock, I could've worked with the surprise of the masquerade. The trouble came when *she'd* stepped out of line. If she'd kept her head, if she'd disappeared into the stables, I would not still be fighting this bleeding fight.

"He's gone quiet, Tov," Gunnar whispered as he lifted an old flacon and took a swig of brän ale.

"Never a good sign," Tova returned. She flicked her catlike eyes my way, studying my profile as if I could not sense her stare. "Do you think he forgot we were here?"

I rolled my eyes. For how much folk in the regions trembled at the name Nightrender, I'd think my own bleeding guild would have a touch of respectful adoration for me. If only those who spread such infamous rumors could see how little the Kryv feared their leader, it would hardly bode well for a murderous reputation.

"Maybe tell him how I stopped the old skydguard from blocking our way," Gunnar went on as if I weren't standing beside him. "I'm still impressed with myself."

"Ah, yes. The princeling . . . *oof*." Tova glared at Gunnar when his elbow smashed into her ribs.

"Quit calling me that."

I almost laughed. In the moment he looked entirely like the boy of sixteen

I'd met two turns back, when we'd journeyed to the northern fae kingdom.

Gunnar could split a hair with the point of an arrow, and, as a Hypnotik Alver, had the ability to warp the mind into doing whatever he wanted it to do.

A gift I exploited to the fullest.

When our neighbors to the north rose against their king in rebellion, the Kryv voted to sail to their shores for a peek. My guild went out of curiosity; I saw a way to line our pockets with foreign coin.

If I'd known the move would toss me into the path of Hagen Strom, I would never have gone.

Anything to do with Hagen, naturally, would place me in the path of *her*. A woman who was better off believing I was dead.

Her searches for a boy would always end in disappointment. I'd never reveal my face.

At least that had been the plan. Our destinies were tangling together, and I could not stop it. Wasn't entirely certain I wanted to stop it.

A man would be a fool to risk drinking his poison. To knowingly weaken his resolve.

I was becoming the fool.

The order to my guild had always been to keep the stepdaughter of House Strom out of harm's way. She was not part of our ploy to find Hagen. Merely an Alver to be watched. So, we'd watched. Waited. For nearly a damn turn we'd waited for this moment, and I'd let Hagen go because I put her neck above his.

We would be forced to change our plans to a more dangerous game.

"Are the others in place?" I snapped, silencing the bickering over Gunnar's title.

"Oh-ho, someone is rather irritable tonight," Tova said, tossing one of her nuts at my head. It missed and landed at my feet.

"*Tova*," I warned.

"What?" She pinched her lips and cut me with a glare. "Clearly there is something you aren't telling us about this memory thief. Why are we here instead of chasing down that transport? I think we—Gunnar most of all—deserve to know."

She wasn't wrong, but I would never let her know it. Couldn't was more like it. But she wouldn't know the truth of that either.

"The only thing any of us deserves is to keep breathing," I said, voice low and rough. "Trust me to do that or leave."

Tova's eyes widened. I clenched and unclenched my fists, unsettled I'd spit the words at her. Never, in turns, had I ever told anyone in the guild to leave.

For a few breaths we locked gazes, a struggle of who would bend first. Gunnar shifted in the tension, slowly side-stepping away from the both of us as if we might draw blades against each other.

At long last, Tova let out a heavy sigh and shook her head.

"I'd rather keep our guild intact if it's all the same to you," she said, the hurt in her voice grated down the hidden scars of my back.

I offered a stiff nod, then glanced at Gunnar. "What did you do to the skydguard?"

Gunnar stopped fidgeting, and took a swift step toward me, fire in his eyes. "Had him put the order out to an entire unit not to come to this side of the docks for at least two days. Had my mesmer working almost immediately."

"A stretch," Tova said. "It took him four tries."

Gunnar huffed. "I said almost immediately. We'll be safe to make a deal,

then . . . go after him?”

The words came out as a question, a plea. When I allowed him into the Kryv, he vowed never to question me. He didn't want to now, but like Tova, no doubt he wondered what I had planned for us. Likely he could not make much sense of anything. But on this, I could not give up more.

“Don't look so defeated, Gunnar,” I said. “We are steps ahead.”

“Not if the memory thief ruins everything again.”

He blamed her instead of me, but I would always shoulder every misstep.

“At least tell us why we are interfering with this woman,” Tova said. “Why is she all at once important to us?”

I could not tell my guild everything, but I could tell them something. “This is nothing more than fixing damage done by missing my mark.”

Tova and Gunnar shared a look of surprise. I rarely admitted fault, but my carelessness was no secret. I should've been there before Hagen was taken to House Strom, I should've anticipated the possibility of the masquerade, but allowed myself to be distracted elsewhere.

Kryv did not get distracted. If we did—blood spilled.

I cleared my throat and stared at the slice of dawn rising over the Howl Sea. “Out there, she will be a risk to our plans. She is too emotional, too unskilled. Better to keep her close. Although, she knows a great deal about House Strom and the masquerade. We exploit what she knows for our benefit.” When Gunnar's jaw flicked with tension, I gripped the back of his neck. “What did I tell you when you joined the guild?”

He swallowed with effort. “You told me you would fight to the end and would not stop until he was found. D-Dead or alive.”

“Do you still believe me?”

Gunnar nodded.

"Good."

Tova tilted her head, a sly grin on her mouth. "So, who goes to the meet?"

"You and Raum," I said.

"Do we send Elof?"

"Yes." I drew in a long breath of the cold dawn. "Whether she wants to admit it or not, she trusts him."

"What should we know of her mesmer?" Gunnar asked.

"She is an Anomali," I said. "She doesn't know the game she's playing is reckless and will interfere if left unhandled."

"Then we ought to just kill her," Tova said as if it would not tear a hole in the center of my chest.

"As I said, even with her shortcomings she could be useful."

I hated intertwining our fates to the marrow of my bones, but I had no other way to keep her hidden and breathing. To know what would become of her if she walked into another masquerade, well, I was vicious, wicked, but I could not let her do it alone.

Still, it did not mean anything would change. I would be the villain in her eyes. It would be better for her to hate me, to hate us all.

Gunnar sighed; pain written on his face. "I didn't think we'd ever get here."

"Think it. We're close." I grinned. "But prepare yourself because your father's *sister* is not easy."

With a simple wave of my hand, we drifted into the trees where the rest of the guild waited. My pulse wouldn't stop racing, but I locked it inside.

No room for emotion here. We had a deal to make.



6



# THE MEMORY THIEF

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

“The docks,” Ansel said. “I promised to help you with this reckless idea, so the docks are where we must go.”

I tangled my fingers together, stomach tight. The moment Elof left me last night, I’d pounded on Ansel’s door. His eyes were heavy and burdened. Together we’d commiserated over what had become of Hagen, then I’d asked him what he knew of the Nightrender and a deal they’d made together.

I’d almost expected him to balk at the claim, but his shoulders sunk, and his frown deepened.

He’d confessed he had once made a deal with the Hells, and now we were here, crossing the bridge to the docks near the Howl to do it again.

“Ansel,” I whispered. “Will you tell me details of your deal with the Nightrender?”

He closed his eyes for half a breath and stopped us near an overturned skiff. Without thought—or care—for the rusted color of lichens and hardened sea moss, he slumped against the keel of the boat.

“I had no way to save Dain.”

Dain? His son was full of mischief and loved to poke at the raven nests in the trees surrounding the manor. “What about Dain?”

“After his fever, his heart . . . it was killing him, Malin. No healers would even try. I don’t believe their medicines would’ve worked. But Sigurd—the man I’m taking you to now—he told me there was help to be found in the Guild of Kryv.”

“The Nightrender helped Dain? I thought he was hateful.”

Ansel’s scoff burned of bitterness. “He made a deal, Malin. Nothing comes from the goodness of his heart, I assure you. But I cannot despise the choice. Dain lives, and the Guild of Kryv keeps their bargains.” Ansel gripped my hands in his. “Malin, don’t do this. The Nightrender will own you.”

“Like you, I fear I have no choice. You just said you do not regret saving Dain’s life. What if this saves Hagen?”

There was a part of me that hoped this barter could grant two desires. Find my brother and find Kase.

Ansel’s chin fell to his chest. “Are you certain? I will take you back if you choose otherwise. Don’t mistake me. We can find another way for Dain to receive—”

My hand on his cheek silenced him. “Ansel.” I waited until he looked at me. “I’m certain.”

With a nod and a kiss to the back of my hand, he straightened. “This way then.”

At the edge of the water district, browned butter and minced fowl wafted in the air. An empty hole had replaced my insides and my stomach turned greedy.

Dingy swells lapped against the hulls of schooners, longships, cutters, and trade ships; the sound helped keep a steady beat to my heart. Cobbled streets

were always damp and muddy from constant sea boots marching back and forth, and green moss with speckles of yellow coated the storefronts from the constant wet breeze.

I added speed to my pace to catch up as Ansel led us down a narrow alley.

In the smaller, grungier neighborhood the air grew heady with oil, sweat, and hickory smoke. Flea racks lined the walks, all filled with secondhand dresses, shoes, and worship suits. The meager market was nothing but a few wooden carts where merchants sold bushels of leeks, boiling potatoes, or turnips to those who could afford them.

At the end of the lane, a sign hung over the steel shop door. The building leaned a little from old walls made of barnwood laths.

The stoop groaned under our weight, and inside someone hummed a spritely tune. Ansel pounded on the door, and we waited for half a breath. He knocked again. Nothing. Two more aggressive pounds and the door ripped open, a sweaty man in the frame.

"Gods, I said I was coming!" The stranger furrowed his brow but smiled when he recognized the grounds master. "Ansel, I've not seen you in a long while, my friend."

"And I'm afraid I cannot stay long, Sigurd." He lowered his voice. "This is Malin Strom; she has need of your more immoral connections."

"She willing to pay?"

"Anything," I told him, even if I didn't have a copper penge to my name.

"Then come in."

Ansel tapped my shoulder. "You will be in good hands." My throat tightened as he drew me against his chest. Once he released me, Ansel used his thumb to tilt my chin up. "Sigurd will know how to reach me should you need anything."

Without a look back, Ansel slipped his hood over his head and disappeared into the crowds.

"Sounds as if you've had quite a night," Sigurd said. He opened one arm into his shop. "Shall we?"

Inside, counters were covered in steel plates, countless bolts, and nails for wheels and spokes. Coaches, phaetons, and a few armored chest plates in various stages of disassembly stacked the shelves in the back. Silver shavings dusted the floor, and there was a hint of oil and coffee in the air.

The steelman took in my ragged appearance, then leveraged one hip at a time onto the edge of a countertop.

"Well, get on with it," he said, but did with a smile. Like he was thrilled to have a story to hear. "What happened?"

"My brother was imprisoned by the masquerade, and I plan to free him."

Sigurd's eyes widened. "Oh, is that all?"

My scalp prickled in disquiet. "Will you be able to help me?"

"*Dännisk* Strom, no one in their sound mind would touch the Masque av Aska."

"Is that a no then?"

"You didn't let me finish. I never said my connections were sound in their minds. Merely saying what you're asking hasn't been done. It'd be simpler to break into a sea prison than step behind the curtains of the masquerade. Especially this turn with Lord Niall seeking a bride."

"Then I will die trying." I refused to stop searching.

Sigurd scratched his chin. "You know what you're asking, yes?"

"Yes, I'm asking for your help since you have a way to contact the Guild of Kryv."

He grinned as if he were quite proud of the truth.

My eyes flicked to the missing fingertip on his left hand, a jagged cut, and I wondered about his life. What drew a merchant to associate with the underbelly? He would be respected, possibly a lifelong member of a guild. Why risk a comfortable life to arrange shady cons and ploys?

"I warn you they are not the sort you want to take lightly," Sigurd said. "If you agree to their terms, you must honor the deal, or, forgive my bluntness, the skydguard will find pieces of you from the fjord to the Northern Cliffs."

*Three hells.* I licked my lips. "They can truly help?"

"The Kryv have a particular distaste for the Lord Magnate; don't ask me why, I don't know. And they enjoy causing him a few aches and pains with their schemes. If you want a guild willing to do anything to get your brother back, then I don't think you can stoop lower into the gutter than the Kryv."

"I must ask how you know them if they are so terrible."

He smirked. "I've stepped into the gutter a few times myself. Helped smuggle out a few cheer boys and girls here and there. I don't like cheer houses for my own reasons, and my deals usually end in cheeries finding new lives elsewhere."

I lifted a brow. Cheer houses were brutal brothels that did not give up their workers easily. "Impressive."

"If you're here in earnest," he said. "I'll arrange a meet."

"Arrange it," I said, the tremor in my voice gave way to how terrified I truly was.

Sigurd drummed his fingers over the countertop, but a smile spread over his lips. "As you say."



SIGURD WASTED NO TIME reaching out to the Guild of Kryv. The bleeding Nightrender.

What the hells was I doing? More than swiping memories from the corpses of the masquerade or street hawkers, this was a man who tormented the entire kingdom with his dark wishes.

For nearly three hours I'd been left alone in Sigurd's apartment above the steel house. Only my thoughts kept me company. Restlessness had me pacing from wall to wall, tugging at my hair, sitting, then standing. I could not keep still.

At the back of the sleeping chamber was a standing wash stall with a drain in the center and a rather clever pulley contraption to draw water from a well below the window.

Alone, with nothing more to do but fret, I scrubbed the grime under my fingernails, washed dirt from the wooden raven around my neck, scrubbed away the sweat and oil from the steel shop. I washed until my skin grew pink and raw.

Refusing to stroll through the apartment in nothing but a thin linen, I took the liberty of borrowing one of Sigurd's long tunic tops folded on a narrow shelf in the stall. Sigurd was a bear of a man, so his shirt struck low on my knees.

Dressed and clean, I crossed from the washroom to the narrow bedroom.

"Comfortable?"

I startled, holding a hand to my chest, but almost smiled when Sigurd winked from a tattered stuffed chair near the window.

"I hope you don't mind." I gestured at the tunic.

"A naked woman wearing my shirt? Not at all."

My cheeks filled with heat, but Sigurd didn't tease me again.

"I didn't know when you'd return," I said, slowly braiding my damp hair over one shoulder. "Any luck?"

Sigurd rocked in the chair, holding my gaze for a few uncomfortable heartbeats. "Yes." He stopped rocking, slapped his thighs, and stood. "I expect company any moment."

My throat dried like a quick swallow of sand. At my sides, I dug the curves of my fingernails into the meat of my palms to hide the tension in my body.

"Be certain you wish to go forward, *dännisk*."

I wasn't certain about anything. The nearer the moment came to meeting the Guild of Kryv the more I thought it would be better to run back to House Strom and stay hidden in my cold loft until I crossed into the Otherworld.

I hesitated and fought to keep my voice steady. "I'm ready."

Sigurd tilted his head, a smile in his gray eyes. "There is time to give this more thought. Sometimes life is unkind, like what happened to your brother. But at every wretched thing, it doesn't mean we must run into the fire and get killed in the process."

"Why are you saying this? Do you think the Kryv will kill me?"

"I think you should be as clever if not cleverer than the Kryv, and certainly never trust them fully. But I do not think they are so cold-blooded as slitting your throat on the first meet. After that, I don't know. I've never worked with them for long."

"How did you come to know them?"

Sigurd winked. "Ah, that is a story for another day. But trust that I know they work on their own set of rules. Are you ready to do what might be asked of you? Taking on the Black Palace and the Masque av Aska is risky business. What means do you have to defend yourself?"

"I know how to use a blade."

"So do skydguard. So do Kryv."

"I'll be fine," I insisted.

Sigurd opened his mouth as if to argue, but someone rapped at the door in the shop below our feet. With a heavy sigh, the steelman proffered a defeated kind of smile. "I hope so, *dännisk* Strom. Because time is up. They're here."





7

# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE DEEPER INTO THE shop we went, the mustier the smell. Sea winds rattled the wooden walls, and shadows played games with my mind.

This could be one deadly mistake, but I feared it was too late to turn back.

Sigurd's main level office wasn't large. A narrow desk, messy with parchment, took up one corner, and two wooden chairs set against the wall. I sat in the nearest chair and folded my hands in my lap.

Sigurd spared me a glance, as if to give me one last chance to change my mind, then opened the back door.

Three dark figures, two men and a woman, stood shoulder to shoulder in the doorway. Masked to the nose, black lines scratched down their cheeks, and dark runes lined their foreheads.

"Come in," Sigurd said, moving aside.

The woman's ebony hair was shaved on one side and the rest was piled high on her head, like curled satin ribbons. Her skin was a smooth toasted brown, and her eyes were the strangest eyes I'd ever seen. Black slits cut through a dazzling luminescent color. Like a cat in the night.

The next man pulled down his half mask, revealing his cunning grin. As if he knew a secret I was not privy to.

He was paler than the woman with thick cornhusk hair, and ice crystal eyes. The sleeves of his black tunic were rolled to his elbows, and at his sides, his fingers never stopped twitching.

Behind them the second man removed a cloak, next his mask.

A choked sound ran up my throat like swallowing too much water all at once.

"*Elof.*" By the hells. The rounded face, the glassy eyes, the patchy beard of the bastard who told me about the Guild of Kryv stared back at me. "What . . . what are you doing here?"

Elof stepped between the other two Kryv. At first glance, he seemed the weakest in build, but they parted for him. Kryv stepped aside. *For him.* My eyes dropped to the thick belt on his waist. Both hips were draped in bone cutting knives. Across his back was a short blade made of heavy iron.

"I warned you, *dännisk.* I know of the Kryv."

"Know of them? You *are* a Kryv."

"Observant, this one," said the woman, snatching a few paper-wrapped sweets from a clay bowl on Sigurd's desk. "May we proceed, or do you wish to babble all day?"

Elof had tricked me. Did Ansel deceive me too? Or was he unaware of Elof's connections to the Guild of Kryv?

My mind reeled through interactions between the grounds master and Elof at House Strom. Nothing stood amiss in my mind. Brisk, to the point. Typical men who cared little about friendship with fellow servants.

In three quick strides, the Kryv with frosty eyes had me backed against the wall without trouble. "Got a name, lovey?"

"Mal. Strom," I stammered. "Malin Strom."

The Kryv smirked, and he dragged one knuckle across my cheek, clearly undisturbed by how close he stood. "Raum. And I like Mal better. The beauty over there," he said with a nod at the woman, "is Tova. And you know that ugly sod."

Tova unwrapped another sweet and tossed it onto her tongue. "Our time is valuable, so let's get on with it."

Words dried up like bits of ash on my tongue.

"Sit," Elof said, gesturing to the chair I'd leaped from moments before.

I narrowed my eyes to seem wholly composed. In truth, I thought I might retch any moment.

"Huh, I'm going to go out on a limb and say this was a waste of time," said Raum. He perched on the back of the second wooden chair, so his feet were flat on the seat, and one knee bounced incessantly. "I'm not sure this one has it in her."

"I disagree," Elof said. "At least, I thought I did."

Being spineless would do nothing to help Hagen. I was an Alver—a rare Alver—who frightened crooks like Hob. I could make a deal with the Kryv. "I want you to answer my questions first."

"We're not here for that," Elof said. "In fact, if it weren't for your recklessness, we might not be in this situation at all."

"My recklessness? I did not bring the masque. I did not take Hagen." My voice went shrill, and I could not stop the maelstrom coiling in my chest. "I've hunted the masquerade for turns, and I will not lose my brother the same way I lost . . ." I shook my head. There was no need to bring Kase into this. Not yet. "I will not lose him."

Elof's cheek twitched. "Hunting the masquerade to discover its secrets has

nothing to do with the way you tried to barge into a unit of skydguard. Had you not forced me to intervene and drag you away, your dear brother might be with his bleeding family tonight. Warm. Happy. *Safe.*”

I chuckled. “His family? I would not describe House Strom as warm and happy.”

“Not House Strom. I meant your brother’s family. His children. His lover.”

If he had slapped me across the jaw, I would not have been as stunned. Breath caught in the back of my throat, sweat coated my palms. “My brother does not have children.”

“He does,” Elof said, almost bored. “From the Northern Kingdom. Where you believed he traveled for business, really, he traveled to be with them.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No, if Hagen had a family elsewhere, they would be brought here to be with him.”

“Ah, not everything is so simple. The north once made it impossible for them to travel. Your brother has spent endless turns trying to change that. The last visit, he crossed a line. Why do you think he was tossed into a sea prison, *dännisk?*”

My lips parted. “He . . . he had a business arrangement go wrong.”

“Fine. Go with that story,” Elof said. “Your brother will be a dead man soon since you cannot stop questioning us. I wish I could say it’s been a pleasure.”

Elof stood, the other two Kryv made moves to follow.

“Wait!” I shot out one hand. A flutter of desperation scorched the skin on the back of my neck. “If he had a family, I don’t understand, why did he not tell me?”

“Who’s to say, but he didn’t.” Elof’s jaw tightened. “I don’t much care why, what I care about is you interfered in our attempt to snatch him.”

"Why?" I narrowed my eyes at Elof, hating him and desiring he keep speaking all at once. "Why did you want him? What were your plans with him?"

"We were hired to retrieve Hagen Strom and return him to his family. That is all." Elof crossed the space between us and crowded against me. His face nearly touched mine; his voice grew low and dark. "We were prepared, we'd arranged his release. But because I intervened to stop you, a mark was missed."

My shoulders stiffened as I butted my chest against his, enjoying too much how his brows twitched in a bit of surprise. "Do not blame me. I reacted as anyone who cared would. You were just as surprised as me that the masquerade wagons arrived."

"Perhaps, but I know how to not react emotionally."

"Is having a heart so wrong?"

"Yes. When it gets others killed it is a deadly thing to have," Elof said. The shadows of his face eased as he forced a snide grin. "But we can't look back any longer. We alter course. Seeing how you ruined our original plan—"

"I didn't—" I tried to interject, but Elof's voice overpowered mine as he barreled on.

"We have no choice but to add another deal to our previously made arrangement. What are you prepared to barter, *dännisk* Strom? You came to make a deal. Make one."

"But everything has changed." I scoffed. "You are already going after Hagen by your own admission. A deal with me will be redundant."

"No. Our plan was in place. One we have tirelessly conceived for some time. One that did not involve traipsing to the masquerade because an emotional woman stood in the way of our grab."

If I stabbed Elof, surely the Kryv would still help me. I was certain they must've found him as irritating as I did.

"The point is," Elof went on, "we are facing new plays, new games. Dangerous ones. We'll need more backing if our guild is to continue. If not, we will cut our losses, and deliver the dreadful news to your brother's Northern family that he was irretrievable."

It was a fist to the heart. "You'd let him suffer, die, at the masque because it's *too hard*? I thought you were the formidable Guild of Kryv."

"We are," Raum said. "Did we not establish this already?"

"We're not fools," Tova said. "What you're asking has never been done. Our original deal did not do the impossible. You understand, don't you? Risk increases, so does our price."

"Don't get us wrong, we don't shy away from the impossible." Raum laughed and clapped Elof on the back.

"No, but we bleeding better get paid to do it," Elof said. "Give us something we can leverage against you."

"I am not so stupid to give you something to use against me. Get your price increase from this supposed family in the north," I said as powerfully as I could manage. Still, a tremble dressed every word.

Elof folded his arms over his chest. "I did not expect you to be so callous toward your dear brother."

"I am not callous. I'll get him myself, but I won't be manipulated by the likes of you." On my feet, I made a move for the door, but shuddered when Elof curled his hand around my arm, holding firm.

His eyes were dark and burdened. "Be honest with yourself. What is your move? What is your plan? How will you get past the skydguard, or the Lord Magnate's personal armies? How will you reach Hagen when you don't

know where the Alver chambers are kept? Tell me how you will hide your gift when the Lord Magnate is always looking for new mesmer?"

My body tensed. He could be lying. He could be saying all this to terrify me into making a deal. In truth, I might've brushed his warnings away if I had not already witnessed how quickly folk disappeared at the masquerade.

If a boy's screams did not haunt my memories night after night.

"You know how to get through all that?" I asked, voice soft.

"In due time." He dropped his hand from my arm, and I felt a little emptier. Odd. He frightened me and brought safety in the same breath.

"So, if I don't make a deal with you, the Kryv will abandon the plan to take Hagen?"

"Our deal in the north did not extend to this level of risk. If you wish us to continue, then, as Tova said, when risk increases, our price must increase. What are you willing to pay? How desperate are you?"

His voice had taken on a hard edge.

All I had to give were bone dust memories. A prize the Kryv could not even use without me. They were valuable. Memories filled with fetishes, secrets, the sort of things folk like the Kryv would pay well to possess if it gave them power to bribe another.

But if I gave them, I would need to join the Kryv. In a way, I'd be part of the payment.

"I can offer memories I've gathered over the turns," I whispered. "Memories of corruption, murder, and secrets folk would never want the Guild of Kryv to know."

Elof tilted his head. "How do you expect us to use these memories?"

"Through my Talent. It could be of use."

Raum grinned. "I've never seen a memory Alver work before. Didn't



really know they existed, to be honest.”

“I would need to . . . join you,” I said. “No one else can read them, but once I read them, I can share them with you.”

The three Kryv went quiet. Only Elof looked at me as if he’d expected this, as if he knew a great deal more than he was letting on.

Silence grated down my spine like sharp fingernails.

When Tova scoffed, I nearly cried out in relief.

“We don’t take in strays.” Tova glanced at her fellow Kryv, as if urging them to back her. “I say no deal.”

“I have nothing more to give. *Please.*” A hot ache gathered behind my eyes. Exhaustion, fear, all of it crushed me where I stood.

“There it is,” Elof said with a vicious sneer. “Desperation.”

Tova and Raum chuckled, and I didn’t understand the shift in their demeanor.

“All right. No need to beg,” Tova said. “But before we accept memories as payment, show us how it works. I want to make sure you’re good for it.”

Elof stepped aside, inviting me forward.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Sigurd, to show how I can share memories, may I take one from you?”

He wore a look of surprise, hesitated, but soon came to my side. Perhaps curious where I planned to go with this. “How?”

“I’ll need to kiss you.”

“Well, this got interesting,” Raum said, nudging Tova with his elbow.

Sigurd cleared his throat, but didn’t protest. I swallowed against my own disquiet, stood on my toes, and kissed him.

Sigurd was not a poor choice to kiss. Clean. Unassuming. Willing. The smoke returned to mind, molding and building shapes, drawing clearer

images of little gasps, a sapphire necklace, clothes in heaps on the floor, the scent of skin and friction.

I grinned slyly. “Sigurd, you scoundrel. I wonder what would happen should Lady Ashton’s husband discover your love affair.”

“Bleeding skies.” Bewilderment shadowed Sigurd’s face. “What did you do? I can still . . . well, maybe I can’t remember it.”

“Only a glimpse of the memory is there. I took the rest.” I frowned and looked to Elof. I had desired him at House Strom, feared him, yet he brought a strange calm. “You seem to lead this meet. If you care to see Sigurd’s memory, I must do the same to you.”

A muscle pulsed in his jaw. His entire body stiffened, as if the thought disgusted him. I fought to keep my composure, tried not to react. He meant nothing to me, so it did not matter if the idea of his mouth on mine disgusted him or not.

“Share it only,” he snapped at long last. “Do not even think of looking in my head or I’ll cut you where you stand.”

“Your head is not a place I would ever go on my own accord, I assure you.”

Face to face, Elof held my stare for a single heartbeat before I closed my eyes against what I was going to do. I kissed him.

His mouth was warm, inviting. A rush of heat rolled through my stomach. Hells. A man such as him should not stir such things.

Smoke and ash billowed in my head again, only this time the wisps curled around Sigurd’s salacious moment with Lady Ashton. Like a cold wind filled my mind, the images blew away until nothing but dark, shapeless mist remained.

My breath tangled with Elof’s. Slow. Gentle. I exhaled the memory onto

his tongue. When I could not exhale more, I pulled back. An unwanted reluctance bloomed in my chest. I hid the whole of it beneath a narrowed glare.

Elof's eyes fluttered open. It took only a few moments before one corner of his mouth lifted. He faced the other two Kryv. "I see it plainly."

"Gods, think of what secrets you could spread, lovey," Raum said, nudging me like he'd nudged Tova. As if we were friendly and he was not terrifying.

"My mesmer is strange and feared," I said. "I've trusted you with it."

Elof added nothing, simply peeled my skin back with his eyes. My gaze drifted to his lips, and I hated myself a little for imagining touching them again.

"This makes you one of those Anomalies, right?" Sigurd asked. "I know a bit about Alvers. Have an aunt who is a Mediski with a little healing shop near Liten."

"Ah," was all I said. An Alver healer did not fit with the odd, strangeness of Anomali Alvers.

Mediski Alvers were healers. Elixists were talented alchemists. Rifiers were frightening. Destroyers. Killers, really. But Profetik and Hypnotik Alvers played games with the mind through illusion or uncanny senses. Frightening in their own way. Anomalies were mutts. A collision of different Talents, usually more feared than the others.

"Your mesmer is interesting," Tova said. "But should Ivar learn of it, you'll be more of a risk than an asset."

"But can we ignore the potential of such a Talent?" Elof argued.

"And if she's got memories with secrets she can share, well, I'd like to be the ones to get those secrets," Raum said.

Elof sat on the edge of Sigurd's desk. "Where are these stolen memories,

*dännisk?*”

“I have them hidden.” A rush of excitement boiled in my blood. They were going to help me. I’d get Hagen back. After it was over, I might even be trusted enough they’d help me find Kase. “At House Strom.”

“Where?”

“I’m not telling you.” I folded my arms over my chest, barring myself against them. “Well, what do you say? Is it enough?”

“This isn’t going to be over tomorrow,” Tova said. “It’s like the inside of a clock, each piece, each cog must be working to turn the hands. You aren’t a piece in our world.”

“I will be.”

Elof shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“And you don’t know what lengths I will go, lengths I have gone, to find people I love.”

“True enough.” He glanced at his fellow Kryv. “Well?”

“We’re taking in a dealmaker, and planning to take from the Masque av Aska,” Tova said. “This is what we’re doing, right? I’m understanding the madness well enough?”

“Yes,” Elof said without a change in his expression.

Tova nodded and took another sweet. “As long as I’m clear. Do as you please, but make the choice. I’m hungry and wish to leave.”

“Raum?” Elof pressed.

Raum shrugged. “I’m in. I’m always in.”

“All right.” Something in Elof’s voice raised the hair on the back of my neck. Like he knew things I didn’t, and I’d walked into a trap. “As you wish—welcome to the Kryv.”



8

# THE MEMORY THIEF

RAUM AND TOVA CROUCHED next to me in the Strom gardens.

"This is it, lovey," Raum said. He called me lovey enough I was beginning to wonder if he knew my name or not. "Here we are. You better be good for it."

"I am." I recalled Sigurd's warning to be craftier than the Kryv. I'd need to be sly. A balance of give and take, but no matter what, I needed to remember they were the guild of the Nightrender. Remaining with the Kryv meant I'd face the bloody ghost everyone feared.

We'd huddled at Sigurd's until midnight. Planning, resting, and distrusting each other. Sometime in the night Tova tossed me a tunic and trousers. I didn't know where she came by the clothes, but I was more like a Kryv in them.

Elof had left to gather more of the guild, and I was turned over to the watch of Raum and Tova. We'd wandered forest trails back to House Strom. If the guild wanted me to pay them, then I'd need the memories.

I wouldn't be returning to House Strom. Something inside told me this was the last night, so I added to the risk, and made plans to take supplies for my

new existence. Wherever it was about to take me.

The trouble with my plan was the best supplies were inside the longhouse. A place I wasn't welcome.

Tova emerged from between two rowan trees and pulled a hood over her head. "What's taking so long?"

"Nothing. I'll meet you at the stables."

"Hurry," she snapped.

Raum winked playfully before he disappeared with Tova into the shadows. I sprinted up the pebbled drive to a side door the servants used. Two bulky servants stood near a fire pit twenty paces off, warming their hands and laughing as they kept watch over the Strom household.

I ducked behind a fragrant hedge even if they'd likely think nothing of it should they see my face.

Strange sneaking like a thief on land I'd worked for turns. But the Black Palace had House Strom in its sights.

Elof might've had a point. I'd been foolish to draw attention to myself in front of skydguard collecting an Alver for the masquerade. Not to mention the last few turns I'd grown reckless with my mesmer.

Odds were it would only be a matter of time before the Lord Magnate discovered the stepdaughter in the hayloft was more powerful than the Strom son they'd snatched. He would take his frustrations out on the whole household.

For the sake of a family who did not truly care for me, I would need to leave for good.

I didn't think it would hurt as it did. Like a hot knife carving out my heart.

When the servants turned away to add more twigs to their small fire, I scurried to the door and stepped inside.

The narrow corridor was warm from pine smoke billowing off the inglenook in the great room. Roasted eel and buttered carrots with parsnips from supper left my insides wanting.

Each corridor in the house led to the great room. Wicker chairs surrounded the oak table in the center, always set with silver plates and ewers of wine and brän for guests. The stone inglenook arched to the ceiling; the flames licked at a heavy spit in the center where meats were roasted daily.

I snagged a leather satchel servants used to gather roots and vegetables, and filled it with a few bread rolls, fish jerky, and a flacon of the sweet ale Bard loved so much.

At the scuffle of feet, I hurried to a narrow nook filled with fur cloaks, woolen cowls, and capes. I took what I could. A woolen cap and tunic, a fur stole, and hand coverings made of leather for when the frosts came.

My hand brushed against the smooth, polished surface of my stepfather's ashwood lockbox he kept tucked in the back.

Doubtless the box would be packed in penge. I licked my lips. No. I couldn't. Then again, how could I begin anew without a copper to my name?

My hands shook as I removed a slender pick made of fishbone from my braid.

Three turns ago, I'd ventured into the shanties in town where, for a bit of penge, cutpurses were happy to teach a girl how to pick a lock. The sensation of bolts, levers, mechanisms, and crossing forbidden barriers thrilled me.

I'd depend on touch to work. Any light was too great a risk. I held my breath until my hands steadied, then leveraged the fishbone in the keyhole.

Two breaths. Three.

The lock clicked.

I wasted no time and lifted the lid.



By the skies. Stacks of paper penge, skin purses of coin, gemstones, jade, ivory, a small treasury was mine for the taking. Likely half belonged to the coffers of the Masque av Aska. There was nothing between me and taking some for myself.

Gods forgive me.

With silent, swift hands, I dug into the wealth, taking a few stacks of penge, and one coin purse. Satchel tucked under one arm, I left the nook and hurried back to the side door aimed at the stable. I used the shadows of trees as cover from any servants who might catch a glimpse of me. Or worse—Bard and Jens.

At the stables, Raum and Tova had crouched behind a water barrel, only standing when I came into view.

"Ready?" Raum asked.

"Almost. A few more things, and we can leave." I still needed to get the memories, but didn't want to let on how close they stood to them. Even if they could not use them, giving over control of my bone dust vials left my stomach turned upside down in sick.

With the Kryv outside, I climbed the ladder. The loft held little to my name. A few tunics, some trousers, one tattered skirt for the annual *jul fete*, and Asger. I hid the stuffed horse and my clothes beneath the penge in the satchel. Hells, if the Kryv ever learned I stole away with a child's toy, they'd probably toss me into the Howl, thinking I was too mad to be handled.

I slipped out the back way of the stables, checking once to make sure Tova and Raum hadn't followed. Night mists gathered, cold and thick, as I bent into a crouch at a large feedbox. A heavy gray stone guarded a hole beneath the box. I dropped to my knees and rolled the stone away.

I did not take a risk hiding these in the hayloft. Not with so many servants

skulking about day after day.

With wet mornings and approaching rains, the soil had thickened and swallowed what I'd hidden. I dug through the grime and silken mud until my fingers curled around the slick corner of the pine memory box.

But when I lifted the lid, a chill cut to my bones. Where were my vials? Frantically, I clawed at the damp earth again, searching. Nothing.

My throat tightened, but I did not have time to fret long before angry hands grabbed the back of my neck.

A scream scraped out as Bard tossed me away from the feedbox into a heap of mud and clay.

"Looking for these, Malin?" My stepbrother's face was guarded but for the slight twitch in the corner of his mouth. At his side were three Black Palace skydguard, blades ready.

"Bard." I grimaced when he held up a basket packed with the bone dust vials. "Those are mine."

Bard had a way of remaining composed, cold, and frighteningly unbothered by anything. "Unfortunately, after Hagen's imprisonment, the Lord Magnate thought it prudent to inspect our grounds for any more suspicious behavior. Afraid some of those tricky potions from his Elixists found strange mesmer here."

"Those are nothing but ash." I prayed to gods who never listened to the likes of me, prayed to any humanity in Bard's heart. If the skydguard discovered what I could do, I would get my first wish—I'd join Hagen in the bowels of the Masque av Aska.

"Doesn't do any good to lie." Bard's jaw hardened. "They figured out your scheme. Stealing from Anomalies? Tsk-tsk little mouse."

What was he talking about? Bard knew I did not steal these from another

Alver. Was he covering for me *and* turning me over at the same time?

At my silence, Bard let out a rough, raspy laugh. “Who knew I had such wretched siblings. I’ll write you both from the sagas of House Strom myself.”

“Bard, please.” I reached for him, but a skydguard moved swifter. My breath caught in the back of my throat when his heavy boot smashed into my ribs.

I rolled onto my shoulder, trying to find a bit of breath, when another guard gripped my hair.

“No!” I cried out against the white, hot pain sliding up my side. “Bard, please! I can help him; I can save him. Don’t do this.”

“I did nothing. To do something would mean I was brought in on any plans, not left in the bleeding dark.” With a pained glare, Bard dropped the basket of vials and turned away, leaving me to face my fate with the skydguard.

“As an unregistered Alver, you are requested to face your Lord Magnate Ivar,” one guard said, reaching for me.

“No!” I’d be turned into a monster. I didn’t know how Ivar did it, but the Alvers of the Black Palace served only the Lord Magnate.

They lived for him. Killed for him.

A skydguard kicked me again, silencing my cries.

I thought of the Kryv. Would they still go for Hagen if they found me dead? I could plead for my stepfather, but when a skydguard began fettering my wrists behind my back, I was as stone, hard and cold. Hatred was blinding. For the gods. For fate. For myself.

A crash came from the front of the stables. The sound of doors clattering, then the scrape of feet on gravel. Common sounds, but it drew the attention

of the skydguard. One guard left to peer around the stables; one breath later he cried out in agony, crumbling to the ground.

The other two guards dropped me and rushed for their companion.

Before I overthought too much, I snatched the basket of vials, and scrambled to my feet. I raced for the front of the stables, but fumbled when two more skydguard materialized from the longhouse.

I ignored the demands for me to halt when a skydguard remembered they had a prisoner. Back at the feedbox, a mute scream lodged in my throat.

The three skydguard who'd arrived with Bard were sprawled across the dirt, twisted in odd angles. Throats bloodied.

Raum, Tova, and a third Kryv I didn't know, hovered over the bodies, dark stains on their knives, sweat on their brows.

Tova met my gaze for half a breath. I couldn't move.

When the rush of new skydguard at my back shouted the alarm, the pause in chaos was over.

Blades raised once more, the Kryv attacked like a dark flood.



9

# THE NIGHTRENDER

“SKYDGUARD ARE SCATTERED EVERYWHERE across the grounds. Do you think they were waiting for her?” Vali asked. He kept tilting his head side to side, doubtless sounds were striking him in every direction.

The same way Raum could see inhuman distances, Vali could hear the slightest gasp of breath from lengths away when he used his sensate mesmer.

Skydguard *were* everywhere.

I’d not planned on such a fight, but such things happened whenever the Black Palace and masquerade were involved. I’d come mere moments after she’d abandoned the loft, mere moments before the guards attacked.

Now, we’d end it swiftly.

I tugged the black hood over my head. “I’ve no doubt each guard has been waiting to take her the moment they discovered those vials.”

With a simple gesture, I signaled for Vali and the rest of the guild to abandon the hayloft and take Strom land for ourselves. No mistake, there was always a warped thrill at the idea of cutting down a few skydguard.

More than blood and bone, what I wanted to avoid was her.

After this, there would be no barriers between us, no illusions, and I still had no thought on how to manage it.

A fire of anger burned inside my chest, the constant heat of resentment and fear lived beneath the surface.

I didn't take well to my foundation being rocked, and to have her among us would shift everything.

There was no other choice; I'd dropped focus, drawn her in, and made the deal. Whether I wished to or not, I'd honor the bargain. She'd join us, and for the coming weeks the Nightrender would be a piece of her existence.

Only the Nightrender. I would be no one else. No matter what other names she discovered.

I opened my palms and summoned darkness around me like a cloak of night. My eyes drifted from the latched window to the quilts folded neatly over the hay, then to the crooked table-shelf made from scrap wood and rusted nails.

The beginning of a smile was unwanted as I dragged my fingertips across the surface. Bleeding thing took me a week to build.

A scream from outside snapped my eyes off the pathetic shelf.

Darkness coated my eyesight like an old friend. In truth, I'd always been meant for frightening things.

I rolled my shoulders back, then abandoned the loft.

Outside, I breathed in the cool air, tinged in the coppery hint of blood, the salt of sweat, the rancid tang of piss as skydguard went against the Kryv.

The Guild of Kryv wasn't large, but despite our few numbers, we knew how to kill with gory magnificence. Each Kryv wore blades sharper than anything, and at the front gate little Hanna and her brother, Ash, pounded

rawhide drums painted in the oak tree of the gods. Both were dressed in black with rough lines of battle green and dark kohl streaked over their eyes.

Ash lifted his moonlight pale face, finding me as I stepped into the gardens.

“Terrify them!” he shouted.

I responded with a fist pound to my heart. Ash wanted to join the fight, but at only thirteen it was better to keep him back. The only way to convince the boy was to assign him the task of keeping his young sister safe.

Ash would pick Hanna every time.

Shrieks and cries of the dying guards faded beneath the hypnotic beat and delight of Kryv movements.

Raum and Tova were lost to me, caught in the mess of swords carving bodies, likely leading *her* through the fight.

I didn't need to search her out, didn't need to oversee her removal. The Kryv were capable and would be better suited. I had already succumbed to distraction once. There would be no room for more.

I lost count of how many guards bloodied the grass before the air changed. Colder, a little harsher. From the gates to the gardens, darkness spread. Heady, tangible.

On my tongue the bittersweet tang of magic burrowed deep. Each breath drew in the chill of shadows.

There was nothing kind or beautiful about the mesmer of fear. It preyed upon folks' weakest moments. In those moments when the heart stilled, when adrenaline flooded the blood, I took those fears and twisted them.

Enough terror lived on Strom lands tonight to feed my power until dawn.

I envisioned the skydguard in my mind, then directed the shadows to coil around them. Fear of death would give me the power to break bodies, but one



slip, and I could strike the wrong side.

That was the trouble with fear. It was everywhere.

In the Kryv, the servants, the guards. Wading through whose was whose took more energy than the use of mesmer.

An ache bloomed up the back of my skull by the time I'd homed the shadows only around the skydguard.

In the next heartbeat, guards seized their own throats with a sort of pathetic desperation as I draped my cruel magic around them. To the naked eye there was nothing around their necks, nothing strangled them, only the night and blood. Inside, fear gripped them, and I transformed it into a weapon.

"By the gods." A voice drew my focus to the edge of the gardens.

By one of the stone walls running the edge of the garden, she gaped at me, hand over her mouth. That fiery hair was damp across her forehead, those sharp, green-sea eyes wide and terrified.

*Your hair looks like the sunset, Mallie.*

*Yours looks like dirt. But the good kind of dirt.*

*What the hells is the good kind of dirt?*

*You'd know it if you saw it, Kase. But there is. There just is.*

Dammit. I blinked through the memory. A prompt reminder this entire scheme was a wretchedly foolish idea.

From where she stood, a potent mix of fear and intrigue confused my focus, enough some of the gasping skydguard slumped in relief as my mesmer retreated.

She hugged her middle and turned away from me as if my darkness might devour her. It would, should she get too close. I wouldn't let it happen. For

her sake or mine, I didn't know, but this conflict of wanting her and resisting her grew tiresome.

I lowered my head, ensuring my hood hid my features. With a raised hand, once more skydguard gasped and clawed at their faces.

I made a tight fist.

The snapping of necks was grisly.

Malin leaned over and retched when a guard five paces from her went still, his body twisted and broken. The darkness recoiled, like serpents in the grass, and left a thin trail of blood spilling from the corner of the dead guard's mouth.

Tova hooked a hand under her arm. "Are you injured?"

"No." Malin's breaths came in sharp, little gasps, eyes on me in horror. "The Nightrender."

Blood pounded in my head. She feared me, and I should want it. But I could not deny there was a dull pain at the thought.

The doors of the longhouse clanged against the sides as Jens Strom rushed out, haggard, half-dressed. The way his eyes took in the bloody scene, the darkness, the Kryv, clearly, he'd been kept from intervening, only to break free to his land upended.

"Lynx." The largest member of the guild hurried to my side. "Handle the woman. We're leaving."

Lynx wasn't one to talk a great deal. Truth be told, beneath all his meat was a man who spent a great deal of time lost in books and thoughts of the stars and how they formed, how the world turned, how the seas shifted currents.

He was a puzzler, a poetic. But brutal in the same breath.

"Stop!" Jens shouted.

Malin whipped her head toward the sound of his voice, but Lynx was already on her.

One of his thick palms coated her entire face. In two breaths she went limp in his arms. His ability to calm the body to the point of sleep was useful, and if I had to guess, could be used for sinister things with enough strength.

With a simple whistle, Ash and Hanna's drums played a new tune, signaling our time here was over.

With the last of my energy, I pulled shadows from the branches of the trees, the corners of the gardens, the forest, tightening them around every Kryv until they were concealed.

"No!" Jens shouted again as Lynx faded into the blackness with his stepdaughter. I was the last to leave, always remaining behind to see the Guild of Kryv safely removed from any fight. Jens had a wild look in his eyes when they locked on mine. I doubted he could see much of me, but he knew who looked back at him. His shoulders curved forward in a bit of defeat. "Bring her back and I will hide her away."

"You had your chance and failed."

"Why do you do this?"

A wicked grin spread over my lips. "Because I always keep my promises."

House Strom was blanketed in night. Not even a single flicker of a candleflame could be seen as I disappeared with my guild. The past at my back and . . . at my front.



10

# THE MEMORY THIEF

MY SKULL SCREAMED AS if fire melted the bone. Incessant rocking kept lolling my head back and forth.

One eye cracked open. I was tucked inside a small cart. Above me sunlight waltzed through canopies of dark leaves. Tangled moss hung from the branches, and cries of unknown creatures rose from the brush.

The Kryv had smuggled me next to several swords wrapped in fur, and all edges were smudged in something wet. My limbs were stiffer than lead when I tried to move, and my trousers clung to my legs, fetid and rank.

Dense, muggy air provided the first clue we'd left the main townships and had crossed into the wilds of the Forest of Limericks, a sort of jungle of evergreen trees and ferns. Legends haunted the trees with tales of water sprites drawing travelers to their deaths in the rivers and lakes, and beasts with fangs longer than my fingers awaiting to break bones.

At one side of the wagon, Tova kept a steady pace, and at the front, the thick Kryv who'd put his hand on my face pulled the cart by a rod.

Where was the Nightrender? Out of anyone I wanted to account for the brutal man. Those shadows . . .

I shook my head as if it might wipe clean the memory of how the skydguard bent and broke with the simple tilt of the Nightrender's head. How did he command darkness in such a way? It was mesmer I'd never witnessed, and in truth, wasn't certain I wanted to witness again.

He was vicious. Terrifying.

He was *perfect*.

When I faced the Nightrender again, I'd be forced to hide the race of my pulse, but he was irrevocably formidable. Exactly the sort of man needed to hunt a lost Alver at the masquerade.

"How do you feel?" Tova asked, peering over the edge of the cart.

A bit of fear and frustration knotted in the center of my chest. "Like a torch has been lit inside my head."

"Probably because Lynx mesmerized you," she said, unfazed by my bitterness. "Kept your mind convinced it was asleep so you wouldn't make noise as we left. Useful as they are, Hypnotik mesmer stings like a burning knife when it fades."

I glanced at the big Kryv pulling the cart. "He's a Hypnotik?"

"What else would he be?"

How in the hells would I know anything about Lynx the Kryv to fashion an opinion on who or what he was?

"Tova," said Lynx as he rested the cart to a stop. "We're back, but we're to speak straightaway."

Tova hummed a bright folk tune as she reached for my arm. Her mannerisms were almost playful, and it unsettled my previous opinions on the woman. Before she'd been harsh, abrupt, and I'd been certain she hated me.

I pulled away, but her second grab for my arm counted, and I was briskly

yanked from the back of the cart.

My brain spun. Where solid ground had been, now I skidded into a damp pit, each step more slippery.

Blades chopped at branches; dew sprayed my face. Brambles, vines, and overgrowth tangled around my ankles, leaving welts as I ripped my feet through the shrubs. A hint of brine perfumed the air with wet heat, and it coated my tongue with the silkiness of nearby blossoms.

When the ground flattened, my legs shook from walking downhill, but Tova gave me no rest.

Buried in the trees was an overgrown bridge. Dried vines of ivy hid the shape from anyone not looking for it. Raum passed me with a wink and pulled back the brambles over the entrance of a tunnel at the end of the bridge. Musty and damp, it echoed like the inside of a water well.

When light broke, the tunnel opened to a town. Or what was left of one.

Old dirt roads and crumbling homes once made of wood and clay lined wooded paths.

"What is this?"

"We call it Felstad," Tova said. "It means haven."

Cold bloomed through my chest. This was their world. Out here I was at their mercy, and if they wished me dead, who would know?

I buried my fear inside, if only to hide the truth from the Kryv before they could exploit my weakness.

At the end of a path, a massive black stone ruin towered over the abandoned township. The ancient rooftop had caved in, giving way for a small forest to grow inside. Trees sprouted in tangles, and vibrant birds with long tail feathers nested in the branches beyond the walls.

In my mind, the Guild of Kryv lived in a dank pit surrounded by rot. They

ate snakes and web weavers, or maybe bones.

When Tova released my arm in the center of the ruin courtyard, I lifted my face to the sunlight. Gold-winged butterflies flittered through the trees, and sweet songbirds welcomed us into the haven. No bones and web weavers; the Kryv's refuge was beautiful.

A bit of bright in my sea of fear.

Old corridors honeycombed from the inner ruins into dark hallways and alcoves. Above, amongst the trees, were ledges of broken levels once part of upper floors. A few Kryv dangled their legs over the edges.

All the Kryv who'd traveled with the cart walked to a rack and dropped weapons in a pile in a way both organized and chaotic. Tova laughed with three others as they stripped scabbards, bows, and swords. A gaunt boy reached for Raum's sword, and I recognized him as one of the battle drummers.

"Seven," the boy counted. Dark hair, dark lashes, dark clothes, stood out against his pale face. He took every blade and organized them by size and type. After a moment the boy shook his head and flicked each finger methodically. "No, no, we have eight sickle knives." He pointed at a shelf of wickedly curved knives. "There are only seven. Only seven."

Tova snapped her fingers. "Sorry, Ash. Hang on." She lifted her trousers and tugged the knife from a sheath on her shin.

The boy sighed in relief and carefully placed the knife next to the others, recounting twice. "You know, sickle knives are handy in the gardens, best for thorns and nettles if you don't want to be poked. But in a battle, they can twist the stomach before you cut it open. If you aim right, that is."

The boy spouted his information, but I didn't think anyone was really listening. He didn't seem to mind.



Tova came to my side. "Time to go. We have schemes to work out."

In one of the narrow corridors, we joined Raum again. He laughed at something with Lynx and a Kryv with dark skin and a piercing in his brow, like the folk from the Hemlig region.

"That's Vali," Tova said. "If you get him to smile, I shall be impressed."

Vali deepened his scowl in response.

Tova turned my shoulders and pointed to another Kryv with raven black hair. "Fiske," she said. Fiske slung an arm around the shoulders of a lean redheaded man, who whispered in his ear and laced their fingers together. "The redhead is Isak."

Tova went on as if I'd been waiting all night to learn every Kryv name.

Inside the corridor, moss draped in matted webs over doors. There were winding stairwells and carved in the stone walls were images of the gods' oak tree and the gods' ravens.

"Where is Elof?" I asked, unsure why. For someone familiar, perhaps.

"Outside already," Raum answered as he ran to catch up to us, Vali behind him. "Shall we? I wanted to be here at the front to catch your face when you meet the Nightrender."

"Wait," I said. Blood rushed in hectic waves to my head. "The darkness he brought, what sort of Alver is the Nightrender? I mean, what am I walking into here?"

"Does it matter?" Raum asked. "Alvers are Alvers."

"Not hardly."

His grin fell. "Ah, you have prejudice against other Kinds, well then, perhaps he is a Hypnotik, or a Rifter, or maybe a Malevolent. Enjoy guessing."

I'd made him angry, and I promptly decided I preferred smiling Raum over

this.

But he was trying to frighten me because Malevolent mesmer didn't exist. A myth—it must be. Pure evil and darkness couldn't survive in one person alone.

"Will he kill me?" My voice came like a strangled whisper.

"You hired his guild, but you assume because of his mesmer he must be worse than the hells?" Raum slammed his palm against the wall near my head. "Funny you think anyone here is a monster when you have your own twisted magic. Don't forget, lovey, you asked to be here."

He snapped his teeth and took the lead.

"You're off to a good start," Tova murmured and dragged me through the door to meet the man who'd slaughtered a dozen men with nothing but shadows.



11

# THE MEMORY THIEF

OUTSIDE, DEW-SOAKED BLOSSOMS DOTTED the trees and shrubs, and the grass was soft enough to sleep on. Raum drew an oddly wide berth around a creek. I longed for the water, and my dirty skin mourned as we strode past.

Vines wrapped around crumbling bricks and pillars tucked behind the leaves. I drew in a sharp breath when we approached because seated on stones was the Nightrender.

Except he was no longer hidden beneath a cowl. I saw his face plainly.

"Elof?" This wasn't right. I saw the Nightrender. I'd worked beside Elof. It . . . it couldn't be.

"*Dännisk.*" Elof's pale eyes took me in, but his smile had nothing kind about it now.

"Y-You're . . ." Bleeding gods, I was a stammering fool.

"Yes," he finished for me. "I might've hidden a few things. I'm a rather private person, after all."

Elof leaned back against the stones. A chill gathered in the air, like a north wind picked up and carved through my flesh to my bones. With a simple

wave of his hand in front of his face the shadow of Prince Fell melted away.

Skin shifted. His hair lengthened into dark waves with a few small, scattered braids decorated in black beads. His patchy beard slimmed into a stubbled chin of the man I saw last night. Runes and lines painted his face, but the most unnerving of the changes were his eyes. The striking blue was now black, glossy ink.

I'd met folk with dark eyes before, but these weren't typical black. An illusion over his features, no doubt.

"Clever trick, don't you think?" Tova whispered.

No. Nothing was clever. I didn't understand. I hated how his face reminded me more of Kase than Prince Fell. The whole revelation left my stomach sour.

My palms pressed to the sides of my head. "All this time, you've . . . been an illusion?"

I said it more to myself, but Elof—the Nightrender—responded, his voice a new, deep rasp. "Illusions can be quite useful. Seems folk trust Elof more than—" He paused, then grinned with a touch of smugness. "Me."

Damn the gods. Curse the Kryv. For months—nearly a bleeding turn—they'd been in my life, plotting and scheming. My head reeled through all those times on Strom land I'd taunted the Nightrender.

My mind could not accept that the man who'd pulled me away from the skydguard at House Strom was a villain. A thief. A killer.

He'd been angry I'd stepped in his way to take Hagen.

So, why was I alive?

My eyes lifted to those pitch holes in his face. He must be a wicked sort of Hypnotik.

"Perfect," Raum said with an arrogant applause. "Marvelous. Exactly the

reaction I'd hoped to see. I love a good reveal."

He elbowed Vali in the ribs until his fellow Kryv broke a half smile.

Behind the boulders the second child, the little drummer girl, peeked out. She had two braids hanging over her skinny shoulders, and watched me with big, seafoam eyes.

The young Kryv who'd counted the knives skipped up to the Nightrender's side. After a moment, the girl made deliberate gestures with her fingers. The boy watched without blinking, then nodded.

She never said a word, but she and the boy were clearly speaking.

Under the silent, unyielding scrutiny of the Nightrender, I cautiously tallied the Kryv with sly movements of my head. They'd duped me. Known me from the start. Been hiding in plain sight, and I was the fool who sought them out.

The Nightrender, disguised as Elof, had pulled me into their world. He made no mistake by mentioning the Kryv. He'd wanted me here, and I was determined to find out why. I wouldn't fall for their tricks again.

The more I knew who to watch for, the safer I'd be.

To the left, Fiske settled against a tree trunk. Isak rested his head over his lap and glared at me as if I were a flea on his skin. Lynx stood near a lean Kryv with golden hair and pink, grisly scars on his arms. The scarred Kryv drank from a flacon and wore a timid smile, but when he caught my stare, he narrowed his eyes.

Hells he looked familiar.

The Nightrender cocked his head as I kneeled on the damp grass. He wasn't the sort of man who'd think twice about snapping my neck, so it was a personal betrayal when I acknowledged the strong shape of his new jawline, and how the black in his eyes suited, oddly enough.

He resembled a boy I once loved, so his face was not unworthy to look upon.

The Nightrender leaned over his knees, eyes narrowed. I waited for him to speak, but he seemed content to study me without a word.

"What?" I finally asked when the quiet became unbearable.

"Already this plan of yours has put us in battle with the skydguard."

What was I supposed to say? It was not as if I'd intended to be surrounded by Black Palace guards. I fought the urge to retort. The Guild of Kryv had warned me of the risks, the bleeding Nightrender ought to know when the Masque av Aska was involved, skydguard would be a constant nuisance.

"Oh, let's talk of the skyds later." Tova clapped her hands. "Shall we introduce them?"

With one hand she yanked on the scarred Kryv's arm. He recoiled slightly, jaw tight, but followed her to my side.

The Nightrender shrugged. "A decision I leave to Gunnar."

I looked at the fleshy scars. Made by a lash, no doubt. I had witnessed similar marks on runaway serfs in town. He was hardly a man. No more than seventeen, maybe eighteen. I squinted at him, trying to place him. "Do I know you?"

He hesitated. "My name is Gunnar Strom."

Raum laughed, shaking Vali's shoulders. "Reveals, my friend. *Reveals*. One more to go."

"S-Strom?" My voice cracked. I did recognize the Kryv. But for a few darker features he was the exact image of Hagen.

"As we told you," the Nightrender said, "your brother has a family. Meet one of them."

I blinked my stun to Gunnar. "Hagen is your father?"

"Yes," Gunnar said. "I came from the North and became a Kryv to find him for my mother and my sister."

"Sister." I closed my eyes. *Damn you, Hagen.* "Why would he never mention you?"

"I don't know. Likely because our lives were not simple or safe in the north."

"Nephew of a rebel king," Tova whispered to me, mouthing *a prince* as she jabbed her thumb at Gunnar.

She closed her eyes and gave me a little nod as if she'd cleared up all confusion.

"Your brother has mighty connections, that's all you need to know," the Nightrender said. "We have other things to discuss. What more do you have for us?"

"I don't understand." My head was still reeling over the face of my brother on a Kryv.

"You'd said there would be memories. Where are they?"

I cleared my throat. "In the basket . . . I dropped it."

"No, I snagged it," Tova said. "And the penge you hid in that satchel of yours."

My mouth parted. "That was mine."

The Nightrender clicked his tongue. "Consider it a bonus payment for our assistance in saving your neck."

Bleeding gods. I had nothing now. No memories. No penge. They owned me.

"Remember, only I can make them valuable," I hurried to say, "so don't get any ideas of slitting my throat. Without me they'll be worthless to you."

The Nightrender regarded me with a hint of wicked amusement. "Someone



knows how to make a deal. What are in these memories?"

He saw my mesmer, there was no point hiding it now. "Last thoughts of high-ranking folk from the Masque av Aska. There are plenty of secrets in their final moments."

The Nightrender slouched against the stones. "Good. Fair payment for a near impossible plan."

"It is impossible," Vali grumbled for the first time. "No one steals from the masquerade. Especially not an Alver. Apologies, Gunnar, I know this matters, but you must know—it's never been done."

"And no one barter to join the Nightrender in his den," I insisted. "And yet, here I am."

Vali's face twisted into something between a grimace and a snarl.

The Nightrender rose from the stones and stood in front of me. Up close, the surface of his eyes was like dark smoke. The way he tilted his head, I guessed he was deciding the best place to stick me with the sword hanging from his waist.

Once a cave bear ventured down from the Northern Cliffs, killed some of our mares, and frightened our staff half to death. After, Ansel taught me how to face a beast with a lifted chin and confidence, all to seem bigger. The Nightrender was a kind of beast, so I fought the urge to turn away. "I made a legitimate deal. One, after learning my brother's son is among you, I have no doubt I did not need to make. You would've continued going after my brother."

The Nightrender only grinned like he enjoyed hearing me unravel his deception and trickery.

"Even still," I went on, "I expect it to be seen through, and to be part of it. Or are these not the Kryv everyone speaks of with such fear and reverence?"

His mouth twitched in one corner. “Making demands will get your tongue cut from your head.”

I believed him.

He lowered to one knee, slid his blacksteel blade from its sheath, and used the edge to lift my chin. I stiffened and looked straight ahead when his fingers caressed the curve of my neck and down my throat. The Nightrender pulled out the yarn with the wooden raven on the end.

For half a breath he rubbed his thumb over the surface, lost somewhere in his thoughts.

“Thieving from the masquerade is impossible,” he said. “To anyone but us.”

“Then why are we hiding away instead of facing it now?” I bit the inside of my cheek. My temper would not serve me well here.

“Hiding?” The Nightrender locked me in his black stare. “Who said anything about hiding? We have a meet tonight. Yes, while you were sleeping it off in a cart, we were working. We keep our deals.”

The Nightrender cracked his neck side to side, allowed the raven to fall from his grip, and returned his sword to the sheath. “Tell me why you’ve hunted the masque, *dännisk*.”

He didn’t deserve to know, but a man like him had ways of finding out whatever he wanted. “Because I lost someone I loved at the masque before.”

“The masque draws many crowds,” he said. “A good place for accidents to happen.”

“This was no accident. Children do not just disappear as though they never existed.” I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath in through my nose. “I know if we find the Masque av Aska trade, we’ll find Hagen.”

“And the playmate you lost?”

"I never said we were playmates."

"An assumption."

Raum paced near the Nightrender's stone seat, but I didn't think it was from nerves, more he simply enjoyed moving. Any frustration he had with me was gone. "When are we going to talk about her tricky kiss?"

Vali grimaced. "What?"

"I need breath for memories," I insisted. "I do not do it for pleasure."

"Tell me everything you know about your mesmer," the Nightrender said.

"You saw—"

"But what do you know?" he interrupted. "Information and knowledge is valuable."

"When . . . when I take memories, I leave only bits and pieces behind, but that is in those who are living. The dead, I only get the final memory."

Raum balked. "You could call it a kiss of death."

A few taunting chuckles slammed into my back from the Guild of Kryv.

Feverish heat gathered in my face. I gritted my teeth, uncertain how they'd react to my methods. "I have a few standing deals with a crewman on the grave barge, so whenever there is a death from the festival, I buy a little finger, then take the memory from the crushed bone."

The lawn was silent. I yearned for the earth to swallow me whole.

Raum cleared his throat. "And, uh, what exactly do you do with that crushed bone?"

"She eats it," the Nightrender answered for me. "Right?"

"I prefer to say breathe it in. The final breath lives in the bones of the dead." I had no reason to be ashamed of my mesmer, yet under his stare I was. "The dead go to the Otherworld with secrets, and I can choke down a bit of bone for such a potential deal. Through them, I've learned there is more to

the Masque av Aska than a mere festival. Don't tell me you haven't done worse."

The Nightrender flashed his cruel grin. "No one here said we hadn't."

"Daj said she was powerful," Gunnar whispered to Lynx. I still heard, and I didn't think he cared.

The Nightrender circled me. "Is that all you can do?"

"What else is there? I've only read of Anomalies, but there aren't many memory workers to study."

"I've no doubt there is more you can do than steal memories and deliver them through gentle kisses. I'm sure you could cause a bit of pain somewhere along the line."

Of course, a man as him would hope I could be cruel. What would I become with the Kryv? What was I willing to become to save Hagen?

One heartbeat was all it took to decide I'd be anything I needed to be.

The Nightrender held a karambit knife with a finger hole in the hilt; I never saw him reach for a weapon. The curved blade was blacker than his soul, and he spun the steel through a slew of tricky maneuvers.

Why were we even here discussing my mesmer when we ought to be planning our next move? I was exhausted from the night and irritated the guild still behaved as though they weren't going to help me.

As the Nightrender spun his knife, I reached out and caught his wrist when the knifepoint was aimed at the sky. He was stronger, and I didn't angle his wrist correctly. With a few lithe movements he could have the blade carving my innards.

Those inky eyes narrowed as he glanced to where my hand held his, as if the stun of being touched stopped him more than the pressure.

"I am done talking about this," I said, low and raw. "I want to know the

plan on how I get my brother back. We've both suffered long enough, and I will see to it his ends now."

The Nightrender drew his face close; heat radiated off his skin. All at once it was as though no one existed but me and him. "You think you know suffering? Why? Because your stepfather ignored you? Put you in the hayloft? What do you know? *Nothing.*"

Each word ripped from the back of his throat.

For a moment I forgot I challenged the Nightrender. "You do not know how far I will go to protect the people I love. Even against the likes of you."

The black of his eyes pooled with what I took as hate. "You'd be surprised the things I know."

"Now. It's *now*," Raum hissed, shaking out his hands, grinning that foolish grin at Vali again.

The Nightrender closed his eyes in an extended blink. When he opened them again, the shadows were gone. His face had gone unaltered, but his eyes were golden like the morning sun.

"I know a great many things about you, Malin."

My lip trembled. I was enraged, breathless, certainly very confused. Tears I reserved for the memories of what was lost dripped over my lashes. I blinked them away to see, to be certain this was real. His bright, unforgettable eyes were things I'd not seen since childhood.

And they hated me now.

My voice came as a breath, hardly there before it was gone. "Kase?"



# BOOK TWO



12



# THE MEMORY THIEF

## The Past

RED BRAIDS ASKEW AND fingers sticky from the juices of sweet ice, I raced through the crowds trying to reach the rainbow pole first. Towering in the center, the pole's length was laced in all colors: gold and green, blue and indigo, red and pink. Folk skipped and spun, unraveling then twisting the long ribbons back up in different patterns.

We should not be here, but it was a wonder that we were. Wonderment was a great deal more fun than following stingy rules Hagen and my stepfather put upon our heads.

I laughed when I touched a fiery red sash first but screamed at a pinch to the back of my arm.

“Beat you!”

I peeked through a tangle of ribbons. Honey-gold eyes met mine in return. “Kase, you bleeding liar, you did not.”

“Don't swear, Mallie.”

“You do all the time.”

The boy, skinnier than a lamppost with wavy dark hair, frowned. “I still won.”

I'd wanted to win, but in truth Kase always won when we raced. "Fine. Spiced or sugared nuts?"

"Don't spend your copper." He said the words and shifted on his feet with a bit of unraveling excitement.

I snorted. "Fair's fair. Don't pretend like you don't want those nuts. Now, sugared or spiced?"

He grinned. "What do you think?"

Spiced. "Don't let no one see you. Hagen's already grumbly enough we snuck in. He's mad at you."

"Why the hells is he mad at me when this was your idea?"

"Swear!" I jabbed my finger in his face. Then we both giggled. "He's mad because he thinks we're gonna show off our mesmer and get snatched by the masquerade snatchers." I wiggled my fingers and made a ghostly sound, expecting him to laugh.

Instead, Kase smacked his syrupy hand over my mouth. "Shh. Hells, Mallie." No one else called me Mallie but him. He glanced over his shoulder. "Those snatchers are real. Now, no one needs to know I rift."

"Barely rift," I teased. He couldn't even scratch my skin when I let him practice.

He shoved my shoulder; a small grin painted his mouth. "He's just mad 'cause you're a thickhead and start blurting stuff out about mesmer."

"I'm not afraid," I whispered. "My mesmer is strong."

"It's creepy."

I snickered. "After the sweets Hagen said he'd take us to the divination rune lady if we want, but that's it before he'll make us go home."

Kase groaned. "Her again? She says nutty things."

My fist slammed against his chest. "The last thing she said was about me.

What? Am I not good enough to be vowing with anyone?”

The old Alver woman had flipped over one of her mystic wooden runes and told Kase he needed to guard my heart—it'd be his to vow with someday.

When she'd said it, something tight and hot grabbed hold in my chest, but Kase made a retching noise and ruined it.

Like boys usually do.

“I didn't say anything about you being good or bad.” He rubbed the spot where I'd smacked him and glared at me. “I already decided I'm takin' vows with you, stupid. You gotta kiss during the vow stuff, and I already have with you.” He scratched his head. “You weren't so bad at it, so it wouldn't be too gross doing it again. I'm just saying I don't like the rune lady tellin' me what to do. And she smells funny.”

Kase didn't look at me, and I was glad. My cheeks felt odd, sort of hot and prickly.

Last turn, some of the waif house boys in town dared Kase to kiss one of the waif house girls. Not willing to be a coward, he said he'd kiss me instead since he knew what I ate every day.

Maybe Kase did it to show off to the rough orphan boys, but I didn't think I'd ever forget it. I had imagined another mouth on mine would be wet and weird, maybe slimy, but it'd been warm, and felt . . . good in a strange way.

But something happened at his touch. I saw something. Almost the same as peeking into his thoughts, and as if his kiss were a key, my mesmer sparked to life.

I was embarrassed I kept thinking about it. With a jerk of my hand, I waved him away. “Just go wait for me. And find Hagen. He'll get madder if you don't.”

He beamed and ran toward the Hypnotik tent.

That night, with his declaration he'd vow himself to me someday, was the last memory I had of Kase Eriksson.



13

# THE NIGHTRENDER

WHY DID I DO it? In my head it made some sense to keep the truth hidden from her. The guild could've called me Nightrender in her presence. They wouldn't give up my name. Not to her.

True, they knew we had some connection to the past. The Kryv understood Hagen Strom had been a sort of defender to me as a boy. But I'd never brought my guild into the depths of my knotted past with Malin Strom.

My decision had lashed out so swiftly. A heady desire to hear my name from her mouth, a desire to break her; I wasn't certain why I gave in to the need. Now in the courtyard of the ruins, she stared at me like I'd sprouted up from the hells.

Muscles tensed. I could hardly catch a deep enough breath. Hate me. She needed to despise me, to leave this bleeding place whenever this ended.

I could live with her disdain if she drew breath far from the shores of Klockglas. They'd take her in the North. She'd be free to use mesmer in the open. Find some fae to love as devotedly as she did Hagen, as she . . . as she always loved.

I had no room in the scabrous, maggot-rotted thing in my chest to be hers anymore.

Hanna finger-spoke frantically with Ash. Unable to use her voice, we'd all quickly learned how to communicate with the girl. Gunnar's mother had suffered a similar ailment in the form of a curse. He'd taught us even more ways to speak with our hands around Hanna.

Ash responded to his sister with a silent nod.

Tova gnawed her thumbnail. Gunnar looked between us, as if he were suddenly torn on who to stand beside. Isak and Fiske whispered to each other. Vali frowned. Unsurprising. Lynx rested a hand on the knife he never parted with.

Raum was the only one in the guild who seemed utterly pleased with Malin knowing my name. The others had expected me to be distant and cold.

Now, I'd proven how weak I was around the girl of the past.

I needed to leave, needed to be free of her scrutiny. Raum winked at Malin and followed me when I reeled around for the ruins.

The corridors branched off in a labyrinth of twists and turns, but we'd lived here long enough I moved to the center hall without much thought. One by one the Kryv abandoned their places in the courtyard, and meandered inside, watching me as if I might do something horrifying.

"Need some sweet ale?" Raum asked. He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Isak made a fresh batch, and the way you look, the hells know, it might help take the edge off."

"Kase, you were closer to the woman than you let on," Vali said, catching up to us. Always the straightforward one. "The look on her face, I thought her heart might give out."

"I don't want to speak of it," I snapped.

"Ah," Raum started slowly. "My friend, you might not have a choice. Incoming!"

Before I had a chance to grasp anything he was saying, a thick shout echoed off the ruin walls.

"No!"

Birds fluttered from their branches. My body froze.

I turned with the patience of melting snow. She knew the truth, but I didn't miss the way her breath caught in a little gasp when our eyes locked again. As if she needed to prove the whole of it to her heart once more.

I knew the feeling.

I'd been hidden in plain sight for nearly a turn. I'd been near her, touched her. But this moment was still different. There were no illusions or pretenses between us.

A naked sort of feeling. Exposed at long last. In truth it took all my control to keep my face as stone.

"No," she repeated through her teeth. "You don't get to walk away from me."

My jaw pulsed. "*You* do not make demands here. I warned you once, I'll not do it again."

"Then cut out my tongue, Nightrender!" Bold. Then again, she was always bold. A dangerous flaw. Malin's voice trembled and was steady all at once. "But not until you explain what the bleeding hells happened to you."

I owed her nothing. She was not part of me. Not anymore. But if she wanted the truth, she'd get it. I tilted my head, voice dark as midnight. "I went to the hells and back."

I turned to walk away again.

The slap of her feet over the stones led me to hope she ran in the opposite



direction. Should've known she wouldn't give it up.

I made it five paces before her small hand slammed against my shoulder. A pathetic mix of a slap and a jab, but it startled me enough I spun around to meet fresh tears in her eyes.

*Dammit.* I hated tears.

"You bastard," she said. "What were you going to do? Take Hagen and never make yourself known to me?"

"Yes. Obviously. Until you ruined it all."

Malin's hands clutched the sides of her head. "All gods. At Sigurd's, this is why you did not want me to dig in your head. I would've found you out." Fire flashed in her eyes. "Do you not know how many times I nearly got myself killed—for you!"

Emotion. Fear. Love. All of it was too riddled in risk. None of those things had any place here. I'd learned enough to know when you gave in, when those took precedent over cunning, intellect, and greed, only pain followed.

In a few tricky steps, I had her backed against one wall, my body forming a cage over hers. Both my palms flattened aside her head, and I leaned close enough the green in her eyes gleamed like chipped glass. Every freckle dusting her nose, the small scar beneath her eye from a thorn bush, every horribly beautiful imperfection stared back at me.

"I never asked that of you." I lowered my voice. "And you're a fool for it."

"No. I was a devoted friend."

Devotion. Hells, I hated that word. What I knew, coupled with her proclivity to be the most loyal, most *devoted* person I'd ever met, left me with a bad taste in my mouth. The bleeding woman had no idea what risk she faced, and I had no ability to tell her.

I took a step back. "Time to end your search, *dännisk* Strom. You have no

friends here.”

I left her against the wall and disappeared into the shadows of our haven. This time, she didn't follow.



THE TENEMENT ROOM WAS cramped and musty. A scratched oak table with root crates as chairs marked the dining nook, wicker chairs with fox furs woven into cushions made a small sitting area, and an overstuffed sack of fur and straw was what he called a bed.

Still, the Rutten district with its dusty, thin-walled rooms was better than what Helgi once called home.

The door clicked against the lock and the hinges groaned as it swung open.

Helgi was thin like a rod and gaunt like a skull. His hair never flattened and always stuck on end. The tuft of ratty hair he called a beard hid the scabs from his nervous picking. He bore all the characteristics of a deer ready to leap away at the first snap of a twig.

Helgi let out a long breath as he stripped back a burlap jacket from his shoulders. He tossed a satchel on top of the table, then lit the candle, brightening the small sitting area in pale yellow.

With intention, I shifted in one of his twig chairs; my weight causing the wood to groan.

“All gods.” Helgi yelped and knocked his hip against the table. His eyes widened at the sight of me.

I tugged on the sleeve of my tunic; ankle crossed over one knee. “Hello, Helgi.”

His eyes danced from my face to Gunnar's at my left shoulder, then Fiske's on my right. Fiske hadn't predicted anything nefarious by coming here tonight. He had a Talent of knowing when good luck ended, and poor fortune came out.

"Nightrender," Helgi's voice crackled through a loud gulp. "What . . . a pleasure."

"Is it? I wonder why you did not follow through on our payment then."

Those sunken eyes popped, as if they might burst from his skull. "No. I'd never renege on anything. I got nothing, Nightrender. Nothing for you, swear it to the gods."

"You shouldn't trouble them. They are too busy not existing."

I removed the curved karambit knife from a sheath on my thigh and spun it around one finger. Helgi shuffled back toward the door in slow steps. He wouldn't run. The man was brainless, but he wasn't a fool. His movements were more as if instinct to flee battled with his own logic that fleeing would mean a swift cut to the throat.

I used my chin to gesture to the wizened room "Why live here? Did you not purchase a cottage by the edge of Limericks after our deal?"

He shifted on his feet. "Lost it. Had a few bad games is all."

"Ah, I see. The vice has returned."

"Is that why you're here? Come to take back the winnings? Because our deal never said nothing about what I'd do with the pot."

"I have no interest in how much you squandered Gunnar's hard-won purse." Gunnar huffed and glared at Helgi until the man was forced to stare at the ground. I stopped spinning the knife, clicked my tongue, and stood. "It did, however, use the matter of information as payment. A debt, sadly, you've not paid."

"Look, Nightrender, my woman is going to be home any time now. I don't think she'd take it too kindly if she knew I had dealings with, well, with you lot."

"No," I said with a twisted sort of grin. "I'm sure she wouldn't. You'll be glad to know I have no intention of lingering. You've been keeping things from me Helgi, and I plan to get those things quickly, or we will have more to fret over than your woman coming through the door."

The Kryv had developed a precise dance when it came to threatening. Fiske took five steps to one side, cutting off the back door. Gunnar was slier. Masking his pace by inspecting open shelves with chipped teacups and drinking horns. By the time he'd reached a slab of salted pheasant hanging on the wall, Gunnar had covered the only window in the room.

While they moved to Helgi's back, I was all the man saw to the front. He was caught between us in every direction. Backed into a corner, most marks would squeal and give up everything without spilling a drop of blood.

Helgi was the sort to bend and break at the slightest pressure. A hard look. A flick of a knife. A bit of shadows in my eyes.

I'd said nothing, done nothing more than loom over him, and Helgi's chin trembled. Over his brow sweat beaded. Blue veins popped beneath the paper-thin flesh over his skull.

"I can't say nothing, Nightrender. They'll have my fingers if I do."

"I'll match their fingers and raise you two eyes." The point of the knife teased the ridge of his cheek. When I darkened the shadows in my eyes, Helgi's throat bobbed in a rough swallow. "You come to us looking for a bit of good fortune, a way to feed your bloated belly. Gunnar bests the game hall for an entire night, brings you the coffers. I'm not sure you understand the discomfort such a thing caused my dear Gunnar."

"Bleeding headache for a week, you sod," Gunnar snapped.

Helgi's sunken eyes followed me as I paced his tiny room. "Your payment was to provide me information from your mistress of employ when I asked."

"But our deal was months back," Helgi said, hands out like a supplicant.

"A good deal never dies." I spun the knife again. He winced. Gods, the things I could do to this man with all the fear he carried in that skinny body. "This is the payment. You think we didn't see some sense in making you a dealmaker because of your connection to Mistress Salvisk's cheer house? Now, your landlord was quick to tell me you were boasting at the game tables about the mighty deal your mistress made for the Masque av Aska. Odd, but I heard nothing from you."

Without warning, I slammed the point of my blade into the thin wood of his table. He barked a cry of surprise and trembled more than a bleeding child would.

Twist, break, bend, anything to get what we needed. Those were our brutal, effective tactics. But my control was at risk if anyone discovered how cracked and warped the shield around me had become.

I blamed sunset hair and a sharp tongue for the jagged pieces shaking loose.

Helgi sniffed, but he broke. With a defeated sigh he turned to the satchel and removed a crumbled piece of parchment with a broken wax seal on one side. The parchment was stained and battered, as if he'd dug it straight from a waste pile.

Knowing Helgi, he'd done exactly that.

I plucked the parchment from his fingers and behaved as if I studied every word before I handed it to Fiske.

As hoped for, he summarized out loud. "This is signed by masque

dignitaries. Who knew they left words of gratitude for a cheer house mistress?"

"The traders came." Helgi said. "Made a deal with Mistress Salvisk. One she's been vying for the last two turns. She sold her cheeries for the queen's ring tent." The man's shoulders slumped. "It's not that I kept it from you, Nightrender. But I missed the mark. I knew I was supposed to tell you if any prison traders, masque folk, or Black Palace traders were scheduled to come sniff around. They came and went before I knew."

"There is no *if*, Helgi," I said, voice low. "The only reason we connected our guild to you is because Mistress Salvisk runs the cheer house most favored by the Black Palace. It was only a matter of time before she traded directly with the Masque av Aska or the Lord Magnate's puppets."

"So, we missed the trade deal we needed." Fiske twirled the dirty missive in his fingers, locking Helgi in a glare. "We could've threatened them already if we'd known."

"Please. I didn't know. The deal was done in the dark, and I found out the next day."

"And kept it from us."

"I didn't want you to think I wasn't doing my part."

"You did not do your part. I care little what time traders arrive, or when their deals are made," I said in a tone calm as a summer's morning. "You had one task. Inform us of a meet and do it without pitiful excuses. Not only did you fail at this task, once you learned of your misstep, you tried to hide the truth from us. A dangerous move to make. Good for us the folk around you are more loyal to us than you, or you might've gotten away with it."

Helgi's face scrunched like he was in pain. "Nightrender, please, I didn't know Mistress Salvisk took conferences after dark. She retires early, says she

doesn't like to hear the noises of patrons.”

I believed him. Only because I knew that much about Salvisk. A woman who traded young folk, fallen from nobility. When shame or misfortune befell the wealthiest of Klockglas they were the most wretched and desperate. Even the type to sell their children to cheer house brothels.

Her cheer boys and girls were accustomed to the lifestyles of the folk who frequented the Black Palace and the masquerade.

Salvisk did these things but did not have the stomach to watch them play out. The weakest kind of villain.

I lifted my chin, tugging the point of the knife from the table. “You failed us, Helgi, but we are a forgiving guild. We need to speak with Mistress Salvisk.”

“She'd never meet with you.”

“I'm aware. What you will do is arrange a meet with a new buyer. But there will be a competitor. Lead her to believe she has an auction on her hands. When it is set, you send word.”

“What is it you plan to do?” he asked in a whisper.

“Not your concern. Do as we ask, and you can consider our dealings at an end.” With slow, methodical movements I touched the curve of the blade to the pulse point on his throat. “Last chance, Helgi. I don't tolerate mistakes well.”

“No.” His voice shook. “No, I understand. I'll send word. I will.”

“Good. Do it quickly. You've put us behind already.” Only once I pulled away did Helgi breathe again. I signaled to Gunnar and Fiske to follow me out of the tenement. Before I abandoned the space, I looked back at the pathetic dealmaker. “I do hope you'll consider staying away from the game tables. You're a piss poor player.”

He frowned and gave a jerky nod as if he hated agreeing.

"Oh." I snapped my fingers. "And your woman, she's not coming home tonight. I'm afraid she's rather inclined to bed the sods winning at the tables as of late. I'd not expect her until the sun rises."

His open mouth was the last thing I saw before I draped us in shadows and slammed the rickety door behind us.

Rutten carried a constant smell of rot and mold from turns of standing water cracking the wooden foundations of the shops and homes. But it was convenient in that no one walked the streets after dark. Most remained holed up in their smelly houses or delved headfirst into the debauchery of the rowdy gambling dens in the town square.

In an alley behind the tenement, I accepted a drink of Gunnar's flacon and used the back of my sleeve to wipe the burn of brän off my mouth.

"Think it'll be quick work, or a long wait?" Gunnar asked.

I knew he was anxious, likely more than anyone, but this would take a precision we'd not worked yet. "Salvisk will want to keep her deals big and bold. She won't refuse the shine of an auction. We'll move soon."

"We could ride in under guise with her sold cheeries when they're collected, and enter the Black Palace before the festival begins," Fiske offered.

I shook my head. "They are collected from the cheer house no less than a week before the masquerade. Too early and we'd risk being caught. Our best chance will be to enter after we've learned all we can about this turn's masque, the layout, the entertainment, all of it. Masquerade traders and auditioners will be the ones to have the information."

"We're not going after Salvisk then?" Gunnar asked. "We're going after the traders she sold to?"



I smirked. "Who says we will not handle both?"

Fiske picked at his fingernails, a furrow over his brow. "He mentioned the queen's ring. It will be on display, perhaps we should rid the Lord Magnate of his favorite trinket while we're visiting the Black Palace."

I merely grunted a reply. Truth be told, I'd burn the ring if I had the chance.

"Lynx told me about the ring," Gunnar said. "I'd like to finally see this legendary queenmaker."

"It is nothing remarkable," I said, signaling for them to follow me into the street.

A thousand lifetimes would be too soon to see that bleeding ring again. Made of glass that looked like silver. Runes said to glow gold should fate's queen return and heal the broken kingdom of the east.

The madness of the game drew out the worst in folk. The cruelest natures. But Ivar would dangle the ring in the greedy eyes of his people, distracting them from the true purpose of his game: to sniff out any Alver who might be born of the long-lost royal bloodlines, so he could kill them.

The bleeding ring was a curse. A burden splitting me in two.

"What do we do with our newest guild member until Helgi brings word?" Fiske asked.

My chest tightened. Malin Strom was a thorn in my side. A hope in my heart. What to do with her? No mistake, waiting patiently would not sit well in her stubborn head.

"She'll acquaint herself with Felstad, then go with us to Salvisk's," I said. "She wants to know what it is to be a Kryv, I say she learns."

Fiske arched a brow. "So sure that's wise? She might be deadweight."

The need to keep Malin in my sights had only worsened since the deal at

the steel house. I hated the whole of it. But hate did nothing to dull the need to keep watch, to keep her hating me. Perhaps it could be because I did not feel at ease unless I knew she was unharmed.

"She might give us an opportunity to put her memory stealing to use," I said. "We ought to exploit any mesmer that has good use. Games are beginning."

Deadly games.

Deal or not, I'd not risk the life of Malin Strom. If it became clear we would not succeed, I'd bind her hands, toss her in a crate, and ship her off these shores myself if necessary.

A promise was a promise, after all.



14

# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE NIGHTRENDER WAS GONE.

Hours ago, I'd watched from a window as he, Gunnar, and Fiske were swallowed by the shadows of the forest. I'd been told to sleep, but how could I when turns of suffering and praying had all been for naught?

I now sat atop a feather stuffed sleeping mat, picking at a plate of berries in Tova's room, taking some solace in the blue skeins of moonlight.

The back of my throat had a scratch I couldn't clear and sweat beaded my forehead. Joints ached like I'd rusted over, but I assumed the pains were from all the moments of looking death in the eye.

"You all are cruel," I said, my first words since finding out the truth.

Tova stopped combing a pick made of bone through her curls. "Don't be a child. You are no better than us. I know what you've done to get some of those memories." She pointed at my basket, which was brought in after I'd cried out all my tears in a dusty alcove after Kase stormed out on me.

Tova watched as I reached into the basket and added the vials to a small pig skin pouch I kept in the bottom. Burned into the hide were runes, protections to keep the vials safe. I frowned as I worked. What hurt most was

all these turns of bribing and scheming were done for a man who was not worth it.

"Thinking of terminating our deal? I'd think less of you if you did simply because the Nightrender hurt your feelings."

My chest squeezed. This was more than hurt feelings. It was agony. "I'm not leaving. Hagen matters more than anything."

"Good." Tova rummaged through a small chest against the wall, then lifted out a basket filled with soaps and towels. "Care to wash a bit? You stink."

I glared at her and took a pearl of soap perfumed with sprigs of lavender. "You don't smell so fine yourself."

She chuckled and filled a clay washbasin. Tova added mint leaves and drops of rose oil. Tova stripped her shirt, and shucked off her trousers, unashamed she had an audience. She had a simple beauty; I could admit as much without liking her.

Desperate to be free of my rancid clothes, I peeled back my tunic and trousers to my undergarments.

"I've got lavender, amber honey, oh, and a bean from Furen," Tova said. "When you crush it down it smells like sugar. Care to try some for your hair?"

She handed me a glass jar of the beans and I took it with shaky hands covered in cuts and mud and smelling like old fruit left out in the sun.

My arm throbbed where something had cut my skin, and my hair stuck to my face like wet grass. Discreetly, I tipped my nose into my armpit and sniffed. The curdled sweat soaked in the threads of my undershirt drew out a cough.

"You don't happen to have any blue moss for this cut, do you?" I asked and pointed to the gash on my arm.

"Medicinal herbs are kept down the hall, do you need some desperately?"

"I'll see to it later."

"I can heal it."

I paused my scrubbing. "Heal it? Are you a Mediski?"

"Not a skilled one, which is why we have medicinal herbs, but I think I could manage a simple cut."

I glanced at the wound. The edges were a greenish yellow under the dried blood. "I think it's infected, so I don't suppose you could do much more damage."

Tova licked her lips and shook out her hands. She gently rested her fingertips over the gash, and mesmer tingled like tiny bursts of heat under my skin at once. I gritted my teeth when mesmer deepened into an unsettling sensation of my skin knitting together as though tugged by a needle and thread.

"It feels so . . . odd. How is it done?"

"As it was explained to me, my mesmer quickens the innate healing process everyone has. Something to do with my touch and concentration. Helps if I study how the body naturally heals, then envision it." Tova stuck her tongue out one side of her mouth. "But the concentration is where I am lacking."

What a sight. Two nearly naked women, oily water puddling at our feet, with our utmost attention on a gash on one shoulder.

"That's all I can do," she said after a few moments.

The gash had narrowed into a shiny, rosy line. "Thank you."

"It's nothing."

I reached for a shred of a towel over one side of the basin and gently scrubbed pulpy, sore bruises across my ribs from the brutal kicks the

skydguard had landed at the stables.

While I washed, Tova foraged through a cedar chest, drawing out two stacks of trousers and tunics. She offered one to me as something extra to wear, then tossed the nightshirt I'd brought in my satchel onto the second sleeping mat, telling me to inform her if I needed more clothes. One of the Kryv would get more when they next went to a trade exchange.

"So, how am I to be treated here?" I asked once my skin was clean, and my hair no longer reeked like the hog pens at House Strom. "Any of the men I should avoid?"

Tova wrinkled her nose. "What, you think you'd be their personal cheery?"

"Would I?"

"Hear this now—men are not superior in Felstad. Hanna and I are treated the same as anyone. Because you have breasts does not mean the Kryv abuse you."

Her voice boomed with fierceness, and I believed her. At least one worry faded away. "Hanna? She's the child?"

"Ash's younger sister. One of the last beautiful souls left in this godsforsaken place."

"Can she . . ." I waved my hands on the sides of my head, not wishing to offend, for I didn't know what offended Tova.

"Hear?" Tova nodded. "She can, but she only speaks with the hands. We don't know why. She just never spoke. I'm terrible at translating, and Ash is not a patient teacher. Don't underestimate her because of her age. The girl is wickedly clever with a knife."

I made grand plans not to underestimate any of the Kryv.

Tova went to the door. "I'll be with the others, so stay here until I get back."

"Locking me in?"

"I'll show you more of Felstad tomorrow, I promise." She grabbed her quiver and bow leaning against the wall. "Then you will know the places to avoid and be free to jaunt about as you please."

In my haze of learning Kase Eriksson was alive, Tova had dragged me around Felstad, as if my life had not upended in one moment. I'd walked through back gardens. Been instructed on how to free the front gate of the entrance tunnel. I was shown the dry storage, bottled fruit shelves, then the water and ale casks.

All of it took most of the day, and now she and the guild were locking me away. I didn't like secrets and they had countless. "If you're planning anything, I ought to be involved. We need to begin the search."

"What makes you think we haven't already started?"

I had no answer.

"Remember what I told you about this guild being a clock," Tova went on. "There are pieces, and you'll help us with those pieces when the time is right. For now, learn all you can so you don't get us all killed, and be still. You want to always go, but these things take finesse and patience."

"Maybe Hagen doesn't have the time for us to be patient."

"And if we rush into this, he will be dead. You think you're the only one who cares? Gunnar is our Kryv brother, and this mark is his *father*. Folk may have more than one brother, but only one father makes them."

I leaned against the wall. Another Kryv I'd yet to speak with. Gunnar. My nephew of sorts. He looked at me like I was a disease, but one he might like to catch to get to know a little better.

"Sitting here seems wrong," I said.

"Think as you please, but I'm not here to impress you. You've asked us to



do a job, and we'll do it our way. I'll be back.”

At the click of the door, I was alone.

I obeyed—for a time—but when Tova didn't return, I grew restless.

From beneath the flap of my satchel a bit of yarn stuck out. I'd nearly forgotten about Asger. Sight blurred as I fingered the roughly spun horse. A piece of me broke, hardening into something rough and jagged. The pads of my thumbs ran over the missing button eye, the yarn mane.

Once a comfort to imagine the boy I lost. Now, a cruel reminder the boy had grown to be a killer.

I wanted nothing to do with it.

Wiping my eyes, I tucked Asger into my belt, and hurried to the door, fishbone pick in hand. Pointless, since I jiggled the handle once and the door swung open.

Tova didn't even seal the latch.

I stuck my head into the dimly lit corridor, glanced side to side, and only stepped out once I believed it to be clear of Kryv. Somewhere in the ruins laughter rang out, curses, and a few folk tunes with slurred voices.

So, this was the fearsome Guild of Kryv. Drunkards who spent time singing sagas of poets long gone when the moon was highest.

A guild of feckless fools with knives. Nothing more.

The corridor was long and arched. A steady water drip splattered somewhere in the dark, and each breath drew in a heady bit of damp. My grip curled around the hilt of Tova's knife when the path curved to a stairwell marred in shadows from a small flame.

Where I expected an empty space, I slammed into the firm back of another body. A short, garbled noise scraped from my throat, and my face heated in

shame. Was I the Anomali Alver who had Hob the Street Hawker on his knees mere days ago, or was I a whimpering girl afraid of the dark?

When my eyes adjusted to the face of the man, anticipation and a touch of nerves sent my pulse pounding in my head. “Gunnar. You’re back.”

The young Kryv eyed me with suspicion, but unless I was mistaken, there was a bit of longing there too.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Lie? Truth? I didn’t know and began speaking before the decision was made. “I was looking for the Nightrender’s room. I have something to return to him.”

Gunnar’s eyes went to the exposed leg of the stuffed toy tied to my back. If he wondered, he didn’t ask. “His chamber is up the stairs.”

Gunnar flicked a quick smile and went to leave.

“I wouldn’t mind speaking to you,” I blurted out. “If you’d like, that is.”

“I am on watch tonight,” he said, voice soft. “But I have a little time.”

A weight lifted off my shoulders when he smiled. Hells, he did look a great deal like Hagen.

I smiled in return. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

Bleeding skies. He’d been born before my fifth turn. Nearly all my life Hagen had kept him from me. “And you said you have a sister?”

Gunnar softened. “Yes. Laila. She’s nearly nine turns now.”

“And . . . your mother?”

Gunnar’s face sobered. “*Dännisk*, I know this is not easy for you—”

“Malin,” I whispered. “Or Mal. Please. You look so much like Hagen, and he called—*calls*—me Mal.”

Gunnar hesitated. “Mal, I swear to you there are a great many people

beyond these borders who will go to the hells to find my daj. My mother is one. She blames herself for what happened.”

“What did happen?”

Gunnar ran his fingers through his hair. “My mother begged my father to run with my sister and me when war came. To free us. He obliged and we were caught.”

“Free you from what?”

“I was born into captivity. My mother is a warrior. Born of the royal fae in the north, but an enemy to the non-magic king. She became a game to be played, to be won. Should an opponent best her—that man would win her body.” Gunnar’s fists tightened. “If she won, it meant he’d die a bloody death. She never lost. Until Daj.”

A grimace hardened my face. “No. Hagen would never—”

“He didn’t,” Gunnar said with a grin. “He was simply the first to ask her to sit and talk to him before she killed him. I suppose that was the way to her heart.”

I let out a soft laugh. “Why did he play such a game?”

“From what I was told it was to keep him from this bleeding festival here. House Strom made an arrangement—should he play and win in the name of the Klockglas, then the Lord Magnate would not punish him for using his mesmer to protect . . .” Gunnar’s eyes drifted up the stairs.

*By the gods.* “Me? Or Kase?”

Hagen had used his mesmer gift of blocking magic to conceal Kase and me time and again. I never imagined his protection had cost him so much.

“I think the Lord Magnate only knew he’d protected other Alvers. Not the specifics of who those Alvers were,” Gunnar said. “I know little of the

Nightrender's past, Mal. But I believe he feels a great deal of responsibility to my daj."

I understood. So did I. With a forced smile, I rested a hand on his arm. "You said Hagen failed to free you, but you are. How?"

A horn bellowed in the night. Gunnar turned his head toward the sound. "My watch is beginning," he said softly. "I am free because magic is powerful, and fate has bigger plans for us all."

He tipped his chin in a sort of bow, then disappeared around the corner.

My heart ached for him. Not as a Kryv, not even as Hagen's son. More for the pain beneath his sharp eyes. I made grand plans to be his confidant, should he need one.

My attention turned to the stairs. Instead of clinging to the past, for Gunnar's sake, I'd let go and stand at Hagen's son's side as we found my brother again.

Bard and Jens had little affection for me. If all went wrong, Gunnar Strom would be the last family I truly had left.

I was careful as I climbed the stairs. Many were broken and tilted. It was the sort of staircase one would need to get used to climbing before they could do so without stumbling. On the upper level, a few tapestries lined the walls, centuries-old dust gathered over the flagstone corridor, and only two doors were accessible. The other rooms were caved in, or hardly a room.

Only one had a glimmer of light beneath the crack in the door.

Heart heavy, I placed Asger on the ground. My fingers went cold as I dug beneath the neckline of my tunic and pulled out the raven charm. The way Kase had studied it, almost gently, in the courtyard, I'd give up half my bone-dust memories to know what thoughts plagued his mind in that moment.

I bit on the inside of my cheek as I pressed the raven to my lips. A final

farewell to the past I had fought to keep.

I was no Kryv. My steps were not feathery and silent. Adjusting to place Asger upright, my shoulder tapped against the wall, my boots scraped over the gritty dust. It should've been no surprise my every move was heard throughout Felstad, but when the door swung open, a short gasp escaped all the same.

I was still down on one knee. The back of my throat grew dry as my eyes lifted to meet his. He wasn't Kase. He *couldn't* be Kase, or I would shatter every wall I'd been carefully building between us since he removed his shadows.

But he looked so like him. Hair tousled, frowning lips, the quirk to his left brow.

There were differences. Things I wanted to know and understand, like the small scar marring his chin. Where did it come from? I was only a little ashamed for admiring the divots of muscle which had replaced lanky limbs.

He'd known me all this time, known right where I was, and never revealed himself to me. No mistake, Kase stopped caring for his hayloft friend, but my heart simply forgot to do the same.

His eyes lowered to the horse and the raven charm.

When he looked at me again it was as if I'd taken my sharpest knife and carved out his heart through his spine. A look I'd never forget, and one he promptly buried beneath those strange shadows.

His eyes went dark as pitch. How he did it, I didn't know. The Kase I knew was a Rifter like Bard, and not a good one. Those shadows, those illusions, I didn't understand how his mesmer changed into something so vastly different.

I dug my fingernails into my palms and took a step back. "These aren't

mine. I don't want them."

The Nightrender said nothing. He didn't blink.

Disappointment burned harsh and cruel in my heart. Why hope for anything more?

Halfway to the staircase the soft rasp of his deep voice sent a shiver down my spine. "Wise to let go of something that died long ago."

Each word was broken glass slashing every surface of my body. I did not dignify him with a backward glance. Not even a word. I lifted my chin and left him to his darkness.

Kase Eriksson was dead, after all.



15

# THE MEMORY THIEF

“UP.” TOVA’S BOOT INCESSANTLY nudged my hip.

I groaned and rolled onto my shoulder, blinking against the dawn. “What?”

Tova smacked my hip with her knuckles, then abandoned my cot to her washbasin where she gathered her curls into a knot on top of her head. “We’re leaving. Hells, you were so impatient before, now you’re sleeping the morning away.”

By the chill in the air, the dull gray of the light, I’d guess the sun had barely decided to show not an hour before.

“Go where?” I sat up, scratching my head. For nearly a week, I’d lived in Felstad, and never had Tova roused before the sun.

She didn’t answer, simply tossed a tunic at my face, and said, “Get dressed.”

I obeyed but kept my eyes on her frantic movements. She managed to sheath no less than eight blades across her body. One between her breasts, two across her middle. A forked fishing knife crossed the small of her back, a shiv on either arm. Then a dagger on either thigh.



She threw one of her knives made of bone at me. “Use only if you’ll be dead and bleeding if you don’t. It’s one of my favorite knives.”

I swallowed past the scratch of morning and sheathed the knife to the thick belt I’d purchased near the docks three turns ago. When I carried my vials everywhere and worked with hawkers, a knife or two on a weapon belt was convenient.

I did not move as swiftly as Tova, but went to work gathering my supplies, my rune pouch with the memories, and splashing cold water on my face to chase away the last blur of sleep.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” I asked, hopping after her into the hallway as I tugged on my boot.

“There is a cheer house with new ties to the Masque av Aska. We’ve been waiting to have a visit. Last night, the Nightrender received word from one of his acquaintances, and it’s time for our first play. Since you insist on being privy to every move we make, you’re coming.”

First, when a Kryv said ‘have a visit’ I had no doubt it meant something much more sinister. Second, this acquaintance was likely some poor dealmaker who had no choice but to play this game.

This is what I wanted. The Kryv were making their play and I would be part of it. Whether I was ready or not.

Hours later, a salty breeze from the Howl blew against my dry lips. The moon was high, but beneath a ceiling of dark leaves the cold light hardly brightened our path.

I kept a close pace next to Raum as we carved through the deepest part of the forest. Only he, Tova, and Vali, were with me, while the rest of the guild went elsewhere. No one told me where.

I wouldn’t admit it to anyone, especially Tova who would tease me

endlessly, but the night felt less safe knowing the Nightrender wasn't joining us.

My boots climbed to my knees, a size too big, and I stumbled more than once. Instead of trusting me with only Tova's blade, the Kryv added two more belts to my waist, lined with a curved knife and a dagger.

The others moved like a gentle wind in the trees, shadows in their dark clothes, pelts, and hoods. If not for the gleam of steel from Vali's battle axe and Tova's quiver, I would've lost sight of them entirely.

I quickened my steps to stay next to Raum, stumbling over a fallen log.

When he caught me, Raum's mouth twisted into a boyish grin. "Watch those feet, lovey. I'd be happy to teach you how to place one foot in front of the other if you need reminding."

I snorted a laugh. Loud enough it hurt. Raum looked at me like I'd delighted his entire day.

Whether I wanted to admit it or not, I liked Raum. He'd been friendlier than some of the others, and his natural tendency to tease had a charm all its own.

A few paces more, Raum held up one hand and stopped. I slammed into his back at the edge of a river. He glanced in both directions, his body stiff near the water, until he pointed downstream. "There are enough rocks to cross down there."

"I don't think it's deep," I told him, using a stick to tap the bottom.

He glanced at me, those silver eyes like stars. "Down there is better."

We'd cross at a slope instead of flat ground. It didn't seem to be the best choice. "Do you not like water, Raum?"

He hesitated. "You want to know what would happen if Kase used fear against me?"

Fear? How did Kase use fear? I nodded mutely even though I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"My lungs would fill with water," Raum said. "Breath would be a forgotten notion. My body would get painfully cold, but never go numb. Then it would start over and over again."

It was horrifying to think what Raum must've experienced to draw such a fear. I'd be wise to keep distance with the Kryv. Instead, I embraced a swift affection, and had to resist the urge to hug the man. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "Just . . . down there is better."

"You're right." I smiled.

"Now you're catching on."

Once we crossed, our shoes were wetter, but we had no trouble. The slope wasn't as steep as I thought, and at the top we were met by a wrought iron gate surrounding a sprawling longhouse made from heavy logs and mossy cobblestone.

Raum crouched behind two stone pillars carved in old runes of good fortune. Long, lost blessings. Nothing good would be found here.

From a satchel, Raum pulled out a pair of black pants, then tossed a satin tailcoat hemmed in red, bold as embers, swirls of green, rich as morning grass, and blue, deep as the Howl lagoons. Next, a pair of shoes made of rose leather with the slightest curl at the toes.

Vali shucked off his axe and belt, followed by his black tunic and leather trousers. Tova did the same, unashamed, so I worked mightily hard to be as steady and bold while I dressed in a shabby, shapeless dress to mark me as a serf.

"Mal," Raum said. "If you get turned around in there, stick with me or Vali."

"Why?"

Raum tapped his temple. "I see well."

"Ah, you're both Profetik?"

Raum slung his arm around Vali's shoulders. "They call us the twins. Sight and ears." He glanced at Vali. "Honestly, I see the resemblance."

I grinned and shook my head. With Raum's thick golden hair and Vali's rich brown skin, they couldn't look more different. "Was your mesmer so hard to admit?"

"It's been fun watching you get riled up not knowing what any of us can do," Raum said.

I rolled my eyes. "So what? Do you see visions?"

"No, but I can see through your clothes."

I covered my chest, face hot. Raum and Vali shared a good laugh.

"Ignore them," Tova said and adjusted a gold chain crowning her head. "He can't see through your clothes. Raum can see obstacles at impossible distances and Val can hear the drop of rain ten lengths away. If, of course, they focus, which they often don't. Bleeding sods." She glared playfully at the men, then led me a few paces away. "Remember, you do not speak tonight."

"I won't." I was to be their serf. Nameless. Silent.

"You must not react to what is said, or what you see," Vali added.

"What do you expect to see?"

"They are posing as Hemlish traders," Raum said. "Use your imagination."

No doubt I would catch a glimpse of a cheery trade and sale. A thing I knew went on, but never brought it from the back of my thoughts to imagine how it was done.

Were I a better person, my stomach might turn over on behalf of the cheer

boys and girls. Bile might burn my throat in disgust. I might flinch. The sort of person I'd become skimmed memories from bones and sold them to the highest bidder. I didn't flinch, and there was no knot hardening in my gut.

My mind, instead, went to ways I could steal the memories of those who sold the cheeries, then maybe get them to forget how to breathe.

I finished dressing, mimicking the way Tova hid her knives beneath her skirt. My arrangement lacked a bit of her finesse, and when we stepped through the gates, I had to walk with my toes pointed out to keep two of my blades from knocking between my thighs.

Raum would pose as our guide. Wealthy visitors like Hemlish traders did not travel the back roads of Klockglas unaccompanied.

His position in the scheme was well-played. Raum's wit distracted the house steward at the entrance, and the man did not even ask for our papers before leading us inside the longhouse.

I winced at the sharp scent of roses as if every rug and fur was soaked in them.

The steward guided us to the great room of the longhouse. Seated on a three-legged stool in the center of the room sat a girl with dark hair, and a red welt swelling near her eye. Once my gaze turned to the edges of the room, a breathy gasp caught in my throat.

I quickly hung my head when Tova glared at me.

How was I expected not to react when seated on a bench was Gunnar with his cunning smile, and—*three hells*—Kase, but once again he bore the face of Elof.

The only difference between this Elof and the one who frequented Strom lands were the eyes. Instead of the sea blue color, the Nightrender altered the shade to black, with a touch of his true gold.

Dressed in a fine waistcoat, hair combed, he looked every bit like the imaginary Prince Fell.

Like a fist to my throat, my pulse stilled. The bastard.

Elof *was* Prince Fell.

A secret of the Nightrender unraveled, and I doubted he knew I'd stolen a piece of him in a few breaths.

The killer of the east created illusions, but he'd unmistakably created one around our story. The tale we'd shaped together. As if he, too, still held onto a past he said died long ago.

My skin bubbled in angry heat. To sit there and play as if he cared for nothing, well, the Nightrender could hide behind those damn shadows all he wanted. They were not so dark to me anymore.



16

# THE NIGHTRENDER

TO THE WICKED AND vengeful, I was a dark fae whose deals gave them hope for a better life. To the desperate, my deals were a necessary evil.

I'd worked to shape the reputation of the Guild of Kryv into a name folk whispered, as if we might appear from the darkness at any moment. Like phantoms in the night.

Dealmakers transformed after working with us. When their desires were granted, some became killers, some wealthy, but most ended up broken and still desperate. Our deals were not soft and pretty, they were vicious and unforgiving. The same as I tried to be.

So, it made little sense to me how a few harrowed glances from a woman who couldn't even strap her knives correctly had me unsettled and wanting to lash out at anything that moved.

I thought she might look away when I narrowed my own gaze. But Malin Strom merely tightened her mouth into a bloodless line, those eyes telling me I was going to pay for something.

No mistake, I'd need to guess what before she cut me with one of those blades she thought were hidden beneath that too-thin skirt.



*Hells.* I blinked my stare off her legs. Trouble all its own.

Truth be told, the girl who'd been the whole of my boyish soul would be simpler to avoid if she'd grown to smell like hog piss and not . . . *this*.

Malin only looked away when a heavy pelt pulled back from a doorway, and a woman who brought a reek of sour wine entered. Made of lumps and curves unfit for her corseted gown, white powder dusted in her hair, and an odious black mark was painted in the line of her cheek.

"Ah, you must be *Herr Peder* and *Dännisk Helena*. I received your name from my house boy." She made a gesture at nervous, twitchy Helgi at her side. He avoided my eyes and set a tray of flour cakes and blood apples in front of our seats. Mistress Salvisk shooed him away with the flick of her fingers. "I am honored to have you in my household. Tell me, how are the lovely shores of Hemlig this season?"

"White and glowing, as you, Mistress Salvisk," Tova said, bowing her head.

"Sit. Eat." The patroness beamed and wrapped her broad shoulders in a rabbit fur stole. "We'll begin shortly. I have more than this cheery for you to see tonight."

The girl on the stool whimpered and stared at her hands in her lap.

Tova and Vali played their roles well, lifting their noses in the air as they shared passive greetings with Gunnar and me. Malin stood next to Raum and kept her eyes trained on the floorboards.

Perhaps she was angry we'd left her in the dark over Gunnar and I being in the room. She'd survive, and I would owe her no explanation. I gave information when and to whom needed it. Malin needed to know her role, not mine.

"Cake, darling?" Salvisk said brightly, holding up a plate to Gunnar.

He shot her a wicked sort of grin and reached for one of the cakes with red glaze, richer than blood, dripping off the sides.

"Damn the hells." Gunnar dropped the cake and recoiled. By the time he was on his feet, shaking out his hand, the skin had already raised in red pustules.

Salvisk didn't have time to return her tray to the table before the blade of my hooked knife was lodged against the fleshy folds of her neck. "I would not move if I were you." I flicked my eyes to the wall. Where I thought Malin might reel back in terror, instead she stood at Gunnar's side, inspecting his hand, a knife drawn in hers.

I refused to be impressed.

"Raum," I snapped, tangling my fingers in Salvisk's powdery hair to keep her in place. "Inspect it."

Raum kneeled beside the fallen sweet, studying it without getting too close. "I can't be sure without tasting, but there is certainly something added to this little lovely. I'd say eldrish poison."

Eldrish. The only elixir I knew that could poison mesmer to burn through the veins. Fetters called magisk collars were doused in it. Black Palace Elixist Alvers were the ones responsible for lacing the collars in the poison. With the right connections, it would not be impossible to buy a few vials from Ivar's Elixists who had a twisted sense of thrill and love for poisoning fellow Alver folk.

"You think I don't know you," Salvisk tried to shake me off. "Alvers. I can smell the likes of you from ten lengths away. Your ruse must mean you are unregistered. We signaled for skydguard before I opened my door. Better run, little ones. No, better yet—stay. I'd love to watch as the guard tears the skin from your bones."

The woman was aggravating, and I'd heard enough.

Salvisk shrieked when I dragged her by her hair to the table at the far side of the room, then tossed her onto the top in a flurry of skirts and cloying perfume.

"Gunnar," I said briskly. "Are you well enough to continue?"

Gunnar rolled back his shoulders. A muscle tightened in his jaw. "I'm fine and more than ready." He waited until Salvisk met his gaze straight on. "Do not move. Sit there and imagine all the ways we could kill you."

The corner of my mouth lifted into a smirk. Not what I'd told him to do, but I could appreciate the imagination.

There was a time where Gunnar could not work past the ache in his brain that mesmer brought, now he commanded compliance for great lengths of time. I had few doubts, someday, Gunnar would be able to take control of half a dozen minds at once.

A terrifying gift to some.

I reveled in it.

The itch from his tricky magic prickled across my scalp, but I brushed it aside, then flicked my arm until the narrow knife I'd hidden in my sleeve slid into my grip.

One thought, and the cold burn of my mesmer faded into its dormant place in my blood. A sharp tingling sensation rippled over my face as it slimmed and shaped into my true features.

I jerked my head at Raum and Vali. No need for words. We knew one another's signals well enough, and together they rushed to the crying cheer girl on the stool.

"No, no," she cried as they helped her to her feet. "Leave me, leave me."

They ignored her and ushered her from the room. Tova followed,

inspecting the girl's bruised face.

In the distance, a formidable beat of battle drums wakened the night. Our countdown began. Gunnar could hold Salvisk for another quarter hour at most. After that, if we were not finished with our work, the night would take a bloody turn.

Salvisk wore a curious expression as she stared at the door. "The girl . . ."

"Don't worry about her," Gunnar said. "Tell me the names of the traders who bought your cheeries for the queen's ring game."

We needed a name. Any bleeding name and I'd hunt down the men who'd made deals here. Schemes were like a dance across a broken floor. Each piece needed to be laid in proper order or we'd find ourselves stuck in the open without a place to continue the next step.

"A name," Gunnar pressed again, cheeks redder than before.

"I run a tight house, darling." Salvisk blinked as if her attempt to poison us had never happened. "He merely went by Mister K."

Dammit. I came prepared for this, but I would rather not depend on her at all. The more she fit into any plan the more it felt as if fate had grander schemes than me.

Gunnar let out a heavy sigh. "I'm afraid this might be more unpleasant for you, or perhaps pleasant, I really can't say." He stood and went to Malin's side. "Now, sit still and think of knives under your fingernails."

Salvisk went pale.

"Malin, we'll need her memory," Gunnar said. "She's all yours."

Malin shook out her hands. "What if she has that poison on her?"

"Are you losing your nerve?" *Three hells.* Why did the need to speak—kindly or bitterly, it didn't matter—always burst out as if I had no control

over my tongue. I lifted my chin, a sneer curved over my mouth. “Hesitate, and you might as well gut yourself. You’ll be dead anyway.”

“I have a great deal of nerve,” Malin said. “So much, in fact, a little thing like talking about the past does not frighten me into surly shadows.”

Gunnar snorted and covered it with a false cough.

Bastard.

When I said nothing, Malin shook her head and kneeled in front of the dazed Mistress. “You’re keeping her this way, Gunnar?”

“Yes,” he said. “And I’d appreciate not having a headache in the morning by holding it longer than needed.”

Malin rapped on the Mistress’s forehead. “Think of the masquerade traders.”

Gunnar tipped the woman’s chin with his knuckle when she cursed at Malin. “Do as she says.”

With Salvisk once more malleable, I relaxed my shoulders and stood by, watching as Malin hovered her lips over Salvisk’s mouth. Her cheek twitched when the Mistress let out a loud, forceful breath, as if the woman might fall asleep any moment.

Malin closed her eyes, held her mouth a hairsbreadth over Salvisk’s plump stained lips, and inhaled.

Her mesmer had fascinated me once. In truth, it still did. I simply knew what a risk it was should the wrong people discover her Talent.

A few heartbeats passed before Malin settled back on her knees. Her lashes fluttered over her freckled cheeks. Cold as I tried to be, I wished I felt less when she came too close. Fewer dips in my belly, fewer leaps in my chest.

Most days I couldn’t decide if I should flee or reach out and touch her.

My fists were curled tight by the time Malin opened her eyes again.

"Doft," she said, meeting my gaze. "A man with the surname Doft made the deal."

If gods existed, they abhorred me. "Good," I said. "Anything else?"

The drums outside grew louder. I ignored them and looked to Malin as she staggered off her knees.

"This man, Doft, was set to leave Klockglas not long ago, perhaps a sunrise or two. He mentioned something about Skítkast," she said.

"Skítkast?" Gunnar smiled. "Thank the skies. The brän, there's nothing like it, Mal."

"What else." I didn't ask. This was an intentional demand. Our time grew short.

"Something about the Wild Hunt Games."

The Wild Hunt came to Klockglas once. Riders galloped across the region, blowing goat horns painted in gold, hunting hidden ribbons and flags, then sparring in fierce matches to prove the greatest hunter or huntress.

Malin and I, we'd watched it from an oak tree. Did she remember?

Cursed hells. I didn't care if she did. It didn't matter in this moment. Didn't matter at all.

"There's more." Without permission, Malin shuffled through stacks of parchment and thin rice paper on a narrow desk near the pelt covered doorway.

Mistress Salvisk clucked her tongue, slipping through Gunnar's mesmer haze. "Get your hands off my belongings, or end up on your back where you belong, girl."

"A little longer Gunnar," Malin said more like a plea.

One snap of his fingers, and Gunnar had Salvisk back in the whimsical stupor.

"Malin," he warned. "There is a nail driving through my skull."

"Then hush and let me look."

Distance was safest, but my wretched body refused to obey. In three paces, I was at her back.

She shuddered but didn't look at me. "Here to frighten me into submission, Nightrender?"

"To assist," I snapped, "if you would tell me what you're looking for."

"A ledger. The man in the memory left it here to give Salvisk a first bid in what he called the leftovers of an Alver trade set to go on at the masque."

"Alvers aren't traded at the masquerade. Those are done in a public bid."

"This turn is different. He mentioned it, but would not give details in the memory. Kase, it is too exclusive for us to find on our own."

She should not say my name. It stirred too much.

I heaved a sigh, my gaze roving over the parchment strewn table, to the baskets below it filled with booklets. "The ledger will tell us where the trade is?"

"Possibly. It should give us names. Hagen could be in it, so we'd know where they'll take him at the Masque av Aska."

Alver barter during the masquerade? It'd never been done. I made a mental note to look into it as soon as possible.

My eyes scanned stacks of parchment and paper, but only for show. I was hardly helpful in this. There were some weaknesses I would not share with anyone. Not my guild. Certainly not Malin Strom.

But like a fool, I'd volunteered to help search all things words and writing.

In one basket I took out a thick stack of lined parchment bound in pig leather. "Is this the one?"

Malin gave it a swift glance. "Is there a list of names?"

She asked too many questions for which I had no answer.

My face hardened and I tossed the booklet on the table. “You tell me if it is what you want. And hurry.”

Her eyes tore into me like a woman holding back a great deal of violence, but she blinked away from me, scanning the pages. “Gunnar. Look.”

Gunnar hurried to her side. “Kase, she’s right. Daj is in here.”

He pointed at a line. I didn’t look. It was enough to hear them say Hagen’s name was penned in this strange trade. By the gods. What did Ivar have planned for the Masque av Aska?

Whatever it was he would not get the chance to see it through.

“We have what we need. Let them in, Gunnar,” I said.

Gunnar hurried to a window and kicked out the bubbled glass. Salvisk mumbled a shriek when Lynx spilled his thick body into the room.

“Is the whole bleeding guild here? What was the point of coming separately?” Malin said with a sigh of annoyance.

I ignored her and made a quick move for the door.

“Hurry,” I barked. Tension unnerved me, and the way Malin looked at me like she had a thousand cruel things to shout back left me feeling more like a thorn bush than a man.

Lynx placed his hands on Salvisk’s face. Two breaths, that was all, before she slumped to one side, hardly breathing.

“Will you kill her?” Malin asked.

I blinked until both eyes were shadowed. “Yes.”

There was nothing left to say, nothing left to explain. Our roles were no longer needed near the other. I took out my karambit knife, spun it once around my finger, and left the room.





17

# THE NIGHTRENDER

THE LONGHOUSE WAS NO longer dim and pensive. Every corridor, every alcove roared in screams as serfs fled from a rush of Kryv. The beat of drums drew nearer as a patrol approached, but the Kryv did not cease taking their fill.

Ash and Hanna wove through fleeing serfs with fine pillows in their hands. Fiske stumbled out of a bedroom, Isak at his back, both laughing viciously with fine fur coats in their arms.

I rounded a corner, silently taking an account of every Kryv, and found Helgi raiding a shelf lined in precious stones. He would've been wise to leave when he had the chance.

My frown was impassive, but my grip on the back of his neck was unrelenting.

"Nightrender," Helgi fussed. "H-Here you are."

"Here I am." My palm flattened on his chest and slammed his back into the wall. Helgi met my height, nose to nose, but he was nothing but a weak fool.

"Were you leaving without saying farewell, Helgi?" I drew the hook of my blade across the ridge of his cheekbone, the edge of his jaw, to the throbbing

pulse point in his neck in lithe, slow drags. “Strange how Salvisk knew to load her cakes with eldrish.”

“She . . . she must’ve smelled you lot.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s true,” I said, blithely. “Our attention to Alver stink is painstakingly involved. We never step foot into a deal with a drop of blood on us.”

I teased the point of the knife into his shoulder.

Helgi winced, but he had the stones to meet my eyes.

“See, I think you told her, Helgi.” My voice lowered to a rough rasp. I didn’t wait for a word from him. “Did you think Salvisk would protect your bleeding ass?”

“She wrung me,” he cried. “Knew something about me was amiss, and she forced it outta me. She . . . she said the Lord Magnate wants you. Says you know things. I wouldn’t have said anything, but I need this position, Nightrender. How’ll I eat without penge?”

“I suppose you wouldn’t,” I said, turning the blade point down. “You reneged on our arrangement. This is disappointing. I don’t like disappointment.”

“I’ll do anything. Take on five more deals. I’ll serve you till I stop breathing, Nightrender.” His eyes flicked back toward the light of Salvisk’s parlor. “The girl in there. I saw what she does.”

My blood chilled.

“She took bits of her mind, didn’t she?” Helgi rambled on, unaware my body had shifted, blocking him entirely against the wall. He looked to me with a sly grin. “I could barter her for you, Nightrender. You must know what they say about the Alvers who twist memories.”

I smiled and patted the side of his face twice. “Yes, I know what they say,

Helgi. And I can't have you speaking of what you saw tonight."

"I won't. If you say so, I won't."

My grip on the knife tightened. "I know."

The cut was swift. Straight and deep across his neck. Helgi gasped and curled his fingers around my tunic as his legs gave out beneath him. I helped lower him to the floor, and by the time his head touched the wood, his last breath shuddered out with a bubble of blood.

With the back of my hand, I wiped away a bit of blood from my chin.

A sharp breath lifted my eyes to the mouth of the corridor. My face remained stony, but a wild fever raged on the inside.

Malin looked to the pool of blood beneath Helgi's body, to my bloodied knife, to my dark eyes.

Unease burned over my skin. Would the hate I wanted to see in her eyes finally come? If it did, would it ache, or be a relief?

I would not find out. Instead of hate, Malin's mouth twitched.

She smiled. A small grin, but a grin all the same. "You killed him."

I flicked my eyes to Helgi's lifeless body. Gore and death soaked the stones, the wood floors.

Nothing pleasant was here.

With a touch of suspicion, I looked back to Malin. "Clearly."

She crossed her arms over her chest, one shoulder leaned against the wall. She did not look horrified; she almost seemed pleased.

"He wanted to sell me." Her grin took on an aggravating smugness. "And you killed him for it."

*What in the hells?*

My fists clenched; a dark burst of shadows deepened the blackness of the room until I nearly lost sight of her. Where was the bleeding fear? Truth be

told, the pitch shadows were from *my* disquiet. From her, there was nothing.

“This is not the worst I have done.” My intent was to frighten her. Malin Strom should’ve been counting the sunrises until the day she could be free of us. “I will do worse before this is over.”

Curse the gods. Her bleeding smile widened.

“Good of you to warn me.”

I could not stand still any longer. Two brisk strides and I closed the space between us. “What is wrong with you?” I gestured at the dead man behind me. “I killed him, tore out his throat, and you find it amusing?”

“Not amusing.” She lifted her chin. “He threatened me, you removed the threat. As you always did before. Do you recall the web weaver that bit me in the night? You did not stop until you found the web and destroyed it.”

She was disconcerting. I could not find a solid footing around this woman. Our faces drew close. My eyes narrowed. “I recall nothing, and would not consider slitting a man’s throat the same as killing web weavers.”

I recalled every sound, smell, and emotion of the battle with the web weavers.

Malin had fevered for a full day from that bleeding bite. I’d hunted for the silken orb all day until I’d found it in the last stall in the stable house. With a stolen flint and steel, I’d set a flame to it, then squashed the weavers as they scattered.

I took another step. Her back hit the wall. Our chests touched. A bite of cold drilled into my heart. Good. The first flicker of fear from the woman.

I gripped the side of her neck, hoping to pull more fear. It did nothing but bring her closer, with the fresh, honey-sweet scent of her skin in my lungs.

“I did not kill him for you.” Each word sliced through my teeth.

Her breaths came heavier, deeper. Malin didn’t cower or pull away. She

held my stare like she was as captivated with me as I was with her.

“He was to blame for the poison, right?” she whispered.

“Yes.” This was needed. Let me become her monster. Her nightmare. “See what we do to our dealmakers.”

She tilted her head, grinning. “He brought his fate upon himself. If you did not kill him for me, then you killed him for the guild.”

I let out a rough growl and pulled back. “Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop making this some righteous form of justice. It was nothing but a kill to rid myself of a nuisance.”

“Forgive me, but I don’t think it is as simple as that.”

My nostrils flared as I closed my eyes. Shadows draped around my body as my temper boiled in my veins. “Believe whatever you wish. You have until the quarter toll to take what you please from this house. Skydguard are coming.”

I took a step to leave. No, to flee from her. I killed Helgi on her behalf, but it was not out of honor. It was out of fear, out of . . . well, I did not want to think too long on what motivated me to slaughter in the name of Malin Strom.

No mistake, she’d figure it all out and keep grinning at me like I was some sort of dark hero.

“I choose them.”

I stopped my retreat at her voice and glanced over my shoulder.

Tucked behind a barred door were half a dozen dirty faces. I’d not noticed the audience when I’d cornered Helgi, but no doubt, these were the cheeries Salvisk sold to the Masque av Aska. They all wore silver bracelets, a note of purchase, and looked at the bloody scene in horror.

The kind of horror Malin should have in her eyes right now.

“We have no room for cheeries.”

“Noted,” Malin said. “But as I understand it there is a particular steelman who has a proclivity to help rehome cheer boys and girls.”

My teeth ground together. “There is no time to return to Mörplatts.”

“Then they’ll return with me to Felstad.”

What had I done to be cursed with such an insufferable woman?

“No.”

“You, out of anyone, ought to know the finesse of a good deal, Nightrender. To Sigurd, or Felstad. Either way they are not remaining here.”

Malin came toward me, but I took a step away. I could not stand so close without losing all my wits by touching her again. Maybe more. My body trembled from anger or desire, I didn’t know. Didn’t want to know.

I looked at the Kryv rushing in and out of rooms.

“Isak. Fiske.” My voice was dangerous as hot iron. When the two Kryv came close, I pointed at the cheeries. “Take them to the steelman at the docks. Be back in two days’ time.”

Isak and Fiske shared a glance, then nodded.

“Anything else?” Fiske asked.

“No.” I grumbled and strode past. “Unless the bleeding queen has any more requests. I will be seeing to it that Salvisk wakes in the Otherworld. See to the cheeries and get the hells out of here. The drums are too close. Tell the others to prepare to sail; we go to Skítkast.”

“As you say,” Fiske said

“You cannot hide your heart behind shadows forever, Nightrender,” Malin called out.

I wheeled around, on the verge of losing what little control I had left. “We

face the Masque av Aska. Sharpen your blades and forget your heart,  
*dännisk*. Or you will not last long.”





18

# THE MEMORY THIEF

ISAK BROUGHT ME A message from Sigurd when they returned from delivering the cheeries. He said nothing—I'd yet to hear Isak speak—but the redhead didn't look at me like I was made in the bowels of a hog. Something had shifted after returning from Salvisk's. The Guild of Kryv treated me with less caution and more acceptance.

Except the Nightrender.

He avoided me like a plague.

A smile cut across my mouth as I read Sigurd's missive. He explained more masquerade coaches had come and gone from House Strom, and most folk believed Jens had some sort of position within the masque.

I'd already guessed as much if the treasurer had brought Jens the coffers. Sigurd mentioned there'd also been a notice placed for a thief who'd stolen penge from the house on the hill. If only my stepfather knew the masquerade penge belonged to the Guild of Kryv now.

I laughed through a bawdy description of another rendezvous with Lady Ashton. The man was vulgar, and I was pleased to know him.

Tova finished painting a line of kohl beneath her eyes, then handed me a stick of it to do the same. "I suggest packing mint leaves if you've never been on a boat. The Howl can be vicious at times."

With a nod, I finished securing a rough leather belt around my waist. "This place we go, the Lark, what is it?"

Raum had given me the name of the place in Skítkast, but explained nothing more before his busy movements took him elsewhere.

"It's a cheer house, but with a wilder reputation folk in Skítkast are known for."

"Another cheer house?"

"They welcome us. Some of my guild brothers find love there because it is a place both partners feel safe."

My first thought was shameful. About Kase. Imagining him in a cheer girl's bed made me ill. The second was an ache for the other Kryv. I'd never given much thought to their lives and possible pain. Killers, thieves, and Alvers, those were the Kryv, but I'd never considered a need for gentle lovers or affection.

"We're expected," Tova went on. "Although, I'm not entirely certain what Kase has planned, but that's what he does. He plots and gives little pieces as we go."

I grunted, unconvinced. "He gives pieces because he probably wants me to get snatched for the fun of it."

"You know, for someone you fought so hard to find, and now fight so hard to gain his approval, you're quite critical of him."

"I don't want his approval." My voice broke in an embarrassing crack. I cleared it away, shrugging as if none of this bothered me in the least. "I suppose I did not like what I found. That's all."

"Oh, he didn't fit into one of your daydreams?" Tova glared at me. "What did you expect? Kase was simply biding his time in a luxurious palace by the sea?"

I scrubbed my face free of the ache I could never shirk when I thought of him. "I expected to find him changed, but I didn't expect him to hate me."

"Did you consider hate is simply one of his weapons to keep those with the power to ruin him from doing just that?"

I scoffed. Power over the Nightrender was not something I had. Not the way he had power over me. Kase held a piece of me, and no matter what he'd become, I couldn't find a way to take it back.

At Salvisk's, I'd been frightened watching him hold a knife to a man's neck.

For a moment.

Until Kase changed when the dealmaker mentioned me. From Kase's head to his boots, he'd gone stiff, he'd reacted, and in the next breath the man had been dead on the ground. I closed my eyes against the memories of him doing much the same, only with more innocence.

*"Where've you been, Kase?"*

*He stomped his muddy boots at the top of the hayloft, a flint and steel in his hands. "Those weavers won't get you again, Mallie."*

*"Why'd you kill 'em?"*

*His mouth went tight, and he marched across the hay. "Because they needed to know you watch my back, and I watch yours. You're always going to be safe with me, got it? Even against bleeding web weavers."*

He'd promised to keep me safe. Brutal as it was, the Nightrender was still keeping his promise.

"We were prisoners of the Lord Magnate, Malin," Tova said when I kept quiet. "When we say we know the Black Palace and its brutality, we do. We broke out and were *hunted* for turns. The guild was formed out of the need to survive. And just so you know, we wouldn't have made it without Kase."

My heart cinched. Hunted by the Black Palace? What horrors had Kase endured? Those walls he kept between us were a façade. Protections to keep me from looking too deeply. No mistake, he did not want me to know the cruel details of what happened to the boy I lost at a masquerade.

Naturally, it made me want to know everything.

"We're to leave soon," Tova went on. "I would take what you want from the weapon wall before the men wake and get greedy."

Tova faced the wall, more melancholy, as if I'd locked her in memories she'd not visited for a great while. I could offer to take them, to relieve her of the wicked past, but I gave her a soft nod, then left her to her thoughts.

I finished braiding my hair off my face as I walked the empty corridor. On my belt the vials with the bone dust memories clinked together in the rune pouch. The Guild of Kryv had not asked for the vials. They merely asked that I keep them safe and use them when they directed as payment.

I'd take the memories with me even without their direction.

Each memory had been too hard-fought to leave them unguarded again.

In the cold storage, I slurped a bowl of pickled herring, stopped to clean my mouth with mint leaves and powders, then stared at the weapon wall, overwhelmed by each menacing blade tonight.

Movement in an alcove of dried food caught my attention.

*Cursed skies.* My heart twitched in a strange beat as Kase bit into a juicy

white plum and added more fruits to a drawstring pack.

Rooted in my place, I wished I could run, but he turned too quickly. The instant he realized he wasn't alone, he cursed and whipped back around. The sack fell to the floor, and when he turned again his eyes were raven's wing black.

"Why do you hide yourself?" I asked, exasperated. "What good does it do?"

Kase hesitated, clenching and unclenching his fists, then abandoned the alcove. His body crowded against me, the same as he'd done at Salvisk's. I should protest, but in truth, I took a bit of solace having him so close.

I was a bleeding weakling in my resolve to detest the man. All at once, the reasons he should've been terrible were like the memories I stole. Nothing but smoke and ash.

"Why do you hide yourself from me?" I asked again.

Kase's eyes bounced between mine. "Prove I can trust you, and I'll remove all illusion between us."

A dark, honest response, and my heart raced in all the wrong ways. "I think I proved trust well enough already."

"Not for me."

"Then let us trust each other with something now. We must start somewhere."

"Don't demand things of me," he said as a warning.

I ignored it. "Ask me a question. I'm sure you have them. Then I get to ask one of you."

The way he frowned, I expected him to walk away, but he stayed.

"I don't want to fear you," I admitted. "I want your trust again. If we can't, then Hagen will suffer."

He considered me for a long moment. "Fine."

"Care to go first?"

Kase cleared his throat. In truth, it was wholly satisfying to see him discomposed. "Do you still tell stories with the stars?"

Of the hardened questions I thought he would ask, one about those nights traveling distant lands with our brave Prince Fell was not one of them. When I lost Kase, I lost my childhood. The stars were quilted into the night as a bitter reminder.

"No," I said softly. "I stopped. It wasn't the same."

"Probably best. Fairy tales serve no purpose." He clasped his hands behind his back. "A deal is a deal. Ask your question."

The Nightrender returned where Kase almost broke free.

I stiffened against the futile hope the boy I knew was in there. "Are you a Malevolent Alver?"

He sighed. "A dreary epithet, I think."

"So, you are?"

"I may be, or I may not."

"You said you'd answer me."

"I told you to ask. I made no promise of answering."

My mouth pinched into a tight line. "Will you at least tell me what Malevolent means?"

He stepped closer. My tongue stuck to the top of my mouth. Something about him, the darkness, his voice, would always draw me in, and Kase seemed to struggle the same.

When he breathed, his body brushed mine.

"Malevolent mesmer," he said in his gritty rasp, "means power over fear. Likely the inspiration behind dark sprites and fae in old legends."

Raum told me Kase could torture him with fear.

I swallowed and reached out for his hand, gently brushing my fingers over the tops of his knuckles, as if the cold mesmer inside might slip out. “Do you like it? The power of fear, I mean.”

His hand coiled into a fist at my touch, and when I realized what I’d done, I began to pull back.

Kase didn’t allow it.

My heart slammed into my ribs when his callused fingertips took my hand. He rolled it over palm up, the rough brush of his thumb traced over the lines. A memory came of how he used to touch each finger, each wrinkle, and tell me my days were numbered since my fate line had shrunk.

One of those things that would end in giggles until we fell asleep.

“Do you like it?” I whispered, uncertain what question I was truly asking.

“I would if I was a Malevolent,” he said. “Wouldn’t you? Fear has power.”

True enough. I could see the appeal, even carried a touch of envy he might have access to such a gift, and I didn’t.

He released my hand and reached for twin knives with gold filigree on the blades. “Use these. They’re light enough even a child can wield them without losing grip.”

Our fingers touched again at the exchange.

Kase stretched his hand as if something irritated his skin. He left me with a furrowed glance, and all at once I wanted the sage wood smell back.

I wasn’t altogether certain if the thought thrilled me or if I’d stepped into something more dangerous than before.





19

# THE MEMORY THIEF

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT the shore, I was speechless at first glance, for I had never seen the Howl and its shores free of docks and trade ships. It was magnificent.

To judge the breadth of such a wonder was impossible. The few speckles of light on the dark outline on the horizon gave the only indication the waters didn't stretch into eternity. The sea air was fresh, clean, and free of burdens.

The Kryv gathered near a crooked dock where a black longship bobbed in the swells. The curved stempost was shaped into a formidable serpent head, jaws opened and fangs out.

Two angled canvases snapped in the breeze on the mainsail, and every panel was painted dark as pitch. The longship wasn't grand like exchange ships. The strakes bulged in the middle, and there were notches for only a few oars, not like wartime longships and their dozens of oarsmen. Still meant sailing would be tiresome. A black canvas covered the stempost end of the ship as a place to get a bit of respite from the spray of the sea, I supposed.

Raum helped me on deck, Tova next, and I quickly grabbed the side rail as the Howl cradled the vessel, rocking vigorously both the ship and my insides.

"Over the side," Kase snapped as he tugged rigging around the mast. "Or you're cleaning it up."

"I'm fine."

His dark illusions surrounded him. Ergo, according to his own confession, he did not trust me.

Once the Kryv settled, Gunnar and Lynx released the rigs, and a few Kryv took to the oars. I closed my eyes; the wind beat against my face as the sea curled around the hull, drawing the longship out to the deep.

"Here," Tova said ten lengths offshore. She handed me a sprig of mint leaves. "Like I said, it'll help."

I tossed a few leaves onto my tongue. "How long will it take to reach Skítkast?"

"Two nights with good wind."

I understood the boundaries of the mainland, called mainland only because three of the four regions were across the Howl. Jens had a fascination with cartography. Sometimes, when chores were through, I'd sneak into the map room of House Strom and stare at the boundaries with dreams of sailing away.

Furen was controlled by wizened Lord Patryk who took too many consorts, and abandoned matters of state to his son rather than caring himself. Hemlig was smaller, claimed by a young auspicious trader, rumored to be vowed to a fae from the Southern Kingdom. Skítkast was hardly a region, with narrow borders and governed by a lazy council who took bribes in exchange for making laws in favor of those willing to pay for them.

Klockglas was the only oversea region. If there were a king in the East, the Lord Magnate would be the nearest. Ivar held power unlike the other regions.

They bowed to his word, catered to his brutality, and his influence slithered across the Howl.

Alvers dimmed their true natures throughout the mainland to avoid being snatched. Folk without means were mistreated and indentured. All very Klockglas-like.

Three Howl prisons marked the halfway line between coastlines. Watchers, a wicked sort of skydguard claimed by the Prison Guilds, stood guard over the criminals inside. Rumors told of cell blocks stacked one on top of the other, and Hagen once told me the cell bars were made from the bones of old prisoners.

He'd been kept in one and was ripped away before I had the chance to ask if it were true.

"Doing well?" Raum asked once Klockglas disappeared completely. He stretched his arms now that Tova had taken his place at the oar.

"Mint helps," I said, squeamish and green.

"You'll get used to it. Need some distraction?" He glanced warily at the water. "I know I do."

I scooted over and patted the place at my side. "Sit."

Raum obeyed but tangled his fingers and bounced his knees. "You have never left Klockglas?"

"Only through maps. My stepfather traveled often, even across the Fate's Ocean to different kingdoms. Of course, he never took me with him."

Raum winced when a spray of water misted our faces.

I took his hand, boldly, not surprised when he squeezed mine back.

"For what it's worth," he said once the boat settled, "your stepfather is a fool for mistreating you."

I heated beneath the praise, smiling shyly. "Is Skítkast terrible?"

"Terrible? No. Then again, Skítkast is our preferred region since we run with the criminally inclined."

"They're known for Elixists."

"Look at you, knowing your Alvers." Raum flashed a quick smile but stared at the black water when the swells deepened again.

I tapped his shoulder, wanting to turn his focus from the surf. "Want to play a game with me?"

"A game?"

"There are a few guild members who have not given up their mesmer. I have my guesses, though. Will you tell me if I guess right?"

Raum's eyes brightened, and my idea worked. He turned his back on the sea to face me. "I will, and I vow to buy you a horn of Skítkast brän if you can guess correctly. One drink, and your life will be changed."

"I take your deal." I scanned the deck where Kryv rowed, where Hanna and Ash tossed wooden dice, and where Kase stood next to Fiske at the stern board.

I settled on the front row of oarsman. "Gunnar has already shown off his tricky mind games."

"Easy point."

I tapped my chin. "And I know Lynx is a Hypnotik too." The bulky Kryv was close enough to hear us. "I don't know how he uses illusion, though. Maybe by keeping women asleep as he carries them through gardens?"

Raum laughed and smacked his knee. Lynx glared.

"Not even the half of it," Lynx insisted. "I manipulate the mind into an illusion of calm. You think it's easy?"

"*You* calm people?" I snorted behind my hand.

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

"You're not exactly relaxed."

In all the time I'd known Lynx he was brisk and thrived in order. He seemed closest with Gunnar and was the one Kryv keen to cook. In truth, he wasn't half bad at it. I stole some fish stew after Salvisk's and I think he knew it, but took satisfaction knowing others enjoyed what he made.

Tova peered over her shoulder from her place at the oar. "I think she's saying stop being so righteous and perfect, Lynxy. Come slum about with the rest of us."

Lynx only sniffed and complained that everyone underappreciated him.

"Who else?" Raum asked.

"Tova once said Fiske has good instincts. Is he a Profetik?"

"Good. But he's a visionary with his sight. Not the same as me with senses," Raum said.

Fiske turned to us now. The boat was not so big to hide louder conversations, but he didn't seem bothered we discussed his mesmer.

"If he told me to duck my head and run across a dark alley, I would leave a lighted road without question," Raum said.

Fiske chuckled. "Wise."

"You predict things?" I asked. "Bad things?"

"Threats or danger," Lynx answered for him. "A dismal gift if you ask me."

Fiske merely grinned before he turned away.

"Me! Guess me!" Ash slithered through the oarsmen. Hanna followed, a shy smile on her face.

"Ah, now, Ash, I think I figured you out all on my own."

His eyes widened in astonishment. "Really?"

"Yes. You're the smartest on the boat, obviously."

Ash rolled the tip of his finger against a scratch in his ear. "Everyone knows that."

"True. Fine, let me think." I slowed my tone because I delighted in the way the boy tapped his fingers against his legs as excitement grew. "Are you a Hypnotik?"

He grinned and shook his head exuberantly. "No, no. Hold up your hand."

"Why?"

"I'll show you how my mesmer can break a finger."

"Ahh." I pulled away with a nervous chuckle. "I'll take you at your word. You're a Rifter, then."

"Yes, yes, I am," Ash said. The boy had a silly laugh from somewhere in his belly. "Most folk are scared of me because I can break bodies."

Ash was sublimely innocent, hardly something to be feared. The boy scrubbed his cheeks and beamed. Hanna patted my knee and rested a palm over her heart.

"Hanna, you have special mesmer, don't you," I said. Ash nodded at each word. "I don't know it, though. Will you tell me?"

Hanna used her hands to speak, and her brother translated. "She's telling you she is like a wall. She blocks strong mesmer, weak mesmer, anything an Alver can make will die if Hanna focuses enough. Just like Gunnar's daj."

My stomach tightened.

Ash didn't notice and went on. "She's an Anomali. We call her a shield because we don't have a better name."

I blinked through the harsh pain of missing Hagen and forced a smile. "You have special mesmer, Hanna. In the past, I was safer because of mesmer like yours."

Raum hadn't looked at the water for some time and goaded me to finish.

Vali, I named the wolfish Alver with his piss poor mood, even though I knew he was a Profetik.

"I'm not wolfish," Vali shouted. "I simply know when to shut my mouth, unlike you sods."

Isak didn't join us but watched from across the deck. Fiske said Isak was a Hypnotik and gave up nothing more. The others took pleasure in waiting for me to discover how Isak used illusion and mind manipulation on my own.

Strange sitting around Kryv without fear, and instead we laughed, teased, and I found belonging. A little unsettling to think how they terrified me weeks ago.

Now, they were my home.

I opened my mouth to ask which of the Kryv could explain how mesmer actually worked, but Kase shoved between those of us not at an oar. "We're passing the south prison, anyone without a job get into the tent."

So much for avoiding the prison watchers. I squinted against the dark as the oars went quiet. Made of ashen bricks, the tower stretched into the sky, a single light in the expansive upper window. The prisons were built atop narrow strip islands made of nothing but jagged rock.

The north prison, where Hagen was held, took those accused of minor crimes: bad game debts or battering cheerers. The central prison was meant for more brutal criminals like ravishers and conmen. But the south prison with spiked gates and a hint of decay in the breeze was the place for those the regions wished to maim and forget. People were lost inside the walls.

"Did you hear?" Kase hissed behind me.

I startled and hurried toward the tent. "What about you?"

His hands splayed wide as he faced the rocky prison. "Get in there and don't make a sound."



I didn't listen, curiosity was more potent, and stayed to watch. Nothing burst from his hands, but something happened to the boat. Shadows spilled from the rails, the hull. A thick blanket of night surrounded the longship; darkness firm enough I couldn't see beyond my nose.

The same as nights in my hayloft when I imagined a ghost stood behind me.

It was sensational.

A hand reached out of the tent and struck my foot. The small flicker of a flame from a long matchstick brightened Isak's face. "Ash w-wants you to c-come inside."

His voice was soft, like a secret, but he stammered terribly.

Inside the cramped tent, I hunched, a little stunned Isak spoke. A small candle in the center hardly lit the space. Breakers crashed against the prison island, and I imagined the watchers scanning the Howl for anyone they could put behind their bars. Folk like the Kryv.

The darkness wasn't natural—a heady blackness that clung to my skin, seeped into my blood, until I was part of it.

Ash reached for me before I found a seat; he trembled. Hanna sat on her brother's other side and squeezed his shoulder. I held him tightly as he hummed under his breath.

"I hate the dark. Hate it," he muttered, voice muffled against my body.

"Ash," I whispered. Like Raum, I planned to distract him from fear. "Tell me about Isak's knife."

The boy cracked his eyes. His voice quivered. "We call it a-a knuckle knife. Perfect for jabbing at the face, but a bit bloody when it catches an eye. Does a lot of damage. Sticks between your fingers like you've got an extra one. It'd be painful, don't you think?"

"I think it would, yes."

I tried to keep time in my head but lost track long before the sound of footsteps broke the silence.

"We're clear," Raum called to us.

A collective breath exhaled in the tent. Isak raked his fingers through his hair and stomped out first. Once the cloud of darkness receded, Ash brightened and led Hanna back to the others.

"Terrifyingly exciting, isn't it?" Tova said airily.

"I sat there unmoving, but still feel as if I've been running for hours. How does he do it?" I used my chin to point at Kase.

"What? Oh, the darkness? Believe it or not, a great many of us fear the dark. He uses the fear, and it's quite effective."

The way he'd told me a Malevolent held power.

A bit of an answer to my wonderings, but part of me would not settle on him being a dark Alver until he overcame his damn aversion to my questions and told me himself.



20

# THE NIGHTRENDER

TWO NIGHTS ON THE longship left muscles tight and necks sore.

Dawn rose on the third day with bleak clouds, but high spirits when the shore of Skítkast came into view through the sea mist. Malin rested her cheek against the rail, so the swells splashed her face and killed the nausea she couldn't shake.

The ship rocked and she caught herself on the backstay, a cup of mushy red oysters in her hand. Her eyes locked on mine, and she blew out a long breath.

I leaned against the stempost, unblinking until a tug pulled on my arm. At my side, Hanna waved her hands, eyes wet with tears.

"What's wrong?" I asked softly.

Hanna tapped the side of her head. *It came again.*

Her fingers shook as she shaped her words with them.

"The nightmare?"

Hanna nodded. I could bribe and scheme, I could be cold and villainous, but not to Hanna. I lowered to a crouch and tucked a burnished lock of her long hair behind her ear. "What have I told you?"

She blinked and a tear fell onto her cheek. I brushed it away.

"Hanna," I said, waiting until she looked at me. "I will never fight against the Kryv."

*You do. I say your name, she told me with her frantic fingers, but you pick him. Every time.*

"It won't happen." I took her small hand in mine. "I'd meet the Otherworld before I would serve Ivar. Understand?"

She tugged on the ends of her hair but nodded stiffly. I swiped away another tear from her cheek. The girl gave me a trembling smile before returning to her brother's side to help prepare for docking.

I'd almost forgotten Malin had been making her way toward me until her voice broke through the wind and waves. "A man without humanity would not dry a child's tears." She leaned her elbows over the rail. "Your eyes aren't so dark today."

"You asked for a bit of trust, didn't you?"

"I did." Malin looked over her shoulder. "Is Hanna all right?"

I faced the Howl. "She's fine."

"Why is she crying?"

"She had a nightmare. Not your concern."

Malin let out a deep sigh. "Tova said you wanted to tell me something."

"You need to know what your role will be, so you say the right things."

"All right. I'm willing to do anything if it gets us closer to Hagen."

She wouldn't like this. Truth be told, I didn't care much for this plan, but it would be our swiftest way in, and out.

"I wouldn't be so hasty," I warned. "Tell me what you know of enticement."

Had she had many lovers? The thought of anyone knowing how soft her

skin was, or how the curves of her body felt beneath their hands left me sick with a lust for blood. I was a damn fool.

Malin's mouth parted; a flush of red bloomed beneath her freckles. "I hope you're not meaning—"

"With men, yes." My grip tightened on the edge of the rail.

"I don't see how that's your business."

"Fine, step into the role of a cheery without a word of advice." I paused. This was a risk for her, and she'd need to be cooperative. She'd need to be safe. For a moment, I studied the colors in the waves, green and yellow mingled with inky blue and black, until my pulse slowed again. I softened my tone the best I knew how. "I'm trying to gauge how much I need to prepare you."

She burned through me with a heated glare. Hells, whatever she was about to say would cut, no mistake.

"The only boy I've ever truly kissed without mesmer is a boy who was lost at the masquerade."

The memory of it flooded through me. Ake Svensson, a brute of a waif boy, dared me at the bold age of eleven to take one of the waif girls around a shack near the docks and stick my tongue down her throat.

Ake would've bloodied my nose if I refused, but I hadn't wanted that girl.

I'd only wanted one girl and made a litany of excuses why my lips would only touch the lips of Malin Strom.

Her mesmer woke that day.

My heart had come undone.

"So no," Malin whispered. "I would not consider myself experienced in seduction or provocative things."

"That makes this challenging," I said, if only to hide the beginnings of a

grin. “If Doft was the surname from Salvisk’s memory, it can be no one else but a man named Boswell. He is the Master of Revels for the masque. The man responsible for hiring the entertainment and auditioning mesmer for the shows. He also has a love of cheer houses. As a cheer girl you’ll need to drop that temper. Be submissive, understand?”

“I am not selling myself today.”

“If you play your part well enough, the sod might get a few sloppy kisses on you and that’ll be it.” Then, he’d meet my knife.

“Easy for you to say.”

“No, it is not.” My voice cut, deep and swift. No, it was not simple to watch her put her neck on the line. No, it was not easy for me to keep my hands off her, to ignore the insatiable pull I’d been fighting since I stepped foot on Strom land again.

I gripped her wrist. With a swift tug, I brought Malin’s body close, brushed my lips against her ear, and kept my voice low. “Keeping you alive when I don’t know the extent of your ability is not easy. And I do not trust you, not enough, but I must for today. None of this is easy.”

“Why don’t you trust me? Tell me. What have I done in the turns we’ve been parted to bring your mistrust?”

I pressed her back into the edge of the boat. To her credit, Malin never dropped her gaze from mine.

“We are not the same people we once were,” I said, a hoarse rasp in my tone. “The sooner you accept that you are a dealmaker, and I am the thief you hired, the sooner we can part indifferently.”

Walls, armor, and pain spoke. Everything but the truth.

If the shimmer of hurt in her eyes was any clue, I was pushing her away and succeeding,

Malin slipped out of my hold and stood at my side. Her eyes locked on the silver glimmer of shoreline at the Skítkast docks. Wooden gates barred the city and inlands from view, but the sea air tasted different, like licking an old, dirty bowl.

At long last, she spoke again. “I think I see what you mean. We are not meant to be part of each other’s lives. So, what do I need to do, Nightrender?”

What ought to have been a victory darkened the last bright spot in my mind. For turns, I’d known the best thing would be to let her go, even if it meant by force. Still, to hear the words from her mouth was sharper than a rusted shiv to the ribs.

“We’ve arranged it so Boswell Doft will be where we want him to be,” I said. “You’ll be the one to get the location of the Alver trade out of him.”

“As a cheer girl?”

“He will be looking for company at the last ride of the Wild Hunt festival. You’ll be his company. Take what he knows of the masque.”

Malin’s face scrunched. She closed her eyes. “You need me to get close enough to steal his memory?”

I adjusted one elbow on the railing, facing her. “Remember why you’re doing this. He is the swiftest way we can find where Ivar will hold this private trade. We need this opportunity.”

“And if we miss it?”

I returned a significant look. Her face paled as if she could read my thoughts. Malin understood. Should we fail to retrieve Hagen at the Masque av Aska, odds were, we’d never see him again.





21

# THE MEMORY THIEF

IF I THOUGHT LOADING the boat was difficult, disembarking was worse.

I tripped in the waves. The grip of the tide tossed me about. Currents crashed me forward, and I swallowed sand. Waves pulled me back out, and I swallowed salty water. I was certain the pull would drown me in another breath, but Vali and Tova hooked their hands under my arms and tossed me ashore, laughing mercilessly.

Kase handed a hunched man four copper pieces for tethering the longship to a post in the surf. The old beggar did nothing of note, more watched the Kryv do the heavy lifting while he puffed a clay pipe, his head lost in a brume of brown smoke.

I followed into the seaside city—if it could be called a city. Inside the coast gates was a rumpiled, globular-shaped town, with a miserly row of shops along the muddy roads. One gabled inn leaned to the east, its neighboring alehouse leaned to the west. Tenements with cracked windows, and hovels sunk in puddles. Porches sagged, and some homes were raised on stilts. Most buildings were draped in tattered banners of blue and gold for the Wild Hunt, and filthy ribbons were strewn about the roads.

Skítkast architecture took all the leftovers of the regions, stacked them next to one another, and called it order.

The populace seemed an even mangier sort: cheerier with clients, herb farmers, washed up traders, and a few who chatted with lampposts.

Folk painted their faces in frightening ways. As wicked nyks or fae, using clay to mold points on their ears. Laughter slurred with raised drinking horns as folk stumbled about, clinging to the last of the revelry.

The Nightrender turned the guild down a narrow alleyway. I dug my fingernails into Raum's arm without thinking when we stopped at a house with a pointed roof and rosy siding.

Kase rapped on an arched door. "Dagny," he said slowly, kindly. Sounded odd. "We've come for a visit."

A young woman with shimmering powder on her cheeks answered. "Oh, good you're here." The woman grabbed his arm. "Come on, get inside."

Ratty chairs and an unmade straw mattress littered the room. A vanity with chipping blue paint stood against one wall, a rack of lacy dresses near it, and a hundred licentious noises moaned through the paper-thin walls.

The cheer girl—Dagny—paced around until the last Kryv settled inside. "I've got a bad feeling."

"What else is new?" Tova asked with a laugh.

Dagny fiddled with the lace on her dress. "I know I ask this every time, but you've all really planned this out, right?"

Kase pulled back a dusty curtain over a window facing the main road. "You know the answer, Dag. You spoke with the Falkyns, right?"

I'd never heard the name Falkyn before. They must've been another guild of some sort.

"They'll be waiting." Dagny couldn't be much older than me, but the

burden of a hard life lived in her gray eyes. “We’d better get started.”

I wrung my hands together and stepped out from behind Raum.

“This lovey has a bite, Dag,” Raum said.

“Good. You need a good bite in Skítkast.” Dagny tilted her head and smiled. “Come here then.”

Kase spun his curved knife around his fingers again. I never saw him flick the blade into his grip, but I had no doubt he kept at least three blades always accessible. He remained quiet; his eyes on me as Dagny pulled out a musky chair.

I could do this.

Dagny dusted white powder over my cheeks while the Kryv muttered to each other across the room.

“This powder marks you as fresh,” she said, although I didn’t ask.

“You said you had a bad feeling,” I whispered, once the Guild of Kryv was buried in their own conversations away from us. “Are you an Alver?”

Dagny shook her head. “No. I’m a rather talented worrier is all.”

“So, how do you know the Nightrender?” I hoped she didn’t read into my question, because it certainly was meant as a probe into their relationship, but I had no business asking this cheer girl if he had shared her bed.

Unfortunately, Dagny was quick. “What do you mean? Is he a patron?”

I shrugged and tangled my fingers in the lace of my gown.

She grinned as she brushed my hair. “I’ve offered a space next to me for turns as gratitude for his help to me and the other girls and boys when clients get a bit rough. I imagine he’s a sight to see beneath all those battle leathers, don’t you think?”

“I’ve never given it much thought.”

“Right, and I’m the queen of Skítkast.” She nudged my shoulder. “To

answer your question, he's not taken me up on my offer. But the way he's watching you right now, I suppose I could ask you the same thing."

I spun in my seat.

Kase wasn't looking at me at all. He had his back to us, speaking to Vali, but glanced over his shoulder when Dagny squeaked an odd, strangled laugh.

I frowned at the cheer girl. "Funny."

"Ah, I don't blame you," she said wistfully, beginning to add braids to my hair. "I'd think you strange if you didn't hope for his attention."

"I don't hope for it. I detest it."

"Clearly." Dagny bit down on her bottom lip, but said nothing more on the subject. "Lift your hands, fingers out."

I obeyed and spread my fingers while she drew odd runes on each tip with a charcoal pen.

"They're beautiful," I said. "What do they mean?"

Dagny's smile faded as she revealed her own hands. Black tattoos were needled into her skin. "Beautiful shackles are what they are. The mark of a Lark girl." Dagny wagged one little finger missing its tip. "When you work off pieces of your debt, well, you lose one of your shackles."

I slapped a hand over my mouth. "The Kryv could take you from here, I'm sure of it."

"There are reasons to stay."

"What could possibly keep you here?"

A tear shimmered in her eye. "A story for another day." Dagny clapped her hands together again. "You need to change."

The cheer girl held up a white lacy dress with a rip in the hem. I searched for a curtain, but the room offered little by way of privacy.

"Turn around." I pointed a finger at the men who kept stealing glances our

way.

“Come on, lovey,” Raum said.

I pursed my lips. “Turn around now.”

One by one they grumbled and faced the wall. Kase’s eyes burned a tantalizing dark gold, a hundred unspoken words hovered between us until at last he faced the door.

My tunic and trousers were stripped in a few moments, then by shifting my weight side to side, I wriggled into the tight, musky dress. When Dagny fastened the silver clasp behind my neck, the bodice squeezed the last of the breath from my lungs.

I tugged the sleeves falling seductively off my shoulders and kept adjusting the swooping neckline barely covering my breasts.

“No, let it show, girl.” Dagny swatted away my hand and held up a furred scarf fashioned in the likeness of a fox tail. “You need to wear this around your waist.”

She demonstrated, and sure enough, batted the fur as a tail.

“Why would I give myself a tail?”

“It’s the Hunt!” Dagny said, flinging the fur around her neck, her voice shifted dramatically. “You’re to become a lustful, irresistible *huldrefolk*.”

“You aren’t serious.”

“I am serious,” she said with a frown. “Costume is a selling point during the Hunt, and the patron wants a temptress of the forest.” She brushed my nose with the end of the fur. “To play a proper *huldrefolk*, tails are a must. Now remove that pouch you wear.”

My hand went to the rune pouch with my memory vials. “No, it stays.”

“It will ruin the entire look.”

“The look will need to be built around it.”

“But—”

“It stays, Dag.” The Nightrender did not need to raise his voice to cut through a room. The rasp of the sound sent a shiver up my arms.

Dagny sighed. “Fine. I’ll try to hide it.”

Once I’d dressed, Kase called to me, and in such a brazen gown, I was rather reluctant to stand so near to him.

He wasn’t as discomposd and pointed to a grungy looking arena across the road. Cheers and the thunder of hooves boomed over rocky roads. At the top of the stands were boxes made of wooden laths capable of holding five men.

“You’ll meet him in one of the top booths,” Kase said.

“How will I get out?”

He backed toward the way we entered. “Don’t worry about getting out.”

“You’re asking a great deal of trust, when I get none in return.”

“Life is rather unfair, isn’t it? Now we’re going. We have another appointment.” He signaled to the others to leave.

“What other appointment?” He was leaving me to do this alone?

Kase glanced once more at me and said nothing more than, “Fight to the end.”

I’d heard the saying pass about the guild and hardly believed he offered the Kryv words to me now.

“Don’t worry, he never tells too much to anyone. Just enough,” Dagny said once the Kryv left. “Come on, then. I’ll take you to meet, *Herr Doft*.”



22



# THE MEMORY THIEF

OUTSIDE, I COULDN'T BREATHE, and it wasn't because of the fetid air.

This was becoming too real, too soon.

The Wild Hunt would come to the different regions in different seasons. I'd never been permitted to go, but had watched from afar, and the Skítkast arena was nothing compared to the large game field in Klockglas with its soft grass, red track, and smooth stone benches for the spectators.

Here, clumpy dirt made up the center pit, no grass at all, and the stands were wooden and old. Most looked ready to snap if any more weight settled on the rickety benches. Dirtier, smellier, but the same thrill lived in the sound of pounding hooves, in riders tucked low with great horned helmets atop their heads as they raced for the final prize.

At the end, the grand hunter was awarded baskets of finery; things like spiced meats and sweet wine, silk tunics and woolen doublets, polished horns and steel daggers, and coin—heaps of coin.

The crowd packed in, shoulder to shoulder, cheering for their favorite rider.

Six formidable black stallions thundered around the arena. Posts with ribbons for the riders to snatch as they rode past were staked all along the track to symbolize the All Father, the gods, and underground folk riding away with unsuspecting mortal souls.

Riders were fierce, bulky brutes. How many more began the Hunt but fell out of the games after breaking bones?

In Klockglas, one rider lost his hand. Funny enough, he'd insisted he still wanted to compete and made enough of a fuss when officials wouldn't allow it, he ended up in the Howl's north prison for a season to think it over.

The lead rider wore colors like a midnight sky, inky blue with silver banners fluttering like wings from the sides of his horned helmet. His horse snorted. The beast had fire in its eyes.

Like the lead, each rider dressed in diverting costumes. Some had raven feathers on their cloaks; the horns on one helmet curled as if ready to tie in knots. Another rider had his long hair braided into a heavy rope down his back. One risked an eye patch over an eye to honor the father of gods.

He didn't have favor from any god since he slipped into the third position, his horse foaming and panting.

Dagny nudged me through the sea of sweaty people. I held tightly to the cheer girl as we aimed for the box suites at the top. I'd already dodged at least five wandering hands from the audience, one was a councilman who snatched me by the arm, wanting a cheer girl on his lap. Without Dagny, I would've been devoured before reaching this point.

"The Kryv trusted you for a reason; you will be all right." Dagny patted my cheek. "The Nightrender never does anything at random. He'd find another way if he didn't think you could do this. Good luck."

She opened the door, leaving me utterly alone in the shadows.

I dragged in a breath through my nose, balled my fists until my fingers hurt, and scanned the dark suite. It reeked like unwashed skin beneath a cloak of damp wood.

In the far corner, the same man from Mistress Salvisk's memory rose from a velvet winged chair. The difference from the memory and now was Boswell Doft stood at least two heads taller.

"Let me see you," he commanded.

I licked my lips, mouth sticky, and forced what I hoped was a sultry grin.

His shaved head reminded me of a pale moon, but Doft had hands capable of snapping my neck without trouble. I wrapped an arm around one of the posts keeping the roof from caving in, puffed out my chest, and stroked the furred tail, trying to lure him in as I imagined a seductive *huldrefolk* might.

Doft dragged his lustful eyes up my body. "You'll do nicely."

Now was the time to prove how well I could play a game. I needed him close, needed him to look at me beyond a warm body.

I bit the tip of my finger, playing rakish to hide how terribly my hands shook. "I can please in other ways, *Herr*."

"What ways?" He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled my back against his body. Doft's bottom teeth seemed too big for his mouth, and when he grinned white frothed in the corners of his lips. The crook in his nose hinted it had been broken more than once and left him puffing his hot breath through an open mouth.

He pressed a kiss to my neck. I wanted to retch.

"You are the man of mesmer." His hands paused on my waist. I didn't know what I was doing, but he auditioned mesmer. If I could throw him off by requesting an audition, maybe I could take control in his distraction. "For the . . . the Masque av Aska?"

Doft dragged in a harsh, labored sniff through his crooked nose. Was he . . . smelling me? Then, he shoved me away. “I should’ve known the instant you stepped into the room. You are rank.”

“I want to perform. For you.”

He chuckled and traced the edge of my jaw. “You’d like to leave this place, wouldn’t you, child?”

“Yes, *Herr*.”

“What is your Kind?”

“Elixist,” I lied, and tugged on my skirt, pretending to reach for some ingredient for a potion. My hands shook, and I hoped when I returned with one of my twin knives, I’d be able to strike true. All I needed was to get close and take a bit of breath. “I can show you.”

The moment my hand curled around the hilt of one knife, a hot pain spread through my skull, and I was thrown back. Blood coated my tongue. My head spun.

Doft gripped my hair, drawing my face to his. “Auditions are closed. But there are still uses for you.”

I kicked at him, tried to reach the knives, but he straddled me, pinning my arms at my sides. His breath scorched my skin when he pressed his lips to my ear. “Stupid witch. I think I might take you, just to watch you rot at the Black Palace.”

His lips left wet tracks over my shoulder, wetter than I thought kisses should be. He nipped my ear. A bone-chilling cold stole through me. I thrashed and screamed. I bit his palm.

“Bleeding hells!” Doft raised his hand to strike me again but wailed in agony and crumbled to the side.

Floorboards shifted and Ash’s pale face popped into the suite. He stood on

the beams below, half in the suite half not. His hands opened wide, and one of Doft's fingers was now bent at a sickening angle.

Above me, a slat of the rooftop shifted and Isak dropped through, followed by black eyes.

I breathed a little easier, even smiled when Kase dropped in front of me. The way he regarded me with undivided attention for a few moments, he was more Kase than a man lost in shadows.

Doft moaned. I stayed on the ground, quivering with anger, thoughts of his ugly mouth on my skin. Fists clenched, I stood and pressed the heel of my boot on Doft's neck, holding him there for the guild to destroy.

Kase lifted an eyebrow at the move and crouched next to the man.

When Ash slipped into the suite, I removed my foot, and hugged the boy to me as if he needed protection. Ash was nearly taller than me, but he didn't pull away.

"You?" Doft muttered at Kase, then laughed. "I always wondered when we'd meet again. Such . . . exquisite talent."

Kase took the revel master's chin in his hand. "What's wrong with you, Boswell? Not interested in the girl? Perhaps she frightened you."

"I never thought you'd be trading your own kind, boy."

Kase tilted his gaze to me. "Trading yourself?"

"I improvised."

He chuckled darkly and looked back to Doft. "You must not be in cooperative mood. Let's see if we can change that, shall we?"

"Go to the hells," Doft snapped.

"I've been many times; terribly ugly this time of season."

"Crack your sharp tongue all you want. To me you'll always be nothing but a skinny boy, crying for his girl."

My chest squeezed hard enough I thought it might snap a rib. His girl.

The way Kase spared the briefest glance over his shoulder, told me what I needed to know. He'd cried out for me, and I never came.

As littles, I had Hagen. But Kase had me. Until he had no one, only the cruelty of men like Boswell Doft. I imagined young Kase, alone and terrified, and I wanted to dig my boot back into Doft's throat.

Kase turned over his shoulder. "Isak, our friend is refusing. Persuade him."

There was a flash of recognition over Doft's face when Isak stepped forward. He knew them. Were Kase, Isak, all the Kryv, forced to showcase their mesmer for this fiend?

Isak did nothing, but in another breath, Doft clawed at his eyes, screaming about blindness.

"Get what you need," Kase told me.

I released Ash and kneeled. "I didn't think you'd come so soon."

"I grew tired of him touching you."

A frenzied heat filled my cheeks. I blinked away and cleared my throat. "It may take some time. Memories come easier when they're deliberately thinking of them."

"Your mesmer knows how to read him," Kase said. "Trust it does."

"What exactly am I looking for?"

"Any moments of his business for the Masque av Aska. Anything you can find in the time Isak can give you."

"Isak," I said. "What are you doing to him?"

Doft still scraped his face, whimpering as his broken finger bent more at the motion.

"He darkens the mind," Ash said and flicked his hands. "Makes stupidly stupid folk think they're blind."

Despite what Kase said, there wasn't time to marvel. I steeled myself and pressed my lips to Doft's sour mouth. His gasps made the entire process easier, but the way he tried to bite back required more than one attempt. Doft groaned, then retched on the floor when I was through.

I clutched the sides of my head, focusing, desperate to find a clue anywhere in this wretched man's mind. The living who willingly gave up their memories were simple to read, but those with memories taken by force—I'd only cracked a few. Salvisk was an exception, then again, Gunnar had forced her to comply.

*Mesmer will know.* I repeated Kase's words until the smoke began to swirl and shapes formed in my head.

As I waded through Doft's memories, I started to wish my mesmer would've left his alone. A brutal, disgusting man who'd spent the last few nights with cheeries. Every time he'd left them sobbing after he'd finished.

The repulsive scenes changed to something simpler. A coach parked outside a cheer house. Doft was dressed much like he was at Mistress Salvisk's, but he wasn't alone.

A second man with a fat herb roll in his mouth sat next to him.

"You understand what you've been entrusted with, Hans?" Doft said.

Holding up a long tube with a leather strap, Hans nodded. "Yes, My Lord. I will see to it Klaus readjusts these to be rid of any vulnerabilities."

"I will be at the last ride to finalize the deals with the whores. We'll meet then."

Hans nodded and clutched the tube to his chest, ready to die for whatever was in it.

Smoke began to fade. I could dig more, take more breath, but Isak groaned and leaned against the wall.

Energy was fading. What I'd stolen would need to be enough.

I swallowed the bitter taste of Doft, grateful to be rid of his ugliness. "Another man has something important, at a place called Klaus, I think."

What if we missed our opportunity? I bit my anguish into my bottom lip. Hagen had never felt so far from me than this moment.

"Rest, Isak." Kase's voice was wholly the Nightreuder.

Isak blinked several times, slumped, then moved aside.

"I don't know what it is. I couldn't hold it long enough," I admitted in a whisper when Kase came close.

He nodded with understanding. "There are other ways to get answers." Kase turned and gripped Doft's jaw again. "Why don't you tell me what you know about this turn's masque. Anything might help, Boswell."

"Wanting to return, are you?" Kase struck Doft across the face, but the man only sneered. "Do your worst. I'm no coward."

Kase laughed darkly. "Then why are you so afraid?"

The words did something to Doft. His eyes widened and he shook his head. Kase squeezed harder around Doft's jaw. "One more chance. Give me what I want, and you can ravish the cheer houses to your worm-eaten heart's content."

"Tell me what you want exactly, and perhaps I'll be obliged to help."

Kase chuckled. "Doubtful, but let's try, shall we? Tell me about the Alver trade set to go on at this turn's masque."

Boswell laughed, so a little bloody spittle dribbled over his chin. "You don't miss anything, do you? Whatever you're planning, you will fail. Too many measures have been taken to ensure complete security."

"I think you underestimate me."

"I think you underestimate the Lord Magnate."



Kase's jaw tightened. "There is always a way in, or there would be no event. An invitation of some kind."

"No."

"No?" Kase tilted his head, a flash of shadows in his eyes as his temper flared. I'd learned when the Nightrender was discomposed, the shadows came out. "So, the Lord Magnate trades Alvers to himself?"

Boswell laughed again. "Ah, it is satisfying to perplex you, boy."

"Oh, I'm afraid you've mistaken repulsion for perplexity." Despite his words, Kase began to pace in front of Doft, that curved knife in his hand. "There will be a token given to those welcomed into the trade." He puzzled out loud. "Likely near the beginning of the masque."

"You're wrong."

Kase came to a stop. "Tell me how I'm wrong, Boswell."

"I'd rather keep you guessing."

Kase tapped the point of his knife to his chin and picked up his nervous pacing again. What was he doing? He almost seemed content to appease Doft.

The contrast between this Nightrender and the brutal man who slit a man's throat at Salvisk's was stark and unsettling.

"I think it'll be done the night before. A private party, perhaps?" Kase glanced at Isak. "I'm certain we could find a way in."

"There will be no private party, you bleeding fool." Boswell shifted with a heavy sigh. "Release me now, and I might forget to tell the Lord Magnate you were here, boy."

Kase rubbed his forehead as if his mind hurt. "This is such a challenge. You might've gotten the better of me."

What in the hells? I tilted my head, watching his madness. Did Boswell do

something to him to make him so . . . so . . . odiously friendly? Doft's blood did not reek, but perhaps he had some kind of Elixist potion on hand.

"I think I have it," Kase said, voice light and airy. "Guests will be selected at the masque if they impress the Lord Magnate." He laughed and winked—the bleeding Nightrender *winked*—at Isak. "We can certainly manage such a thing. We've plenty of connections to help us look like the prettiest cocks at the fete."

Now, Boswell clapped in amusement. "And to think folk fear you. I'm afraid your plan is futile, you're two breasts short of the liking for the Heir Mag . . ."

An eerie chill filled the booth, choking off Boswell's words. The man paled, no doubt realizing his misspeak.

I shuddered when Kase's ridiculous, false smile faded, and his eyes blackened like a damp night. Shadows spilled from every lath, every corner, from beneath my feet, darkness shifted and enrobed Doft in a mist of pitch.

"I see," Kase said, his voice returned to the deadly rasp. "The trade is for the new bride."

"No. No, you misunderstood." Doft's voice was desperate. Frightened.

"I don't think I did. Our petulant heir will take the lovely, adoring potential bride and allow her into the bid—a way to preen, I suppose. But who gets the Alver, I wonder? The woman who laughs at his jokes? Sucks his tongue? Has her hands in his trousers to see if anything worthwhile is there?"

Boswell grunted in frustration as the shadows coiled tighter around him. "Thank you, Doft. You've been most helpful."

Kase took a step closer.

"Wait!" Doft cried out. "The woman, your Alver, she went in my head. Took part in my thoughts. You and I both know what she is, and what it'd

mean. We take her to the Black Palace—split the payout. The Lord Magnate would make you a bleeding nobleman for delivering the likes of her.”

Shadows faded.

Doft, sweaty and breathing heavily, lifted his eyes to Kase who'd gone still.

It took another moment for him to catch his bearings, but soon enough, Boswell laughed. “By the gods. Does she not know? You should tell her; it's rather unfair not to give her a fighting chance.”

I furrowed my brow. “What is he talking about?”

“He's a lunatic,” Kase said, but I wasn't sure I believed him. The man at Salvisk's had wanted to sell me much the same.

Kase flicked his sleeve and a new stiletto knife slid into his palm.

“A pick knife. Made with bronze,” Ash whispered because he couldn't help himself. “Quick cuts, but deep. A lot of damage.”

“You should've stopped talking, Boswell.” Kase rammed the knife into Doft's shoulder. As Boswell cried out his agony, Kase hooked his thumbs inside the man's mouth, gripping the lower jaw. “But you always did run your damn mouth too much.”

Doft tried to move, but Kase didn't allow it before he made a swift motion with his hands, and a sickening crack of bone echoed against the slat walls.

Doft moaned, his eyes rolled back in his head, and the lower part of his mouth hung slack. Snapped off the hinges.

I swallowed bile. Ash flicked his fingers, and Isak kept stalwart and silent.

“Always muttering and going on about nothing.” Kase ripped the knife free and wiped the blood across Doft's forehead. “It's time for silence.”

In the next breath, the Nightrender sliced the knife edge, swifter than a gasp, over Doft's neck.

Boswell opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water, wet sounds in his throat. A red stain blossomed down the front of his chest, and soon he crumbled in a puddle of his own blood.

"You killed him," I said, a little ill at all the mess.

"Yes. Are we going to debate the morality of this again?" When I said nothing, he pulled a hood over his head and sheathed his knife. "It's time to move or we're not getting out of here. Now, let's go."



23

# THE NIGHTRENDER

RIGHT ON HIS MARK, Gunnar pulled back bits of the sod and twigs in the rooftop of the booth and tapped Malin's head.

She startled and looked up. "Gunnar?"

The nimble Kryv crouched over the dusty eaves and pointed at the narrow aperture in the roof. "I hope you can climb, Mal."

I straightened from my crouch, hands bloody, and pulled mesmer around my face and eyes.

Malin held my stare, a dozen things to say dancing behind my teeth. Confessions about the sick rage Doft spurred when he'd pinned her with his body. The relief it brought to cut out his tongue for daring to speak about her. She heard, and I could give no answer should she ask more questions.

She broke away first and reached for Gunnar's hand.

He helped her onto the eaves and through the hole in the booth. Isak and Ash followed. I went last, climbing onto the uneven rooftop without a look back at the gore in our wake. Gunnar took the lead with careful steps to the edge of the roof, then plunged off the side.

"Go," Ash said with a nudge to the small of Malin's back when she hesitated.

She cracked her thumb twice. Took a deep breath in, but never released it before she jumped after Gunnar.

It wasn't a long drop. A pace or two before our feet thudded one after the other onto a narrow ledge where laborers and serfs could walk the length of the stands, making any repairs undetected.

Our next move would unite us with the rest of the guild, then slip out through a back alley to the Falkyn nest. A whimper interrupted my step by step repeat of our plan. Malin stood near Gunnar, her palms on the side of her head, trembling.

"I don't want to be here anymore," she said to no one but the night.

Hells, panic was gripping her. All that had gone on tonight, doubtless, was settling in now. At times it happened, even to Kryv. Stun from a great deal of blood or violence would wrap around our minds until the instinct to keep surviving dragged us out of it.

There wasn't time for panic now.

I took her face in my hands. "Look at me." Her eyes blinked to mine, and I tightened my hold on her. "Breathe with me. I'll be here until it passes."

Malin's palms covered the backs of my hands and she never looked away as I drew in a long breath through my nose, guiding her through her own, then together we blew them out. Three more times until her body was less rigid.

"Better?"

She nodded; her thumb drew slow circles on my hands.

Before I could think too long the haze in my head, I took her elbow, and led her toward the edge of the platform.

"We're not out of this yet," I said, returning to the brisk tone I needed to keep. "Don't lose your head on us. Now, keep your arms in."

"Arms in?"

I released my hold on her. Malin tumbled over the edge of the stands. The only sound I caught was a shaky gasp before she landed into the back of a hay cart directly below.

I peered over in time to catch sight of Raum helping her out the back. No broken limbs, no injuries. He muttered something I couldn't hear, handed her a knife, then laughed when she gave her response.

"Ash," I said, anxious to keep moving. "You next. Meet us at the gate."

Too many of us leaping off the edge would draw attention. Gunnar, Isak, and I took a slier route. We scaled the rickety beams of the stands until we worked our way to the muddy streets.

I led us to one of the arched entrances leading into the arena where the rest of the guild waited in the shadows, muttering amongst each other.

The entrance was covered in a stained white canvas with a harsh vomit scent in the threads, but it was secluded and shadowed. To our back, a gate separated us from the game field, locked tight as the last ride roared on.

We'd have a few moments before crowds trampled us as they left the arena.

But something was wrong. The moment I stepped into sight, Dagny dug her fingers into my arm. "The back avenue is blocked. Most streets are."

Damn the hells.

I stiffened, then cursed myself for reacting at all. "Blocked by what? You said they'd be open."

My voice was harsh as vinegar and misplaced.

Dagny knew it and returned my venom with a frown. "They were supposed



to be, but as it is, two of the Lord Magnate's councilors are here for the Wild Hunt. The skydguard have flooded the streets with their caravans. They're a bleeding infestation!"

Think. Pivot. Work a new way out.

"Rooftops?" Tova offered.

I shook my head. "Too many of us."

"Let's wait them out at the *Lark*," Raum said.

"We do not know how long that will be, and we need to keep moving. There's more to find in Skítkast before it disappears back to Klockglas."

Doft's courier. Whatever Malin saw in the memory was still here. Somewhere.

We could not be seen, but wandering the streets with a swell of new skydguard would be impossible to do so concealed. Unless . . .

"Dag, are there still storm walls surrounding the city square? The ones that block the alleys, I mean."

Being in the south with warmer seas, Skítkast was known for heavy sea storms, and since the little wealth they had was in the rounded center of the city, naturally any protection would be offered to the area.

"Yes, why?"

A wicked smile curved over my mouth. "We'll go through there, then."

Vali snorted. "Like fish in a barrel. We'd be surrounded walking out in the open. The city square has four alleyways leading to and from, and the skydguard will be able to come at us from all sides."

"Ah, Vali, that's exactly what I'm counting on," I said.

"Care to explain?"

They'd protest, but when an idea settled in my head, I was hard pressed to ever shake it. When I knew a step was right, it clung to my chest like an

entirely new entity.

I tapped the iron grate over one of the pungent sewer holes. "I never said we'd cross above ground."

Malin wrinkled her nose much the same as the others. I rolled my eyes. Were the Kryv made of bleeding royals afraid to get their boots dirty?

I ignored them all and slid the grate off the opening. "Tova and Gunnar, you'll cover us with your bows until we get outside the city center."

The two Kryv shared a dark grin, and gripped the bows slung over their shoulders.

"Be glad to," Gunnar said.

"Ash," I went on. "You and Hanna go with Dagny and make sure the skydguard hear you." Hanna held the drums, and I pounded the rawhide once. "Make sure they come to the center. Be ready to lock them in. Now, Dagny, explain the tunnels with as much detail as you can."

"But I don't know this side of the ducts well," she insisted.

"Do you wander the sewers regularly?" Malin asked.

I tilted my head, smiling. "Dagny smuggles cheeries out, don't you Dag?"

Her eyes widened. "Didn't realize you knew."

Why wouldn't I? Dagny knew I always tracked what my connections did. Even friendly ones.

"The tunnels?" I pressed again.

Dagny wrung her fingers together. "As I said, I don't know this side as well."

"What do you know?"

Dagny gnawed on one thumbnail and crouched in the mud. I followed. She drew in the dirt, marking the main shape of the square. A rounded center with a fountain, treasury vaults, a small schoolhouse, and tenement homes. There

were four covered roads branching off the city square. Those roads were the only ways in and out. Each would be armed in a heavy storm door, cutting the square off from the rest of the township.

I asked few questions as my mind raced with steps, marks, assignments for each member of the guild. I listened with care as Dagny described any detail coming to her mind. Size of the sewer ducts, different manholes along the way, curves, corners, down to how full the bleeding ducts might be.

This would work. I lifted my eyes once I had the mud-map in my head and looked at the Kryv.

"We won't make it to the nest if guards are roaming the streets, no matter which direction we take," I said. "We can trick the skydguard into the square, then walk beneath them in the ducts. Then, we'll use the storm walls to keep the skydguard locked in place and out of the streets until we surface here." I pointed at a northside mark on the mud map.

"What if you don't move swift enough and get trapped behind the walls, or the ducts are blocked, and you're stuck beneath the square?" Dagny curled her fingers in the lace of her dress.

"Tova and Gunnar will be there for cover should we need them," I explained. "We need to get skydguard out of our path to the nest, right? This is the best way to keep them contained. Even still, this'll need to move fast. Shutting the guard behind the gates will give us a head start, that's all."

I stood, blood racing in anticipation for a new twist in our plan.

"Keep watch on them, Dag." I nodded at Ash and Hanna, then lowered my legs into the sewer shaft.

Dagny led Ash and Hanna away. Tova and Gunnar waited behind in the archway as one by one the rest of the guild followed me below the streets.

The sewers of Skítkast were wide with bloated caverns, like great halls for

rats and vermin.

Isak clapped a hand over his nose, he choked until he stomached the smell. The hot, rank dregs burned my throat, into my lungs, and each step sunk into shin-deep water. In the few raised areas were chairs, even a few makeshift beds where Dagny hid her runaway cheerieries until they could make for the coast.

The tunnel rounded a bend, we took five steps down, three up. Every overhead access hole played tricks on my eyes as shadows and light danced in the dark, and it wasn't long before I had a dagger in my hand.

Something about the leather and steel in my grip calmed my sickeningly fast pulse.

The sewers forked. I held up a fist, stopping those at my back. Above, a foreboding drumbeat filled the cracks and crevices above us.

"It's working," Fiske muttered. "They're coming. Listen."

Everything stilled, from the slight trickle of water to the soft breaths of the Kryv. No one moved.

Over the drums, shouts spilled into the sewers like the skydguard were there with us. Loud commands. United footsteps. The streets weren't terribly thick and in places the shuffling boots sounded mere steps away.

"About fifty paces and we'll be at the final opening on the northside." I pointed to the left tunnel, rehashing Dagny's rough map in my head. Shapes, lines, obstacles, I could memorize the lot quickly, but combine those shapes with words, and it only added chaos in my brain. "Be ready to defend yourselves."

With my free hand, I withdrew my blacksteel sword and quickened the pace of our steps.

Halfway into the new tunnel, Raum cursed. "Bleeding Hells. Kase, wait!"

My stomach twisted, hard and fast, but I reeled back around as Raum took the lead. Brow furrowed, he studied the pitch dark for a few heartbeats before cursing the gods and facing me. “There’s a damn wall over the tunnel, only a small pipe takes the water away. Dag must not have known.”

I despised when plans did not unravel in nice, neat moments the same way they played out in my head. But we would not have survived this long if the Kryv didn’t know the meaning of changing course.

We go back, then we face the same trouble. Too many skydguard, too few open roads to the Falkyn nest. But it left us with going up the manhole above our heads, placing us in the city square, where those drums were currently herding the bastards in one vicious clump.

Still, it was the best chance, the location with the widest roads, and most direct route to the nest.

“We’ll need to surface,” I said. My pulse pounded in my ears. The Kryv, I knew they would be swift, their instincts sharp. There was one person in my head, and I had no idea how she would thrive or fail against a direct battle with skydguard. I cut through the Kryv, stopping at Malin’s pale face. “You know what to do in a battle?”

“What do you think?”

I leaned in, so my lips were against her ear. “Focus on your fight. Leave others to theirs.”

Her tongue swiped over her lips when I pulled back; each breath came faster, but she nodded and tightened her hold on the knife in her hand.

Then, I turned away and began the climb toward our new fight.



24

# THE NIGHTRENDER

I REELED THROUGH EACH step. Surface. Run through the north alley. Close the storm gates on all four alleyways. Lock in the skydguard.

A simple plan. We'd move fast enough. We had to.

I gathered the cold shadows. A hum of mesmer quickened my instincts, added power to my heart. Fear was heady above me. Every whimper, every shudder, every jolt of surprise tasted sharp on my tongue, and I took it for my own strength.

When I breached the surface, already dozens of skydguard had blades drawn, hunched around the large stone fountain of Loki and his children in the center of the square.

There was hardly time to orient before a guard cried out the manhole had opened.

Like a river of black ink, I spread my shadows around the skydguard. The wise ones ran from the dark. The ones stupid enough to be brave stood in its path.

Dark mesmer coiled around ankles and wrists and necks. By the gods, they tried to be fearless, but held a mighty amount of reluctance for death. I could

bathe in the potent adrenaline as their hearts raced in panic at the frigid touch of my magic. If I were not in a hurry, I might toy with them, torture them a bit. Use my wickedness against theirs.

But there was no time.

Five guards in my grip, I closed my fists. Mesmer created dark images in my head. Brutal ways to die. Those thoughts burned through the shadows coiling around their necks and bodies. A burn filled my veins. Either I needed to pull back or give my magic a job to do. With a final thought, I commanded the mounting fear to become reality.

Darkness pierced their chests like mist-made darts and the guards fell over, dead.

I climbed the rest of the way out of the sewers and drew my sword. Powerful as mesmer could be, it took a toll. I'd use what was needed but fight the rest with steel.

Tova fired arrows at the fountain, while Gunnar launched his perfect shots at the four alleyways. His arrows herded the skydguard away from the edges of the city center, giving time for Dagny in one alley, Ash in the next, and Hanna at another, to pull levers on the sides of the archways.

When pulled, iron clanked and scraped against stone, and a heavy, wooden storm wall fell into place.

One alley remained open. Our one chance at escape.

Two skydguard rushed me. One swiped his dagger for my leg. I parried and cut across his upper ribs. As he fell, I spun around and cut through the leathers of the second guard. The first tried to scramble back. I allowed him to get three paces away before I lengthened my stride and stabbed my blacksteel through his heart.

I spun around in time to watch Raum pull Malin from the sewers.



"Go," I shouted at the Kryv on the ground, then to those on the rooftops. Our timetable was shrinking.

Tova and Gunnar put away their bows, sprinted across the rib of the roof, slid down the slats, then disappeared through the north alley.

More skydguard tested their luck and raced after those who'd emerged from the sewer. My attention on my guild gave room for a tall, sweat-soaked guard to kick at my leg.

Cursed hells.

I tightened my grip on my sword and took my own advice to focus on my own bleeding fight. The guard reeled back for a second strike. I leaned away in time to catch the cool wind from the swipe of his blade on my face.

The missed hit made the guard stumble off balance slightly. Enough of a misstep for me to ram my dagger through his chin.

At my back, Raum laughed, blood on his face, and threw a small knife without a hilt, burying the blade in the chest of a nearby guard.

"Time to go!" he shouted at Malin.

She didn't hesitate and ran. But no less than six skydguard bit at their heels.

The skydguard were roaches, always there, difficult to kill entirely.

I pulled at the fear soaking the damp cobblestones once again, muscles trembling. Strength would wane after this, no mistake, but I had enough for a few more plays.

The moment my focus homed in on the guards chasing Malin and Raum, all six staggered to an abrupt stop. They choked; their skin raised in oozing boils. Fear of disease was common in the regions when menders had little to work with. Plague and suffering were not far from the minds of the poor.

It allowed for horribly creative deaths.

The guards let out gurgled cries of anguish. My fists closed, and the six men scraped at their faces, their eyes swelled shut. When they coughed, blood and teeth dripped over their lips.

My arms trembled. I tipped my head to one side, and at once the final breath ripped out of each chest as my mesmer pulled away.

Malin gaped at me. Foolish of her to stop. There were blades ready to cut her down.

"Get out of here!" I shouted.

She blinked back to the moment and tried to run. But when she turned, a thick guard broke her retreat, using his fist to level her to the ground.

My heart stopped. Not a pulse. Not a sound. Nothing but silence as my body froze at the sight of Malin falling.

I tried, gods knew I tried, to despise everything about her. Tried to forget her strange breathy laugh when she thought she said something funny. Tried to forget the way she used to practice her braids on my hair. Hells, I tried to forget the peace that came from falling asleep beside her even as a boy.

Now I'd brought her into this bleeding mess. For what? We could've gone on to get Hagen without her, but I'd deceived her, convinced her to make a deal with the Guild of Kryv for no other reason than it had grown too hard to stay away.

Malin spit blood onto the cobblestones.

"Another Alver! I smell it!" the guard shrieked. "Bring it here for this one and take her out the back."

She tried to scramble away as two more guards brought out a wooden bucket. Inside, something sloshed like they'd drawn from the fountain.

My feet were already moving.

One last burst of mesmer. A little longer. I could hold long enough to get

her away. I pleaded with my magic as dark mists curled around Malin. With a swipe of my hand, I commanded my fear to pull her back.

Only my own terror had the power to be controlled into something tangible and solid with the strength to lift physical objects.

Wrapped in my darkness, her body flipped out of reach. In her place, I stood beneath the guards and the bucket of pain I knew would come. No doubt some wretched elixir was in the pail.

The guards didn't stop and poured the bucket over my head.

Boiling heat seeped through every pore. Fire ravished my skin off my bones. A thousand knives cut through muscle and flesh and dropped me to the ground before I could cry out.

Sound faded into oblivion.

All that was left was the agony.

I could not catch a breath. My skin surely had melted off my body now. Doubtless I was nothing but a bleeding pile of innards. Mesmer. I needed magic to break free of this, but I came up empty. Could not form a single command to pull a drop.

Pressure lowered to my chest.

Through a blur it looked as if someone hovered over me. Skydguard? They could take me, kill me. I'd welcome it if it meant the burn would cease.

But the hands touching me were gentle. These hands cared, and I had the urge to recoil.

"Get up, Kase."

*Malin.*

What a fool. She'd be wise to leave me. I would be nothing but a curse in her life. But she didn't. Malin lifted my arm and placed it over her narrow shoulders.

The pain of it blinded my thoughts. Bright, hot anguish filled my head as she tried to get me to stand. Standing would not be worth it. No question, it would be better to lie back and die.

"You must help me." Malin's voice cracked.

I wanted to groan, wanted to curse her, but with what I knew of the woman, Malin Strom would remain here until I pulled my ass off the ground and made a staunch refusal to cross the line between life and death.

Hells, she'd die beside me if she didn't get some bleeding brains and leave.

No matter how callous, how icy I'd been to her, she bore her heart on the outside and would let it die before she left anyone behind.

Somewhere in the haze and desire to slip into darkness, I moved my feet. A stronger, less gentle grip came to my opposite side. Lynx. His bulky arms lurched me forward until I had no choice in the matter and was stumbling on weak legs.

It was an awkward journey to the gates. I was at least half a head shorter than Lynx, and Malin was nearly a head shorter than me. Misaligned, yet somehow, they dragged me forward.

A haze overtook me, but I was vaguely aware the storm wall closed behind us as we fled through the alleyway. All other sound was as though I'd sunk beneath water. I lost my footing and fell forward.

My skin had burned too long in the poison that I hardly felt the fall, merely groaned, and rolled over to meet the Otherworld.

I'd lived a wretched life but had only one regret.

I should've found a way to tell Malin Strom the truth.

About everything.



25

# THE MEMORY THIEF

HE WOULD NOT DIE. I would go to battle against the All Father himself if the gods tried to take Kase from me.

With the storm wall in place, skydguard trapped behind, I hurried to check the pulse point on his wrist. The beat came uneven. Kase's shoulder was burned and bleeding; the liquid seared straight through his guarders and tunic. "Tova! Where is Tova?"

"Here," she said weakly.

I cursed under my breath. She leaned against the wall of the alley, holding a bloody wound in her stomach.

"I'm fine," she said through a wince. "Truly, it looks worse than it is." Vali murmured something until she smiled as he helped her to her feet. "I might need help—" she winced again, "in helping him, though."

I nodded as though she personally gave me the charge of overseeing Kase's care.

"Malin," Raum said. "We need to move him."

Kase snapped up. Blood stained the side of his face. He tried to shove me away, or perhaps he reached for me.

In the end his hand simply fell in mine. I held it and looked to Raum.  
“Move him where?”

My voice broke. I would not lose him here. Not like this, not when too much had been left unsaid.

“Our way out is just down there, but these gates aren’t going to hold forever.” Raum glanced at the storm gate. The skydguard still pounded on the wood. “Get him up, boys.”

Lynx and Gunnar forced Kase to stand. Around the corner, a man with voluptuous brown hair, toasted skin, and a wickedly playful smile on his face flicked open a gold pocket watch and examined the time.

“Rough night, my friends?” His eyes slid to Kase and Tova. “*Nish*, what’s happened?”

“A heavy dose of eldrish,” Lynx said. “And Tova angered the wrong skydguard.”

Tova smiled, but it was more a grimace. “I did my best.”

The man made a face and hurried to Kase’s side. “Dammit. I don’t know if I’ve got anything strong enough whipped up to help eldrish, but Tova, my lovely friend, we’ll get you patched up in no time.”

“He’s not going to make it if I don’t start working on him now,” I said, shoving my way through.

“Mediski?” the stranger asked.

“No, but I know mending well enough.” Truth be told, I wasn’t sure I did. Not with this.

“Come on then. I’ll at least get some herbs.”

Kase had settled against Lynx’s shoulder, and I didn’t think he was entirely conscious. Only once I stepped through the door to the house did I realize the building on the street was a front for a hideout underground. The stairwell

rounded two times before the stranger stopped in front of another door with a mat to wipe mud from shoes.

"Junius," he called out. "We've a total mess coming in."

I expected the underground house to smell earthy, moldy maybe, but inside the air was fresh with a hint of cinnamon. Furnishings with real satin thread decorated the front sitting room, but the breadth of the house went on for lengths under the streets. I steadied Kase from behind, warmth from his skin on my hand; I prayed he stayed warm.

A woman with silk beaded ribbons braided in her dark hair peered around a corner. A delicate gold chain crowned her forehead, and two silver studs pierced her cheeks. She had beautiful dark skin with warm brown eyes.

"Niklas," she said in a gasp. "What's happened?"

"Eldrish." He pressed a kiss to the side of her head. "And Tova will need your steady hands with a needle."

"Is there a place we can lie him down?" I asked. We'd exchange introductions later.

"Yes, this way." She led us into a large kitchen space, even larger than the cooking area back home. Junius moved a set of wooden bowls and a half-eaten loaf of bread from a long carving table. "Rest him here."

With Kase losing strength, then jumping awake the next moment, it was an ordeal of clever maneuvering and leveraging from me, Raum, and Lynx to get him onto the carving block.

"No, don't touch me," he muttered and tried to shove us away. Who was he fighting? His voice wasn't the bold tremble of confidence. To me, he sounded terrified.

"Kase, stop," I begged.

My voice brought him clarity and his hand covered the side of my face.



“Malin?”

“I’m right here.”

His eyes fluttered. “I thought . . .” He winced and shouted his pain.

Lynx stepped between us and rested his hand over Kase’s chest until he went limp, breaths shallow.

“He’s fading,” Lynx said. “But he’ll be calm. Help him, Malin. Please. I know nothing about mending.”

I’d never seen the meaty Kryv so discomposed.

I was no mender, no Mediski, but I’d studied herbs and learned some about fixing wounds from Sasha, Ansel’s wife, back home. I brushed my hair off my face. “Kase, you’re not dying today.” The words came out like a command. “You are not dying, do you hear me?”

I wiped my hand under my nose, unbothered I was crying, and inspected the wet blisters on his skin.

“What did you do, you bleeding fool?” Junius whispered at my side, her eyes on Kase. Her hand fell to my shoulder. “Niklas will be here to help the moment he has something mixed. Until then, what do you need?”

“Clean towels and water. Oh, and shears if you have them.”

Junius nodded and left immediately.

I washed my hands with a soap pearl near one of the basins and offered Junius a quick thanks when she returned holding silver shears and stacks of towels.

“Can you help him?” Lynx asked in an oddly small voice.

“Yes,” I said with confidence, but I didn’t even know what I was mending. Wetting a towel, I rested it over his shoulder to cool the skin and started cutting the neckline of his dark tunic. “This is the same poison that burned Gunnar, yes?”

Lynx nodded. “Blocks mesmer but can kill Alvers from the toxins. It’s what makes magisk collars. Dumped on him in such a way . . .” Lynx shook his head and didn’t say anything more.

“I will help him.”

I tied my hair off my neck and started cutting away the Nightrender’s tunic. Ash peeked his head into the kitchen. Possibly, the boy was paler. “Is he . . .”

“No, Ash,” I said gently. “He’s only sleeping.”

The boy’s chin quivered. At times, Ash showed little emotion, simply factual and knowing, but his dark eyes were wet. “D-Don’t let him hurt.” He scrubbed his hands together and tried to bite back the tears.

“I’ll take care of him, but I need you to go help Tova and stay with Hanna. Will you do that for me?”

Ash’s face brightened in relief at having a task and allowed Lynx to lead him out of the room.

I wiped my clammy hands on my dress and kept cutting Kase’s clothes.

The threads embedded into his skin, and he jolted whenever I picked at the bloody pieces. Twine hung around his neck, and a sob scraped from my throat at the sight of what was on the end. The wooden raven I’d returned, but the second pendant was a terribly shaped rose with rough-cut petals.

My fingertips brushed over the wooden charm. The rose he’d carved for me, then told me he got to wear it to keep a piece of me with him while I kept his raven with me.

No matter how much he fought against it, the truth was the Nightrender had gripped onto the kinder parts of the past the same as me. He hadn’t rejected everything, and the boy I once knew was still there. Locked inside shadows and blood and hate.

I wiped my brow when the shoulder was cleaned and slimed in herb balms Niklas brought while he drifted between Tova and Kase.

He was an Elixist, no mistake, for he said he had nothing whipped up, but soon the carving block was laden in pungent mixes to bring relief to Kase's burning skin.

Alone now, sweat dripped down the side of my face by the time the blisters stopped oozing. Nudging him onto one shoulder, Kase's bare back faced me, and all along the planes of his muscle were masses of taut scars. Angry skin spanned the wing of his left shoulder to his hip bone.

I blinked through tears and a rush of violence against those who'd harmed him. Only hatred and torture could have done this. "What happened to you?"

My fingertips touched his face with soft strokes. He wouldn't die here today. He'd live, and by the gods, if he wanted vengeance against those who'd harmed him, I would be the first to lift a blade on his behalf.



IN MANY WAYS THE boy I once knew *was* dead.

Yet, watching him sleep now that his wounds were cleaned, I could see him behind the anger of the Nightrender.

Tova winced as she slipped a clean tunic over her bandaged side.

I bit my thumbnail and waited for her to sit beside me. "Tova, tell me everything. No more secrets. I need to know what happened to him."

She hung her head and picked up a bowl of potato stew Junius brought. Mine had gone cold. "It's not my story—"

"His story is your story. Please," I said with a touch of desperation. "Tell me. I don't understand what happened. How did he become a Kryv?"

"The same way we all did." Tova leaned back in her chair. "We met because we were to be trained to be more of the Lord Magnate's loyal Alvers. But we were placed to protect the youngest son of Ivar."

"Not Heir Magnate Niall, but—"

"Luca Grym, yes." Tova scrubbed her face nervously. "We were to serve him, protect him, and I suppose be his friends since he was rarely allowed outdoors. In the meantime, Ivar experimented on us. Mesmer fascinates the Lord Magnate. It's as if he wants to test every Alver's limits to know who could be a threat to him or who is simply unique. There is something strange about Ivar and the way Alvers become loyal to him."

"How did he not gain your loyalty?"

"Because of Luca," she said. "He made countless appeals that his personal Alvers would be his. Ivar hurt us, but he could never take us for his own."

I blinked back tears. "You're not lying?"

"I wish. Ivar likes to begin his manipulation young."

"No doubt with his mesmer." Most believed Ivar to be a Hypnotik, but I suspected there was more to the Lord Magnate. No illusion could keep so many Alvers at his righthand side for so long.

"I'm fortunate enough not to know what his mesmer can do. But whatever his Talent is, it does wretched things to the mind, and no one falters in their love for the Lord Magnate," Tova said. "He's convinced folk their Alver children will find academia at the Black Palace. Young ones are sent each turn with their families believing it is to be a refuge where they can learn of their mesmer, but it's all so Ivar can have his puppets. I was nearly too old for his liking at thirteen."

"Thirteen is young."

"They preferred younger. Ash and Hanna were born in the Black Palace.

Most of the skydguard on watch . . .” Tova squeezed her eyes shut, “took an interest in the female Alvers.”

“Tova,” I whispered, taking her hand.

She sniffed and wiped a hand under her nose. “Ash and Hanna are both children of one of those guards. Their mothers were killed eventually. Ash was four when his died. Hanna, only two. Ivar didn’t want the trouble of any motherly protection while he tried to own them. But both were given to Luca because Kase told him of the little siblings. Ivar must have some affection for his youngest son because he agreed. So, Ash and Hanna have only known us as their family.”

My heart was in shambles. “How did he discover Kase was an Alver? We . . . we snuck into the masque, but we were careful about giving away any hint we had mesmer.”

“I don’t know why he was taken,” she said. “He says neither does he.”

The way she spoke, I had a feeling Tova didn’t believe Kase. The secrets the man kept were not only with me. He hid a great deal from everyone.

After a pause, Tova chuckled. “Kase was different than the rest of us, you know. He was clever, always resisting the Lord Magnate. He and Luca loved causing trouble.”

I wiped away a tear, smiling as I remembered him not so differently. “Sounds like Kase. He always had schemes, but were you really friends with the Lord Magnate’s son?”

I found it impossible to love anything to do with Ivar.

“I’m not sure we knew much about friendship then, but I still say yes. Luca was as much a prisoner as us in some ways.”

“Then how did you escape?”

“When Luca was sent to the academies in Furen to study, the vow Ivar

made ended. Kase was set to serve the Lord Magnate instead. Ivar wants no one more than him, the boy he could never break. After Luca was gone, Kase fought back. The short version: we followed his lead. The gods were on our side. Doors opened, few guards were on watch, and we managed to escape.”

Thoughts tumbled in a strange cataclysm. I didn’t wonder why Kase buried his past, how could he not? Becoming the Nightrender was how he survived. “How long ago did you escape?”

“About five turns ago.”

I squeezed Tova’s hand. Her life had been loveless, joyless, yet she still smiled. Still had kindness. “I wish you had not been treated in such a way.”

She leaned her head on my shoulder. “But it has made me who I am, and I will always be grateful for that.”

“It is a good thing to be grateful for.” I smiled. “I should check on his welts until you are well enough.”

“I could do with some sleep,” she told me through a yawn and went to the door. “Thank you for helping him, perhaps you have a bit of Mediski in you.”

“Don’t say that until you see how poorly I mended his shoulder.”

“Will you be all right alone?”

I nodded with a soft smile. “I’m not afraid of Kase Eriksson.



26

# THE NIGHTRENDER

A WEIGHT ON MY face kept my eyes closed. Something cool to the touch, damp, with a sickly amount of rosemary.

Bit by bit my mind drifted from the foggy nothingness to a hard surface on my back, and from head to hip, the same rosemary dampness across my skin. A prickle of unease danced down my spine. Why did my limbs feel too heavy to swing a blade? I did not take well to feeling helpless or trapped. Even without fetters on my wrists my heart sped, and my impulse was to bite at anything—or anyone—who came too close.

I could hardly lift my arm without wincing as skin pulled painfully taut. As best I could, I touched the coolness on my face. A cloth of some kind soaked my skin with the herbs. Gently, I pulled it away.

“Welcome back.”

With the cloth removed, I let my eyes flutter open. My throat had dried, and each word burned as I spoke. “Must all your damn elixirs smell so rotten, Nik?”

Niklas Tjuv, the guild lead of the Falkyn smugglers, grinned. His thick, dark hair was a mess, and his linen shirt was unbuttoned at the neck. Playful



in nature, but there was a dark burden in his eyes tonight.

I doubted he'd done much by way of sleep since we'd burst into his nest.

"Be grateful, you bastard," he said as he stretched out his legs and arms. "That rot is keeping your skin from peeling off your bones."

"Always overexaggerating." I sobered and lowered my voice. "Thank you."

Niklas quirked one corner of his mouth. "You know how I love to take credit, but I'm afraid most of your care was overseen by your guest."

I groaned, ashamed to admit how that small moment, when I believed the bucket would fall over her head, destroyed one of the walls I'd placed between us.

I could not lose Malin.

Not because she was an Alver. Not because she'd paid the guild her stolen penge.

I could not lose *her*.

"Tell me about her," Niklas said. "No, I'll restate. Tell me the things you've kept from me all these turns."

"She is a dealmaker—"

"Don't patronize me," he interrupted. "We're both too self-important to play such unamusing games. I know what she does, Kase. The others informed me. While you've been deciding whether to die or not, I've replayed a great many of our past conversations. Mulled over actions you've taken, and now I find myself questioning and wondering what ulterior motive my old friend has had all this time?"

"Stop wondering. There is no motive."

Niklas's eyes darkened. "You have withheld something that could change the lives of everyone, something that could change the very fate of this land."

"No."

"Don't lie to me," he said with a calmness, much like the still of night before a storm. "How long have you known of her?"

"Niklas, I have killed men for knowing less." I swallowed past a burn in my throat. "Leave this alone. Please."

Guild leads did not plead. Not in Klockglas, Skítkast, not in any region. Especially not to each other.

It was enough to bring him to pause.

Niklas studied me, then sighed, shaking his head. "You cannot stop fate from taking what she wants."

"I do not believe in fate," I said. "Our paths are ours to choose."

He chuckled darkly. "Then allow me to believe in the three Norns for both of us. You go to the masquerade at this woman's behest. Have you not stopped to wonder if this is exactly what needs to happen?"

"It will be nothing more than our typical scheme."

"I hope so. If this turns into something more, there is no telling who might live or die." Niklas stood and removed some of the linens from my chest, inspecting my skin. I would never tell him—his head would puff up too big—but Niklas was the best Elixist I knew. If anyone could have kept me alive, it was him. He rolled the linens and tossed them into a basin. "They poisoned you with eldrish."

I lifted one brow. "That much and I survived?"

"Barely," Niklas said. "I was able to concoct a blend to pull the poison out before it went to your heart and spread everywhere. But if the girl had not tended to you immediately, I'm not sure I would have been here in time. It escapes me as to why, but she seems to care for you."

I turned my face to the wall. "She knew me before . . . this life. We are not

the same people anymore.”

“I’m sure you’re not,” Niklas said. “Yet, you leapt in front of her and took a bucket of eldrish in her place. I don’t think it was only because of what she is, either. I think it goes deeper.”

“You’ve been vowed too long to Junius, and have gone soft,” I said, desperate to speak of anything but this.

“Ah, my friend, I could be vowed to the woman for two thousand turns and it would not be long enough.” He laughed and backed toward the door. “I’m going to ask you to rest, and I’ll expect you to heed me. Your guild is alive and well and drinking all my brän. Oh, and take my advice on something for I am wiser than you—don’t be the Nightrender to her. Be Kase. I think you will be glad you did.”

Niklas stepped out, leaving me lost in a haze.

Truth be told, I didn’t know how to be Kase. Not anymore. But for the first time in turns, I wanted to be.

Soon, I lost track of time. Moments spun together when one had nothing to do but stare at the wall.

Somewhere deep in the nest, an odd chime, likely from one of Niklas’s smuggled clocks from some distant kingdom, tolled the hour.

The door opened.

I expected Niklas, possibly Tova, but my blood rushed to my face when Malin peeked around the door. Our eyes met. Unable to calm the storm raging in my chest, I slung an arm over my face, hoping she might leave.

She didn’t.

Malin picked up a towel and cleansing paste Niklas left behind. Her fingers touched my rough skin, and I shirked her away.

“Niklas asked me to do this.”

Bastard. Always meddling.

Her soft hand caressed my shoulder. I stiffened against it. Despicable how a loving touch, one that cared, unsettled me more than knives and blood.

Malin worked in silence until the blisters glistened with a thick layer of balm. I kept my head turned away, afraid to bend to the desire inside. For her sake, for mine. To give in would mean to care, and to care would mean a new way for cruel, wicked folk to exploit us.

She said my name, but I returned nothing.

Malin let out a harsh breath, startling me when her hands trapped the sides of my face. Her fingers dug into my skin. Not so much it upset the wounds, more like she did not want to let go. As if I might disappear.

My eyes closed when Malin pressed her brow to mine.

"Why do you hate me?" Her voice croaked. "Help me understand, then I swear to you if you wish me to leave, I will. I will leave you alone."

My chest cracked down the middle. Slowly, my hands went to her arms, and I nudged her back.

She resisted my touch, gripping my face tighter, pushing forward. "Please, Kase."

I let out an exasperated chuckle. "I'm only trying to sit up."

"Oh."

Malin kept her eyes on my every move as I adjusted into sitting on the carving block. The surface of my skin was angry and red. Dried blood streaked across my chest and shoulders. At least my head was no longer swimming.

Once I was steady, Malin settled on a chair in front of me, hands clasped in her lap.

"You're hurt." Before I could think better of it, my fingertips reached out

and brushed over a gash on her brow.

Malin padded her fingers over the spot. She shrugged. "It's nothing."

I let my arm drop and turned my scrutiny to the stone floor.

"You have a gentle touch," she whispered.

"You sound surprised."

"I did watch you shatter a man's jaw."

I lifted my gaze and narrowed my eyes. "Boswell Doft was a tyrant who took frustrations out on his wife, sometimes bringing her to the brink of the Otherworld."

"How could you know?"

"The wife's lover—the other appointment we had before meeting with Doft," I said. "Dagny knew him in a past life, and he was more than forthcoming when she arranged a meet. The lover paid us to finish Doft. You'll find no remorse for the blood on my hands."

"You knew him, didn't you? The way Doft spoke to you—"

"I knew him," I said. "He was the first to see my mesmer. Have no doubt, knowing him and what he is capable of only adds to my lack of remorse." My jaw tensed. "Is Boswell who you wished to speak about?"

She scoffed. "You know I don't."

"Then ask." Niklas had better be right. I wasn't doing a remarkable job at being Kase. Most things I said came out like a poisonous bite.

Malin shifted in her chair. "Why do you hate me one moment, then step in front of danger for my sake?"

"I don't hate you."

Malin shook her head. She didn't believe a word of it.

In the turns we'd been parted I'd become a thing of cruelty and shadows. Darkness was safe. Solitude, a haven. So, it should've been no surprise that

there was a bit of repulsion at her touch and presence. As if kind things were the blades and hate the shield.

But beyond the surface of disgust was a rush of desire. The race of a pulse, the secret hope Malin would touch me again and again.

She'd been my first love; my only love. All these wicked turns later and she'd found the ability to command me once again and didn't even know it.

"I despise everything from the past most days," I said, voice low. "Except you."

"Your actions have said otherwise."

"Malin." Her name rolled off my tongue gently. "Look at me."

Her pinched stare remained on her lap for a long moment, then she lifted her gaze to mine.

"I know you want to understand," I said. "But it's impossible to explain everything. There are things I don't know how to admit, things I've done since we were last together."

"Then I will start." She bit her bottom lip between her teeth. "When I thought you might die out there, I can't remember the last time I was so afraid." I studied her and those grass green eyes broke a part of my soul before piecing it back together again. She swallowed and went on. "I suppose I was afraid on the day you were taken from me."

"From you?"

"Once, you were everything to me. I searched for you, became as much a thief as you. There were no lengths to keep me from finding answers. Sometimes I was cruel, all to find out what happened."

"I know," I said. "You put yourself at risk not knowing if I was alive. It was stupid."

"It was," she agreed. "Because it turns out you're quite rude."

Hells, the smile took me from behind, gripping me before I realized I'd even relaxed enough to grin.

"I should've stopped you turns back," I told her. "Rumors of a girl selling memories didn't escape me."

"Why did you not come to me?"

"I'm dangerous, Malin. I have dangerous enemies. How could I bring those risks to you?"

"But you knew me when I sought the guild's help. You knew me when you were Elof. Why now?"

"I don't entirely know," I admitted. "Maybe I didn't want you getting your throat slit by going after Hagen. Or maybe I finally lost the fight to stay away."

She reached out and placed one hand on my knee. "Then why be so cold to me?"

"When you spend turns becoming someone new, facing the past is like a snag in a tapestry. I thought if you hated what I'd become, we would remain distant, and you would not unravel everything I buried long ago."

"Did it work?"

"No." I whispered. "You've always been my undoing."

For a moment, I wasn't certain how to go on. My stomach backflipped when she curled her hand around mine, her thumb tracing the calluses of my palm.

"At the masque," she whispered, "how did they know you had mesmer? Why did they take you?"

"Who's to say," I grumbled, unable to give up more. I slipped my fingers through hers. "I heard you, you know. I heard you calling my name. When they had me alone in a cage, I called for you too. Until I lost my voice."

"I should've searched harder."

"It's not on you."

"It is," she said through her teeth. "I never should've insisted we go that day. I should've—"

Damn the distance. My palms overtook her face; I pulled her closer. My lips nearly brushed hers when I spoke. "Hear this well," I said in a low warning. "It is *not* on you."

My thumb touched the curve of her lip as I pulled back, still too weak to stay off balance in such a way. "What more do you wish to ask?"

Malin's face was flushed, but she cleared her throat, coming back to the moment. "Are you a Malevolent?"

"I think you already know," I said. "Yes. A descendant of nightmares."

"I don't believe that."

"You'll see it differently when you know what I do." I turned my palms up. "I use fear. Imagine the possibilities, the damage. I create illusions like a Hypnotik, but nothing good or comforting."

"You created Elof's face."

"True, but he had dark intentions." I didn't explain that the illusion of another face came from my own fear of her seeing my true features. Clearing my throat, I went on. "I create dark things, like shadows and waking nightmares. I thought I was a Rifter as a boy because I could break skin, but I was wrong. Those who fear physical harm or death, I can cause it."

She blinked with a bit of astonishment. "Like Raum told me."

"He fears drowning," I said. "I can make him feel as if he is being swallowed by the Howl; I can kill him with it. There are Falkyns here who fear being trapped underground, so I could break these walls over them. Whatever it is, death, suffocation, torture, I can create it."



She was too quiet. No mistake, Malin probably had a bit of fear for me now, and if I were not doused in mesmer-blocking poison, I'd feel it.

But when she tangled her fingers in mine, I was beginning to question her ability to fear anything. Perhaps her sanity. None of the horrid things I ever did or said seemed to impact her opinion of me in the least.

"You were with me in the hayloft at nights. Weren't you?" she whispered. "I felt the darkness and convinced myself it was a ghost watching over me."

In a way, she wasn't wrong. I had been a ghost. When I returned to House Strom to hunt Hagen, I knew there would be glimpses of the girl I could not dislodge from what was left of my stone-cast heart. I simply didn't expect those glimpses to turn into more.

At first, I could settle for hate. Safe, distant hate. If she hated me, at least I'd still be in her head. What I received was unmistakable need and devotion.

"I was there," I admitted thickly.

"But you still pretend to be someone you simply aren't."

"You think the Nightrender is not who I am?" One brow arched. "I changed. This is the reason I didn't want you to ever know me again because I learned to hate, Malin. I don't know love anymore."

"I think you do," she said. "You are the one who has done everything to protect the Kryv. Out of love, I'm sure. Tova told me how you saved Ash and Hanna, and you all treat each other like family."

"It's a pleasant picture you've painted, but perhaps I act out of a need to survive."

Malin staggered to her feet and stretched the aches out of her spine. "Perhaps. I'll not deny we have both changed. But I knew you once, Kase. Better than anyone."

For a moment I said nothing. "I'm not the same as that boy."

"Maybe not, but you saved me from the skydguard. Sounds heroic to me, not wicked."

I smiled, unburdened. "Set your heroic standards higher. I survive by darkness, Malin. I keep it close, and it keeps me."

"We'll see."

I took her hand. Now that we'd touched, the craving for more only intensified. "I thought I wouldn't get there in time. Fiske saw something happening to you, and from the moment we stepped onto Skítkast soil I was on edge, waiting."

"He saw something?"

"Something unclear, but he felt like it involved you."

With care, I leveraged off the carving block, standing in front of her. We were close, a minor step, and we'd be chest to chest. Malin's eyes fluttered closed, and she arched her body closer when I brushed a lock of her hair off her forehead.

"Why did you care so much?" A question I've tried to understand for a time now. "Why did you never stop searching for me?"

Her fingertips traced the line of my jaw. "You wouldn't have stopped had it been me."

I used one knuckle to tilt her face to mine. "Malin, I can't be Kase Eriksson, not anymore."

"Because he has too much humanity?"

I simply shook my head, unsure what to say.

"Fine," she went on, "but don't expect me not to see glimpses of the boy I knew. I should go, you need to let those wounds rest."

Malin drifted toward the door. She paused, tapping the wall with her fingers, and with a soft smile she left me alone once again.

In a game of bribes and ploys emotions had no place. One wrong look, one twitch of the eye, one move to show who you cared for the most could be the difference between the upper hand and losing it all.

Like a heartsick fool, I'd let her dig back inside.

No mistake, the risk of our game increased tenfold.



27

# THE MEMORY THIEF

FOR TWO NIGHTS KASE'S fever came in waves. I was grateful when Tova recovered enough and took over his healing with mesmer. Between her and Niklas, who readily admitted to being an Elixist, the Nightrender was nearly restored.

Niklas and Junius's home belonged to dozens of other people who came and went as they pleased.

On the third night, a few Kryv slept in corners of the main sitting room. Others sharpened and cleaned their bloody blades. Gunnar smiled at a handful of letters sent to him from the Northern Kingdom. From his mother, he said, and his aunt, wife of the rebel fae king. The woman had a friendship with Junius, so missives were delivered to the Falkyn nest.

I stared at the ewer on the table. Raum kept his end of our bargain and spoke true—Skítkast brän was lifechanging because it was disgusting. Like drinking mold.

Tova slipped away to wash, and Raum sat at my side, dragging the point of his blade lazily over his forearm, tracing a faint scar.

Niklas handed out apple ale to wash down the brän and nestled next to Junius on a claw-footed couch. A fine piece, one a member of the exclusive Exchange Guild might have. Perhaps, even a noble house.

He caught my eye over the edge of his drinking horn. “Wondering where we get all this junk?”

“Might’ve crossed my mind.”

Niklas set his drink on the wooden table at his side. “Falkyn is simply a fancy name for smugglers, thieves, and all-around shady folk.”

“You steal things?”

“We take back what was stolen and return it to the needy.”

I laughed sincerely. “So, you’re a hero?”

“Don’t insult me.”

A Falkyn with curly blond hair clapped Niklas on the back. “He’s a regular hero.”

“This is Eero,” Niklas said. “The one in this nest who keeps us from taking too many risks.”

“The Falkyns are the Kryv of Skítkast,” Raum explained, but Niklas waved the idea away. “And Niklas can give you loads of advice on your kiss of death mesmer.”

“True,” Niklas said. “I’ve done an abhorrent amount of reading on mesmer, you see. Drives Junie batty.”

“It’s all he talks about,” Eero agreed and took a cup of brän from a tray.

“Well, you would too if you had mesmer.”

“Thank the hells I don’t. I’m too busy keeping you alive to worry about mesmer.”

I grinned. “Junie, are you an Alver?”

“Yes. I’m a Profetik with taste. A favorite of kings and nobles for obvious

reasons.”

Niklas’s expression twisted into a dark scowl. “Yes, what is it to a king to poison a few Profetiks? Those with mesmer Talents in taste are used for food samplers, you see.”

I’d never considered such thing.

“That isn’t the best part, Junie,” Raum said.

She grinned rather slyly and looked to me. “I taste the lies of others too.”

“Lies? That would be helpful.” Mesmer was fascinating. Being an Anomali, I always made the mistake of thinking I could not be surprised by it.

“It can be burdensome if I’m surrounded by liars,” Junius said. “But, yes, it has proved useful.”

Niklas beamed at his wife like the world existed merely to have her in it. He kissed her head, and I could not help the way thoughts drifted to Kase. He’d been gentler, touched me with tenderness I did not expect, but he was still the Nightrender. Still trapped in shadows.

“Junie couldn’t taste lies until she vowed with you,” Eero said through a gulp of brän. “Something shifted in her mesmer. You, my friend, have simply grown more insufferable.”

Everyone in the room laughed, but the joke escaped me. “What do marital vows have to do with mesmer?”

“You truly don’t know much about being an Alver, do you?” Niklas regarded me with a bit of confusion. “No matter. Let us have a little chat. To answer your question, mesmer can be used in many vows. Contracts sealed with Alver blood are nigh unbreakable, but when two Alvers take vows with each other, their mesmer unites. Not a small decision, and unless both agree to leave the vow, it’s lifelong.”

A furrow gathered in the center of my brow. “What do you mean mesmer unites?”

“When two Alvers vow, they strengthen their Talents by getting a piece of the other. But even more, if I were injured, Junie would know. And if I died —” He paused. “Well, I don’t know what would happen to her. My best theory is she’d be powerless, maybe sickly. Or perhaps she would be as before we took our vows.”

“I’d never be the same,” Junie said, pressing a kiss to Niklas’s neck.

“Alver vows are meticulously arranged in regions to strengthen defenses,” Niklas said. “But I’ve studied this and when choice is removed, and an Alver is forced to vow, the bond is weaker. Call me a romantic, but I think love is what strengthens the bond.”

“I agree,” Fiske said from where he sat against the wall.

“You and Isak are vowed?” I asked. Fiske nodded and wiggled his brows. The idea of such a connection brought a blossoming warmth to my heart. I looked to Niklas again. “Will you laugh at me if I ask how mesmer works in the basic form? What makes Alvers at all?”

“I will laugh at you for many things, but not for that question,” Niklas said. “To other kingdoms, mesmer is called body magic. Inside the body is a system of pathways which lead to different areas in here.” Niklas tapped the side of his head. “Imagine bolts of lightning constantly sparking along these pathways. These charges carry a language all their own to our minds. The different Kinds of mesmer can speak these different languages, control them, take power from them.”

“You mean each Kind of Alver can speak to different parts of the body?”

Niklas nodded, delighted. “Exactly. For example, Profetiks take from the pathway controlling the senses. They use calm and meditation as visionaries



like Fiske, or use basic senses like Junie, Raum, and Vali. They'll see and hear things others can't, smell and track with the instincts of a silver wolf. Taste poison before it touches their tongue, or like Junie, taste the changes in demeanor, the uptick of blood, the reflexive responses to a lie.

"Now, Profetiks are unique, though, since they use their own senses. Most mesmer connects to other folk. A Mediski must touch a person. From there mesmer connects to the impulse responsible for initiating the tissues and innards to begin healing. Or an Elixist, like me, must take a blood sample to be most effective."

"Why a blood sample?"

"Because each body is unique, and my mesmer creates specialized elixirs for individuals." Niklas crossed one ankle over his knee and laced his fingers across his middle. "One elixir might heal a person perfectly, but for someone else the same elixir may not work at all. I can create generic potions, don't mistake me, but with a sample of blood, I could create a poison that could connect to a weakness in one body, but would have little impact on someone else. Eldrish poison is an example of generic elixing. Developed over the turns to find weaknesses in all Alver blood."

"Thank the skies Kase is powerful," Junius said. "In a weaker Alver, we'd have been scraping them off the street."

I leaned forward with rapt attention. I wanted to know it all. How mesmer worked, how I used my own. Niklas went on about each Kind. Rifiers, their mesmer connected to pain. Not bone as I'd always thought. I learned some folk had high tolerance for anguish and could be quite the challenge for a Rifter. Hypnotiks pulled from conscious thought, manipulating, and creating illusions to trick those thoughts like a dream.

"But remember, each Alver has unique ability within their Kind. Take

Lynx,” Niklas said. “He convinces the mind to sleep, while Gunnar alters desire. Both Hypnotiks, but unique. What other questions do you have?”

“I don’t understand Anomali Kinds,” I admitted. “No one seems to know exactly how they work.”

“Then they’re not studying well enough.”

Junie rolled her eyes. “Forgive, Niklas. Elixists are known to be scholarly. He gets rather annoyed when others don’t share his love of the written word.”

“A shame,” Niklas muttered. “If folk would research, they’d know Anomalies feed from emotions instead of physical charges in the body. When we feel things, bursts of chemicals rush through our systems. Happiness, fear, hope, nostalgia even. Anomalies find their power in those moments.”

I shook my head, confused. “Do you know anything about memories, then?”

Niklas hesitated. “I know you work in them.”

He spoke slowly, almost as if he wasn’t certain he should. I wondered what he was thinking, and why even Eero raised a brow, like he was seeing me for the first time.

“I suppose you’re wondering how memories have anything to do with emotion,” Niklas pressed.

I paused to consider the idea. “No, I can see it. Memories are riddled in emotion.”

“Right,” he said. “The same way I use a small bit of blood, you use breath and bone. But I’m not convinced breath is always needed.”

“What do you mean?”

Niklas leaned back on the sofa. “I have read about memory workers. From what I’ve gathered there are two specific Talents among them. An old vein of mesmer. Rare. Powerful.”

The Falkyn paused again. I had the odd feeling he was holding back.

"Because they're oracles," Eero blurted out. "They're the Kind who once ruled this bleeding kingdom."

Niklas's face paled. "Legends, my friend. We don't know if they were memory workers exactly."

My stomach tightened. "Wait, you believe Alvers who stole memories once ruled here?"

The room went too quiet. Sweat on my palms made my skin balmy and I hurried to wipe it away on my trousers.

A muscle popped in Niklas's jaw. He took an extended drink from his horn, then leaned onto his elbows over his knees. "The histories our governments would have us forget involve a civil strife with the old throne."

"Civil? As in family fought against family for the throne?"

"In a way, but more magical. Rumors say the royal family could read the past, the present, and the future through memory."

"How can the future be read through a memory?" I chuckled nervously. "There would be no memory if it had not yet happened."

"Unless the future came from an omniscient vein of power," Niklas deadpanned.

"Meaning?"

"The Norns. Fate itself. The myths say the Norns bestowed one family with a gift, a trinket that would let them see bits and pieces of fate's sight."

"The queen's ring," Eero said.

My brows shot up. "The ring Ivar uses at the masque?"

Niklas shook his head. "I'm sure it is a replica of a legend."

"But you're saying those who could read memories could also read what was to come because of a gift from fate?" It was a strange notion. As Niklas

said, no doubt more myth than true.

"That is what was believed," Niklas said. "Thousands of turns ago there were two princes. One brother was blessed with many daughters, the other with many sons. The sagas say the Norns blessed the children of these two princes with unique magic. The sons could change memories and were given the charge to use the gift for good. Take away pain, perhaps lessen the blow of trauma."

"To alter a memory and leave it would be . . . impossible," I said. "I can take memories, but it does not change them."

"Because it is not your Talent," Lynx offered.

"Exactly," Niklas said, but there was less conviction in his voice, a touch of nervousness hid amongst his bravado and confidence.

"Don't stop the tale there," Raum said, taking a sip of his horn, fully invested in the story. "What of the daughters?"

"The daughters—" Niklas cleared a scratch from his throat. "The daughters were given the gift of controlling complete memories. But also, the gift of seeing forward and backward, as I mentioned before."

"If someone could see the future, they would be impossible to defeat," I said, hating how discomposed this conversation made me. I didn't know why.

"I agree," Niklas said. "But like all mesmer, I have no doubt the foresight had its limitations. I simply don't know what they were. Did it depend on a ring? Touch? I don't know. In the sagas, the daughters performed their gifts through the minds of others. They . . . they could take or give memories when needed."

Raum blew out a whistle. "Lovey, sounds a great deal like you."

He'd meant to tease, but the hair lifted on my arms.

"They're sagas, Raum," I said as playfully as I could manage. "Most are

written with only speckles of truth. Go on,” I told Niklas as if this did not send a sharp rush of apprehension down my spine. “What else would these daughters do?”

He scratched his chin. “Well, you can see how their ability could be powerful. To transfer secret military strategy, one could take a memory from an enemy, make them forget, then bring it to their side to use. Or having foresight of what might come to pass would be powerful. Seeing the future, no matter how small a glimpse, is a mighty gift for a ruler to possess.”

“Is it similar t-t-to Fiske?” Isak asked.

“Nearly,” Niklas said. “You don’t see clear events, true? More feelings.”

Fiske nodded. “In my strongest moments I can sense who will be involved, but I never get specific details. Enough to help us decide to take the risk or not.”

“These daughters, according to the legend, could see actual events,” Niklas said, facing me. “However small, such a thing would be coveted mesmer. To ancient folk, the clear rulers were the daughters who could give and take from memories. Their cousins were second in command. It is a tale as old as time. Greed and jealousy came between the two princes and their families were divided.

“In the end, the prince with the daughters won the throne, and the second prince was disgraced. But the daughters had mercy and kept their cousins in power. The oldest daughter was chosen as queen, and the oldest cousin as regent.” Niklas studied me for a long moment before going on. “Together they ruled our miserly kingdom in peace for centuries. Daughter passing on their gifts to their daughters. Until the same greed which divided them before destroyed the throne through civil war and left our kingdom without a true heir.”

I didn't know what to think. All of it was unsettling. "So, this would mean my mesmer is some descendant of this long-dead family?"

Niklas shrugged and reached for his horn again. "Who is to say?"

Eero scrunched up his face. He looked irritated. "Who is to say? You have left out part of the tale."

"I did not know you knew it so well, my friend." Niklas chuckled and nudged Eero in the ribs.

"I read enough to know it was believed the two royal lines never died off. Their descendants live in hiding, waiting for their queen to arise again," Eero said. "Why the hells do you think the Lord Magnate has his little game at his masquerade? Fate's ring was said to belong to the first queen. Only an heir will fit it. But should one come close to winning . . ." Eero dragged his thumb across his throat, not needing to explain more.

The way Eero looked at me it was as though he expected me to pull out a bleeding crown and plop it on my head. A heavy sense of dread pressed against my spine until I could not sit straight.

"I assure you I am no hidden descendant of queens." I rolled my eyes and scoffed. "My mother was a poor fisherman's widow who found a bit of luck and caught the eye of a nobleman. She took vows to give her daughter a home. There was nothing royal about us."

"Exactly," Niklas said. "It is nothing but a story to explain your mesmer. I have no doubt wars did destroy our throne, but if it involved Alver folk like you, it was coincidence."

I was grateful he changed the topic. Even Eero seemed placated enough to leave it there.

"Tell me about other Anomalies," I said. "Like Kase."

"All rare." Niklas returned to the blithe host. "Hanna—and your brother as

I understand—have a strange Talent too. From what I can tell they act like a shock to the system. The pathways go numb around them. I'm curious how far the block could go if they strengthened their mesmer. How many Alvers could go powerless at once?"

An interesting thought. Could Hagen block many Alvers if he tried? When we found him again, I'd tell him to test the theory.

"As for Kase," Niklas went on. "He taps into fear. But he does have an opposite. Called a Benevolent. One who harnesses power from happiness and hope."

"Sounds pleasant, right?" Lynx muttered. "It isn't."

"Think about it," Niklas said. "Our hopes teeter along desperation by a hairsbreadth. The same as Kase manipulates fear to create chaos, a Benevolent might manipulate joy and desire to maintain control. Folk are desperate to avoid their fears and keep whatever they hope for alive. To exploit desperation, well, there's power there."

The Kryv who were listening made a few bitter-sounding grunts.

"Do you know a Benevolent?" I asked.

"Just one," Raum said. "A sod, and I'd rather not talk about him."

I was curious, but as playful as Raum could be, he wasn't one to lie. When he said he didn't want to talk about something, I'd learned by now, it meant he didn't.

Talk turned to other things, and I was glad. At long last, Niklas insisted we all find a room to sleep, and rest.

I fought the urge to visit Kase again. If anyone needed to rest their wounds it was him, and if I went there again, I did not think I'd have the strength to keep my hands off him.

If he would only let me care for him—hells, if he would let me love him as

I did—there were a great many things besides touching I would do to Kase Eriksson. But to be denied would cut worse than hot steel.

For now, I would fall asleep to dreams of all those things I would do. Ragged breaths, skin on skin, and a future. One I'd hunted to find since he was taken from me.

With such a small glimpse beneath his hardened outer edges, I'd fight to pluck him out of his own darkness.





28

# THE MEMORY THIEF

TOVA'S BREATHS WERE HEAVY and peaceful in the Falkyn nest. We'd taken a sitting room to sleep, one with a stone stove to keep warm.

Sleep nearly pulled me under when a hand clapped over my mouth.

The twin knives were under my pillow; I reached for them. But once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, stun dissolved into frustration. Gold eyes laughed at me in the dark.

"Too slow," Kase whispered. "If I'd wanted you dead, by now, you would be."

I shoved his hand off my face, smoothing my wild hair as I sat up. He grinned, and I was so unused to it, I didn't know how to behave.

I pinched my mouth, battling with relief and worry from nearly losing him again. "Are you well enough to be moving about?"

"It would be more dangerous to keep me locked up. I do not like being idle for long and get rather ill-tempered when I am." His crooked grin gleamed in the darkness. "Come with me. We're not yet finished with Skítkast."

Kase rolled off my sleeping mat. His blacksteel sword was missing, replaced by a suit and waistcoat. He'd dressed like someone in the Exchange

Guild.

Curious as I was, I hugged my pillow against my chest. “I’m *sleeping*. And you shouldn’t be moving when your skin is healing.”

“I’m fine, and you are paying me to help, are you not?”

“With memories, yes. You *stole* my penge.”

“That is a matter of opinion.”

“We should return to not speaking, Nightrender, if speaking means you will wake me at all hours.”

“I think you’re afraid of me.”

“Well, you’d be the one to know,” I said, but sighed, breaking a bit of my armor against him. “You’ve been missing for turns, have hardly said a word to me, so this chatter between us is going to take more than a few nights to catch up.”

The answer must’ve satisfied him because he smirked and tossed a gown with rabbit fur sleeves at me. “Hurry up and get dressed.”

I groaned and untucked my legs from beneath the quilt. The tunic barely struck me at my knees, and my face heated when Kase’s gaze certainly noticed.

I cleared my throat. “Turn around if you please.”

A wickedness lived in those eyes. One that spun a web of heated delight low in my stomach. “Twice now you’ve asked me to turn away. There won’t be a third.”

My mouth parted. Those were the words he left me to fumble with in my brain. Hells, I could hardly fasten the clasp over the low neckline of the gown. A long slit ran up one side and it was entirely too diaphanous.

I added my rune pouch filled with my vials to the inside of my thigh. After a few deep breaths, I composed myself, and stepped into the corridor,

admittedly anxious to learn what he had planned.

Kase spun the curved knife around his finger again. I tapped on his shoulder, and when he turned, his eyes combed the length of me. I cleared my throat, skin overheated, and clasped my hands behind my back. “Are you going to explain why you’ve dressed me this way?”

“You’ll see. Keep up.”

The streets of Skítkast were thick with brine from the sea and smoke from the torches surrounding the empty Wild Hunt arena. Kase led us in the opposite way of the city square. Good. I didn’t want any reminders of Doft or the battle with the skydguard.

“Where are we going?” I whispered when he paused in a narrow alleyway.

Across the street was one of the few houses built with smooth stones, still leaning slightly, but sturdier than the wooden alehouse next door. The windows were aglow, and laughter from inside floated into the streets.

“This house belongs to a trader named Klaus Krokig,” he said. “Klaus has a particular talent with creating cleverly hidden and wholly illegal trade rings throughout the regions. He was to design and inspect this turn’s masquerade layout. Including a new trade room. This is our way to know where Hagen will be. He has the design plans in his possession, and I plan to take them off his hands.”

“How do you know . . .” I didn’t need to finish the question. He knew because he was the Nightrender, because the Guild of Kryv had ways of learning everything about their marks. Even injured on a carving block, he kept scheming. “Why do you need me?”

He glanced over his shoulder, and I had a feeling I wouldn’t like the answer. “You’re going to take them for me.”

“I don’t understand why we cannot enter the masquerade as mere

attendees. Why do we need to know every hidden door? Common folk are welcome this turn.”

Kase lifted one brow. “They are welcome, but will not be favored. Not to mention, common folk are not trying to find a secret trade, then steal one of the Lord Magnate’s Alvers. We need those plans.”

A flutter of unease spread in my chest, but I followed across the street to the side of the house. The Kryv were sly on their feet, and Kase was no exception. He didn’t make a sound. I suspected he gathered darkness when the night thickened around us until I was forced to grip his jacket.

“Go along with whatever I do inside,” he told me at the back door.

I was too nervous to argue. Kase pulled a sharp steel pick from his breast pocket and worked the door. After a few clever movements the knob clicked, and he ushered me into a cramped alcove.

The walls of the alcove were lined in iron stew pots, drying herbs on racks, and canvas grain sacks against the wall. Kase turned his attention to the main kitchen, holding out his hand, as though he wanted mine.

My fingertips tingled as I laced our fingers together. With a tug to my hand, he pulled us out of the alcove.

Halfway across the kitchen, Kase swept me off my feet, had my back against the wall, and one hand possessively on my throat before I even knew we were moving.

His other palm tantalized the sensitive skin along my ribs, the curve of my waist.

“What the hells are you doing?” I hissed.

Kase tucked his face into my neck, and I froze. My skin, my pulse, everything was on fire when his mouth brushed against the nape of my throat. “Quiet,” he said.

I could push him away, but in truth, I had no desire to. In the next breath, the kitchen door swung open, tearing me out of my haze. All at once Kase's rakishness made a degree of sense.

A woman with a white cap over her wiry hair shoved inside, carrying a silver tray. "Oh," she squeaked when she noted the strange man and woman who did not belong.

Kase pulled away from me, one hand still on my waist, and tossed a copper coin at the woman, as though she was hardly worth his time. "Nothing to gossip about, woman," he said, the way any nobleman might.

She bowed her head, and tucked the coin inside her apron pocket, and hurried into the pantry.

"Well played," he whispered when we left the kitchen.

I pulled my arm away. "What were you doing?"

"Trusting you."

I'd meant to be angrier but was pleased one of the iron walls he kept around his heart had crumbled. Still, I smoothed my dress with a frown. "Next time you could warn me."

"Maybe I enjoy making you gasp." Kase slid his arm around my waist, drawing me against him as more maids strode past. His lips were against my head, his breath on my skin. "If you will relax, this will be easier to sell."

Simple, no doubt, for him to say. Every touch sent blood pounding in my head. I didn't want to dwell too long on what the spice of his skin made me think, or the rough, commanding brush of his fingers on my body.

When this was over, if the Nightrender decided once more to cut off his past, how would I recover?

In a drawing room, noblemen and ladies speckled the fur rugs and sitting area, drinking, and bidding farewell to the Wild Hunt in their own way.

Kase took two glasses from a steward's outstretched tray and handed one to me. He drank but kept eyes on the levity.

A woman with dark lips and the palest hair I'd seen paused in front of us. She grinned at Kase, ready to devour him. Her brief glance at me was one of insignificance. To her, I wasn't even a challenge.

What a horrid woman. Giving herself to a man who clearly had arrived with company.

I prepared to dismiss her, but her eyes started to glaze. She staggered, the beads on her gown shivered. Disoriented, she fumbled across the room to the table of sparkling wines. When Kase turned his head, inky filaments faded from his eyes until they were gold again.

"Did you do something to her?"

"She fears hunger and thirst." He grabbed my hand and led me to a corner. "Going to scold me for stepping into her mind?"

"I'm not going to scold you," I said. "I was impressed."

His eyes searched mine. I wanted to ask him what ran through his head in the moment, but breaking the silence seemed wrong. My hand rested over his heart, and I held to the steady beat like a ballast against the fury inside me.

"Malin."

I blinked away my fog. He was saying my name. "What?"

He dipped his face beside my ear, making our conversation look like more than it was. "Doft's courier is standing near the window. The man he's speaking with—" He gestured at a man who looked like he was prepared for battle, not a house fete, "is Klaus. I'm going to distract them. The plans should be in Klaus's chamber in the back. Find them."

"And if I don't find a way in?"

"Not an option." Kase pinched my chin between his thumb and finger.

Demanding, yet tender in one collision of opposites. “You’re capable like the Kryv and don’t see it.”

I fought a smile, even if it was a kind of backhanded praise.

Kase stalked over to the courier, a man with a single brow, and pock scars on his chin. Klaus eyed him suspiciously, one hand atop the silver battle axe tethered to his waist.

Kase removed an herb roll from his pocket and said in a thick accent, “*Herr*, trouble you for a light?”

I licked my lips. I could do this.

Slowly, I made my way to the back. At the door a house steward, a gangly man with a beaklike nose, guarded the way.

“My lady,” he said, holding up his hands. “This room is not open to guests.”

I fanned my face and lied easily. “I’m afraid all this herb smoke has made me rather dizzy.” The steward didn’t move, so I hardened my gaze. “Stand aside.”

“I cannot.”

Doubtless we were short on time. Perhaps, the Nightrender could play a polite guest for a moment, but he was certainly not the sort of man who could spin mindlessly with nobility for long without revealing his disdain.

In one swift motion, I withdrew one of the small knives in the sheath above my ankle. The point pressed against the steward’s belly. He gasped, but I dug the point deeper. “Make a sound and I open your liver. Now, open the door. One of your guests has taken something of mine, and I will have it back.”

The steward had less of a spine than I thought and fumbled with a brass key from his pocket.

“Inside. You’ll wait without a sound,” I said in a low hiss.



The man nodded mutely. I was a tyrant.

Inside the room was nothing remarkable. A simple desk strewn in parchment and vellum. A wet inkwell, quills, and a dusty ledger with scratches of sales and purchases over the turns. Klaus was a man of simple tastes. The only other furnishings were a small wooden bench draped in bear skins, and a chair next to a small stove built into the wall.

Design plans. To keep a bit of mystery, Ivar never had the same Masque av Aska. Tents, attractions, locations would constantly shift to different places around the Black Palace.

A long leather tube in the corner caught my eye. Beside the tube was a traveler's satchel, and a cloak with the symbol of the Black Palace over the left breast. Possibly Doft's cloak. Did the courier know the man was dead?

I broke the top, and inside the musty tube were rolls and rolls of parchment and vellum. I let out a muffled squeal of delight.

"Those do not belong to you, lady," the steward said.

I slung the strap over my shoulder and crossed the room. Knife to his chin, I grinned with a touch of wickedness before pressing my lips just over his. Enough to catch his rough, breathy gasps.

Each inhale dragged smoke and outlines of my face to my own mind. What good was I as a memory thief if I did not steal memories of crimes I committed?

A sharp, ashen repeat of the brief interaction with the steward now lived in my head. When I pulled back, swallowing the last of his breath, he stared at me with a weary stun.

"Your mouth on a man is not the way I wanted this night to go."

I whipped around. Kase leaned over the back of the wooden bench.

"How . . ." The door was still closed. "How did you get in here?"

"Carefully."

"Ah, the Nightrender is witty tonight." I glanced at the steward who hunched on the ground, rubbing his head with a befuddled expression. "I figured it would be best if he forgot me."

Kase scoffed and signaled me to come to him. I crossed the room obediently and handed him the plans. Undeniable satisfaction came from the way his face brightened as he studied the parchment inside.

"Not bad for a memory thief." He slung the strap on the tube over his shoulder. "Ready to leave?"

"From the moment we walked in."

Alas, our silent escape was put on hold. The door crashed open.

It was one thing if I startled, but I discovered, in the untimeliest of moments, if Kase jumped in surprise, my stomach clenched to the point I thought I might retch.

"Damn thieves," Klaus hissed in the doorway, battle axe in his grip.

If he was discomposed before, Kase showed no sign of it now.

"Malin," he said. "I'll leave you to take care of him."

"What!"

Klaus stomped into the room, fists clenched. Kase pulled himself onto the highbacked chair. He unlatched a tall window and paused. "We're in a hurry."

When this was over, I'd strangle him.

"Come here like a good girl," the trader said as he swiped a thick hand at me.

Three hells. I clung to my knife and sliced the blade over his wrist before he knew what was happening. Klaus reeled back, murder in his dark eyes when he looked to me again.

All I had was mesmer and a knife. They'd be enough. I'd make them be enough.

I gathered my gown in hand, and reached into the rune pouch, removing one of my vials. The trader took a swift step toward me, axe raised like he planned to cut open my skull.

Kase turned back, shook one arm, and as always, a knife slid from his sleeve. Call it pride, but now I didn't want his help. This was my mark, my task to see through.

I rushed for Klaus, dipped my shoulder, so it struck his broad chest. He coughed and staggered back on unsteady feet. Already, a heady burn scorched in my veins, as if my mesmer boiled through every pour.

Never had such a fierce rush of magic filled me before. I needed those plans; I needed the Nightrender to leave here unharmed; I needed to live.

All of it collided in a burst of heat in my blood. A new sensation; one I wanted to grow.

I didn't know if my plan would do anything. All I'd done was steal and deliver memories through breath. But what would happen if I forced one into the head of another?

I popped the cork of a vial with my teeth and pounced on the staggering man before Klaus found his footing. A few quick, frantic movements, and I dumped the ash into his eyes, pressing the burn of my palms against his skull.

At first, I thought I was merely a nuisance. This rush of what I thought was mesmer must've been sheer anger and fear for a man I could not bear to lose again.

But it all changed when Klaus's knees gave out.

Mesmer pulsed in my fingertips. All I wanted was him to see every torturous end the poor sod whose finger bone I'd crushed had experienced

before they met the gods.

Was it the captain whose underling had stabbed a dagger through the back of his skull? Or the woman with a peacock mask whose secret lover took her hard in a storage tent, then before he finished, strangled her with a red ribbon, merely for the pleasure of it.

Beneath my palms, Klaus whimpered. He begged me to stop.

I pressed the bone dust into his eyes with more venom, hardly caring this was something I'd made up. A twisted desire I'd hoped might cause a bit of damage, and I was making it come to pass.

The pain it caused was startling and captivating all at once.

I was harming him—burning a memory he never asked for into his brain.

What more could I do?

I removed my hands when Klaus collapsed in heaving sobs. My mouth dropped and I hardly noticed when Kase took my arm.

"I think I forced him to take the memory. It was powerful. Painful. I . . . I've never done that."

Kase cupped his hand beneath my foot and hoisted me up through the open window. "I hate to say I told you so, but I did say you had more power than you knew."

I doubted he hated it all that much.

Before we'd made it through the window, a gaudy woman strode past the doorway, fanning her face. Her dark eyes dropped to the wounded trader, then swept up to find Kase and me.

She screamed.

"I'd suggest you move faster," Kase said and practically shoved me outside.

The window was below the roof's edge. I hooked my arms over the side

and tried not to think of the short time my legs dangled over the streets before I leveraged onto the flat spine of the rooftop.

Calls for our capture disrupted the night. I snatched Kase by the hand once he pulled himself onto the wooden tiles.

He ran with me along the edge of the roof, and without a thought to consult me, sprang off the ledge. I must've screamed because my throat was raw when I twisted my ankle and stumbled onto the roof of the neighboring alehouse. A slanted shape, steep and narrow. I barely managed to keep from falling off the balcony he'd tossed me upon.

"All right?" Kase asked as he helped me to my feet.

I cut him with a glare as a reply.

On the streets, guests abandoned their merriment in the stone house and risked the sludge of the alleyways and muddy walks. If they weren't chasing me, I'd laugh because all around the lesser folk watched from windows of alehouses or packed tenement slums, but no one lifted a finger to help their upper counterparts. Some even tossed dirty linens or rotting pomes at the party goers.

Kase sprinted along the gutter of the roof with expert balance. I tried using his hand to steady me, but I fell more than once.

"Jump," he shouted right before he leapt off the alehouse.

This time I didn't flail as much and didn't roll my ankle as I landed in a cloud of dust and loose tiles onto a flat top of a crooked tenement. Folk whose sleep had been disturbed groaned inside, but no one came to investigate.

I gathered my skirts into my arms and hurried back to my feet.

Kase beckoned me to the edge. He pointed across a wider gap between the flat balcony and a sloped rooftop with gabled windows next door. "Go."

I bit the inside of my cheek. The bunches of fabric in my arms were unnaturally heavy.

"Malin, aim for the window," he said, his hand holding one side of my face. A smile curled on his lips. "Trust me, I'm plenty afraid."

I didn't know how it would help, but there was some comfort knowing the Nightrender had fear pounding through him much the same as me.

The head of a grungy Skítkast patrolman, drunk as the guests, stood on the rung of a ladder, and peeked over the tenement's edge. He called for me to halt.

I ran.

With my gown still bundled in my hands, I vaulted across the open space. The skirt draped over my feet. The moment I reached the edge, with all the brocade under my shoes, I'd slip all the way down. A horrible thought to have during a freefall through the air.

Too soon, my chest smashed against the eaves of the roof. My ribs ached. Each breath was heavy, and my gown was like a stone in water.

I started sliding back, but shadows surrounded me. The same thick, cold comfort from the city square when Kase's mesmer knocked me aside buoyed me in the air until a hand snatched my wrist.

Niklas's white grin broke the dark. Half his body hung out the gabled window with Eero and four more Falkyns holding him steady inside. "Dress looks lovely."

I freed a breathy laugh and found my footing on the wooden slats as he helped me through the window into a musty attic.

Kase crashed onto the roof after me, and in another breath stumbled inside.

"Want to mess with them a bit?" Niklas asked. "I always enjoy your tricks."

Kase shook out his hands and looked to the streets where calls for our heads rose to the stars. “Spent what I had left. Still a little off from the eldrish.”

My fear of falling—he’d used it to hold me steady, surely. Or was it his fear that held me up?

It didn’t matter. I understood why he’d given Klaus to me. He didn’t have the strength to do it alone, and all of it made me angrier. Kase should’ve waited before doing something this outrageous.

Eero opened a crawlspace in the floorboards and signaled for us to follow.

“Productive night, then?” Niklas asked.

“Thanks to Malin,” Kase said once I’d slipped halfway through the escape door.

I didn’t know if he saw, but a smile spread over my lips before I dipped out of sight.



29



# THE NIGHTRENDER

TOVA HUNCHED AT THE table, picking at a bowl of fruit, but she only ate the orange and red pieces. Her face was locked in a scowl.

"Let it go, Tova," I said for the tenth time.

"I ought to kick you in the bits." Tova had fumed for the last four days, still sour over not being invited to the night running atop the roofs of Skítkast.

"Tov, you were stabbed less than a week ago," Junius said with a gentle laugh.

"And he bathed in eldrish!"

I tried to keep a straight face and finished packing a roll of weapons, more penge Raum had been clever enough to see lying in the street, and a few days' worth of food for the journey home.

We'd been delayed long enough. It was time to make our next moves.

"I know what will help you move on," I said, shouldering the pack. "Our food stores need updating. I have it on good authority those plums from the south are on shelves at the exchange. I vow to get you an entire crate when we return."

Tova shoved two fruit pieces into her mouth and huffed. “That’ll help.”

Before the noon sun, we gathered with some of the Falkyn Guild at the sea gates.

The breeze whipped sand against my cheeks, burning the healing wounds. Skítkast was different in sunlight. The ashen laths on homes were a little whiter, and the market streets where folk bought wool, jade, or plucked quail were a little quieter. Daylight brought out calmer faces while the wild ones arrived after the sun set.

“Morning and night,” Niklas said as he handed over a small wooden box. “Don’t miss, or you’ll have more scars and get infected, and I don’t feel like coming over to Klockglas to save your ass.”

I took the box of his elixir and clasped his forearm. “Thank you for saving it this time.” I turned to Junius. “You’re sure about the seamstress?”

“Yes,” Junius said with a pinched mouth. “After the Wild Hunt I sent word to our Falkyns in Klockglas as you asked. They first followed the hawker, but when their missive returned with the connection to the seamstress, well, you have uncanny luck. Either fate has plans for you, or you’re in the gods’ favor.”

“I would be if they existed. Your Falkyns, they checked her thoroughly?”

Junius nodded. “She’ll be a good mark to squeeze.”

Unbidden, a rush of anxious blood filled my veins. We would either pull off the greatest ruse in the Masque av Aska or die trying.

Niklas handed me a pouch filled with a crystal powder. “Make sure the threads of the jacket are doused in this.” He handed me a second pouch with powder more like ash and coal dust. “Then, this will coat the beading on the gown.”

“This is the elixir we discussed?” I took the pouch, ensuring it was secured

before tucking it into the boiled leather satchel with the healing elixirs.

"The exact dosage. Handle it with care and be sure to oversee the application. This has a tendency to lead to obsession, Kase. We want temporary."

"It will work?"

"Once the two powders are in the same vicinity, yes, it'll work." He gave me a lazy salute. "Never fear, my liege. I know my craft."

True enough. I was not one to question Niklas, but when it involved the masque and Malin, I needed to be overprepared and confident in each move.

Junius touched my arm, her forehead bunched in worry. "You think this is the best step to take?"

"No," I admitted. "But it might be the only one we have."

Niklas offered me a bemused look. "Until we meet again then."

I dipped my chin. Next time we spoke, doubtless, the world would look a little more dangerous.

Dagny came to see us off, and as I boarded the longboat, she squeezed Malin until it looked as though her spine might pop.

I snorted and pretended to ignore the cinch in my chest knowing Malin Strom had been implanted in our world, and it was as if she were always meant to be there. From Tova to Niklas, she'd won them over and I didn't know what to think.

This was no life, not for her.

Twenty lengths away from the smell of unwashed skin and old boots, we dug into a meager meal. Malin gnawed mint leaves instead. How she could scale rooftops, take on skydguard, seduce Doft, but suffer on a longboat was laughable.

I leaned over the rail near the stempost, sharpening the point of the knife

that had opened Doft's throat.

Malin came to my side and held out a white bread roll. "You'd better take it now," she said. "Tova insists she's ready to eat everything."

I tucked the knife away and took the bread.

Malin stared out at the expanse of the Howl, breathing in the clean brine. "What do we do next?"

"You mean what do *I* do? I make the decisions, *dännisk*."

"No, I made no mistake. What do *we* do next?" She challenged my stare. "Don't forget, without me, you would have no design plans."

She'd grown bolder and I liked the way it fit on her.

"Or it was another opportunity for practice." I took a bite of the roll, holding her gaze.

"Admit it, Nightrender. You needed me with Klaus."

"I saved your neck, and if I didn't need to keep doing it, all this might go faster."

Malin balked. "You must be joking. I played as much a role of getting us out last—"

I laughed, a true, deep laugh from somewhere in my chest. I wasn't certain who was more startled, Malin or me. I couldn't bleeding stop. Even after I took out the knife again, sharpening the blade to think of violent things, I would lift my eyes, see her wrinkled brow, and begin again.

An amusing lift came to her lip. If I had to guess, I'd say Malin fought mightily hard not to smile herself.

"Listen, Nightrender," she said after a moment. "I've got a score to settle with the masquerade as much as you, so what do *we* do?"

I took a deep breath, but a half smile remained. "We'll find Hagen."

"Good, but not the score I meant. I lost a friend to this wretched festival."

My pulse thundered in my head when she faced me, her expression somber. Malin stepped closer. "I'm going to help rip the masque apart, so what comes next?"

I crowded her, my chest to the back of her shoulder. I hadn't lied—I did enjoy making her gasp. "Do you take pleasure in commanding me?"

"The way you keep all your secrets bottled inside someone must demand you let them out."

"Mystery holds a bit of power." My fingertips brushed aside some of her hair, giving room for my lips to touch her ear as I spoke. "Deceit and secrets are how we survive."

The Kryv were all willing to kill, thief, and break others. Qualities I depended upon to ensure slimy wretches kept me well informed.

"You're a little despicable," Malin said, her voice breathless as her body slumped against my chest.

A strange feeling took hold of me. Hells, it was almost light, almost cheerful. "I've been called worse."

I stepped away. Any closer, and I'd lose what little strength I had left to resist her entirely.

With my eyes on the spray of the sea, I lowered my voice. "What we do next is learn all we can of the layout of the Masque av Aska. Once we know that, then we can plot our marks on the inside."

"How do we get into the trade, Kase?"

Her voice was frayed and broken. I wanted to take it away, but the answer would only add to the trouble. "Heir Magnate Niall." The name grew sour on my tongue. "You heard Doft. He is the way folk will get invited in. We need to get close to him."

"Any idea how?"

I knew how, but I did not share schemes until I was certain it was the step to take. The dance was too delicate to risk. "I'm working on it."

Laughter at our backs drew Malin's attention to Gunnar and Lynx. I don't know what the two Kryv had said, but they both tossed their heads back, laughing at the sky.

Malin slouched wearily. "I wanted to free Hagen for myself. Now, to know he has a family, a lover waiting for him, I want to find him for them. I thought Hagen never wanted a family; he rejected advances from women in town. Now, I realize it was because his heart belongs to someone else."

I'd met Hagen's lover during our journey to the North. She was not a woman who was delicate; she was fierce, deadly, and prepared to tear the world apart to protect her family.

"Love is more dangerous than fear," I said. Yet, the fear of love was what tinged my words now. "It brings vulnerability, distraction, and puts cruel marks on the heads of others should enemies catch wind of those who matter to you."

"What a grim outlook."

Experience demanded I view the world in such a way. "We're here to exist, breathe, then die," I said. "Humankind is simple, but cruel. I'm not sure if most are evolved enough to love beyond their own selfish interests."

"Do you see the good in anyone?" she asked in earnest.

*You.* Naturally, I would not say it out loud. Instead, I said, "The guild."

"You're wrong," Malin said mildly. "I will find Hagen because I love him. And I searched for you all these turns because . . ." She cut off. Never had I wanted someone to finish a thought more than now. Malin didn't. "All I'm saying is not all things are done because of selfishness."

She spun around on her heel.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To sleep. I need rest after this inspiring conversation."

"Good," I said, fighting a smile. "You were starting to get irritating."

Fiske and Isak chuckled as Malin wheeled on me, the fire I enjoyed so much was alive in her eyes. She pointed one finger at my face. "You know, you are . . . just . . ."

"What am I?" I popped the last bite of roll onto my tongue.

Malin groaned deep in her throat. "Never mind."

She left me and slumped against Tova near the sternpost.

Malin shot me a glare, but whether she wanted me to see or not, her mouth curved into a faint smile before she closed her eyes.



30



# THE MEMORY THIEF

ON THE SECOND DAWN, Klockglas came into view. The air was sticky and wet with a coming storm.

At the hidden dock, the Kryv tossed packs of knives and food over; they fumbled off the boat, finding their land legs. I wanted to return to Felstad, curl up on the cot in Tova's cold room, and sleep for three days.

Kase shattered my grand plans. The last to leave the boat, Kase raised one hand and gathered his guild close.

"Return to Felstad," he said. "Malin and I will go to the Exchange."

"Will we? What if I say no?"

"I would like to see you turn down a chance to be involved." A grin tugged at his lips. As if schemes were afoot. With Kase, no mistake, they always were. "Go on. Give it a go."

Smug bastard.

Folding my arms over my chest, I turned away, pretending I did not hear the soft, hidden laugh escape his throat.

"Do not forget you promised a full crate," Tova said, shaping a box with her arms.

To part with the Kryv felt strange, but they faded into the trees like they were part of the night, drifting from one shadow to the next.

Kase hooded his face and supplied me with a cloak from the boat as soft rain started to fall. He opened one arm and gestured toward the opposite path. This direction would wind around the edge of the shore and drop down into the smallest of trade squares in Klockglas.

With the storm rolling over the fjord, the air grew heavy with damp. We walked in silence, and early on, the one who was not a Kryv in our duo became clear. Feather steps were impossible in the mud and damp unless one was the Nightrender. Kase, with his heavy blacksteel sheathed on his waist, prowled through the brush faint as a breeze.

“Care to know why we’re going to a trade square?”

“For Tova’s plums?”

“I do fear her empty stomach, but we have a meet. One I think you’ll find of interest.”

An unwanted ache burned my throat. “A meet? Of interest to me?”

“Now you’re simply repeating what I say.” Kase scoffed and pulled back a dried, overgrown tree branch for me to pass through. “Yes, there is someone who needs to make a deal with the Kryv.”

“A deal they’ve asked for?”

He winked and faded out of view around a bend. Hells. No doubt, he had some wretched Nightrender plan in his head. Now, I was part of it.

The small exchange hub wasn’t far. Two lengths from the shore we arrived under a mist of rain and cold. Kase seemed wholly at ease. He did not lift his hood, but no one minded. If he had penge, he could be a beast from the hells, and they’d welcome him with open arms.

Together we plucked ripe pomes, apples, plums and placed them in a crate

he carried. Kase flicked copper penge coins at the soaked exchange merchants. At a corner stand, Kase lifted a sweet stick made of a hardened honey glaze dipped in bitter chocolate. He gave the merchant three penge and purchased the lot.

"Do you remember these?" he asked.

Such a simple phrase, but one that ached to my bones. He'd yet to willingly bring up the past first. Until now.

I grinned and took one of the sweets. "I do. I'm glad to see you've begun to pay for them."

"I'm not as quick footed as I once was. You must admit, the merchant we stole from was a foul-smelling sod."

"Naturally, he was asking to be robbed because of his hygiene."

"Glad we see it the same."

There was an extraordinary lightness about the moment. I swayed as we walked and let out a moan when silky chocolate melted on my tongue, unlocking a hundred memories of days with less knives and hate.

We'd gathered quite a collection to restock Felstad by the time Kase took hold of my elbow, leading us beyond the square into a cluster of homes. The township was small; I didn't know its name, but it was made of wood and wattle homes with sod rooftops.

Kase stopped at a rounded home. Raised on small stilts to keep out the constant puddles from soaking into the thin wood floor.

"The backdoor," he said, tucking the crate beneath an unruly shrub.

I didn't question. A rush of adrenaline flooded my veins. My fingers twitched. There was a heady desire to unravel the way he thought as the Nightrender, to dig up his schemes beside him. Strong enough I forgot to fear.

When we reached the back of the house, Kase's hand squeezed my hip, drawing me closer. His front to my back, by the gods, I'd never felt such a shock. A bright sensation I'd nearly forgotten. Even as a skinny, lamppost of a boy, I'd always been safe and steady with Kase Eriksson.

The illusion of the Nightrender was fading. The boy he was did not need to return. I could admit it now; I'd rather take Kase Eriksson, the man. Shadows and scars and all.

I only wish I could know if he became lost in the same whirlwind as me.

In the moment, he was unreadable. Back to the side of the house, my body in his arms, he didn't look at me. All he did was lean one side of his head against the damp wood. In the silence, I finally heard what he did.

Playful laughter, a few groans of pleasure, the scuffle of feet over wood floors, the slap of skin on skin.

"Who are they?" I whispered.

"See for yourself."

He released my body and a shudder rippled up my arms, like he'd protected me from the wind by his touch.

I had no time to ask another question before Kase used the hard point of his elbow to knock in the waxy parchment cover over the back window. Shadows inked the beautiful gold of his eyes, and the Nightrender, swifter than a single breath, slipped through the hole.

My climb lacked every thread of elegance and nimble motions as his, but I tumbled into the house in time to hear a few shouts and cries as shadows coiled around the small shack.

"By the hells, who—"

The man didn't finish his words, but it didn't matter. I knew that voice. "Hob?"

I peeked around Kase's broad shoulder, then snorted a laugh. Not Kryv-like, but it couldn't be helped, catching sight of my dear street hawker with his trousers around his ankles, fumbling about in the dark. The woman was in as much disarray. Pulling up her dress bodice, smoothing her skirts, padding at her messy braids.

But even with his nakedness, Hob stopped fumbling at my voice. "Malin?"

His sharp eyes locked on me as Kase pulled back the shadows. Hob's jaw pulsed. He finished pulling up his trousers, fastening them with a belt, then violently pulled out a chair from the table they'd been desecrating.

He slouched in it, arms folded over his chest, a frown carved deep on his face. "By the hells, woman. We had an arrangement—" He didn't finish his reprimand before *his* woman slapped him across the face. "Dammit, Inge. What was that for?"

"Who is she?" Inge snapped. "You have other *arrangements*, Jakoby?"

My eyes widened. She knew Hob's first name. Jakoby Hob, but no one, only those he told personally, knew his first name. Those he trusted. Far as I knew, I was the only one to learn it, and only because he'd been rather drunk. Once he'd sobered, he'd demanded I call him Hob.

He cared for this woman. Strange, but it left me feeling envious. A thing I never thought I'd be around the likes of Hob.

"No, I . . ." He let out a growl. "She's an acquaintance, love."

Wise of Hob. Like he'd done with his name, I'd warned him of my own secrets. Early in our dealings he was taught to never speak of my mesmer, or I'd show him what it could truly do. At the time, I'd been lying. Now, after what had happened with Klaus, I wondered if I could do a great deal more damage than I thought.

"You're playing games with the Nightrender now?" Hob almost looked

offended.

At the mention of his name, Kase took the lead. “We’re not here to discuss her deals. We’re here to see to yours.”

Hob paled. “I don’t make deals with the likes of you. Not so desperate to sell my bleeding soul just yet.”

“Oh, you misunderstood.” Kase laughed in the rough rasp of the Nightrender and pulled a second chair from the table. “I was speaking to her.”

All attention turned to Inge. I didn’t know her. She wasn’t a grand beauty, but she had a pleasant face. Long, satin black hair, and pink lips still swollen from Hob’s mouth. Beneath Kase’s black gaze she shrunk.

“Me? I don’t know what you mean.”

“No one ever does.” Kase let out a heavy sigh. “We have need of a gown. The finest gown you can make.”

The woman’s shoulders relaxed. “A gown? You’re here for a . . . commission?”

“Good choice, Mal.” Hob clapped with a nod. “Inge is the best in the region. She’s been commissioned for the bleeding Heir Magnate’s masquerade costume.”

It was almost endearing the way his lover fluttered beneath his praise. Who would have thought the street hawker could be called a match?

“Call it a commission if you’d like,” Kase went on. “But I won’t be paying for it.”

To her credit, Inge straightened, hands on her hips. “I don’t care if you’re the All Father himself. I don’t work for nothing.”

“What is this?” Hob paused an herb roll halfway to his lips. “Malin, are you disrespecting her?”

"Was I doing the talking, Hob?"

"Well, I don't expect a gown to be for the bleeding Nightrender."

Throughout the exchange, Kase was unmoved. Eerily so. He sat with thin mists of darkness swirling like murky water around his fingers. "I'd like to move this along."

Inge huffed. "I'm not making a gown for no penge."

Kase ignored her. His eyes roamed up my body without shame. "I think blue would suit her, perhaps green to match her eyes. I'd like it to be finished by next high moon."

"You're mad." Inge barked a laugh. "That's barely five days."

"And I have all the confidence you'll complete it. Don't tell me as the most coveted seamstress in Liten that you don't have materials half shaped."

"Mere pieces," Inge argued. "Not fitted to anything. Certainly not a skinny thing like her."

I frowned and looked away.

"You will," Kase said.

"I refuse." Inge smiled a little viciously. "I know you threaten folk to do your bidding, Nightrender. Do your worst, you've got nothing on me."

"So sure?"

My scalp prickled. By the gods, I knew the man beyond the darkness and even still the question shot a flash of fear through my heart.

Inge faltered for half a breath. "Yes. I'm sure."

Kase flicked his gaze to Hob. The Hawker had the herb roll between his teeth but had yet to light it. He was too raptly attentive to the man across from him.

"In that case, I might as well let your lover in on the game you play with him. I believe he and my Kryv are friendly. She'd want me to tell him."

I noted how Kase called me one of his Kryv, but I stored the thought away. All thought went to Hob. What did Kase know?

By the way he froze, Hob was in the dark as much as me. “What game?”

“No.” A pitchy squeak escaped from Inge. She covered her mouth with her fists. “No. It is nothing, please.”

Hells, how did Kase do this? Tears glistened on her lashes, and she looked at Hob with such shattered longing my heart split in two. I had an unbearable need to stand beside my villainous street hawker. The pinch in my gut told me the Nightrender was about to deliver one of his bribes and Hob would be caught in the crossfire.

“What game, Inge?” Hob said, voice rough.

She blinked. The tears fell. She shook her head mutely.

Kase kicked his legs out in front of him, crossing his ankles. “Agree to do the gown? Or do I tell the hawker how you use him for information on the underbelly, then bring it to your skydguard brothers? Your eldest, he recently received a handsome imprisonment payment from the Black Palace for all the crooks he’s locked up. True?”

“No!” Inge shrieked, her shoulders shuddering.

Kase did not play his hand fairly. I didn’t understand his move. What did he have to hold against her now?

Hob curled forward as if a fist had lodged into his stomach. He lifted his gaze to Inge.

Lines from tears glistened on the ridges of her cheeks. “Jakoby, please—”

Hob stood abruptly, cutting her off. The chair scraped over the wood floor, then toppled to one side. The pulse of his jaw was rapid like a heartbeat. Without a word, he reached for his canvas coat, and went for the door.

I made a move for him, but he held up a hand. “*Dännisk*, should you need



me, seems I'll be in the Jagged Grove slum, hiding from skydguard."

"Jak . . ." Inge drew in a harsh gasp when he turned his back on her and slammed the door behind him.

Truth be told, I was ashamed. All this time I thought I did not much care for Jakoby Hob. But witnessing his heart shredded in such a way, a fierce defensiveness roared to life inside me.

I pointed my anger at his lover. "You must've played him well. Hob trusts no one, yet he gave his heart to you."

"I believe I said this on the boat," Kase murmured. "Love is too dangerous."

"I will not start this argument with you right now," I snapped back.

"Pity. It would be a marvelous victory on my part."

I rolled my eyes and glared at a sobbing Inge. "Why did you sell him out? Why use him at all?"

Inge curled forward. "You don't understand."

"And we don't need to," Kase said. "The gown, or should I go after him and tell him the rest?"

Ah, there it was. The little dagger twist, enough leverage to continue to get what he wanted. This was the Nightrender in his truest form.

Inge's body sagged. "I will have a gown ready by the high moon."

A harsh silence filled Inge's small house as she guided me through measurements. I could not be certain, but I had every belief this gown would be worn to the masque. Though, I hadn't figured why I was the only one in the guild being fitted for anything extravagant.

Inge spent time with a parchment pad and charcoal pen, sketching out a design. Without a word she held out the concept for approval. A remarkable

gown. Full, no sleeves, and an intricate corset made of ribbons over the bodice.

"Fit for a future queen," Kase said. "Do you agree?"

What was this about? "It is beautiful, but I am no queen."

"No. Although, I do hope we can make it so those who don't know the truth are still convinced you hold a throne somewhere."

He had a plan, and I was not invited into the whole of it yet. Before I could press him, Kase rose, his eyes on Inge.

"Malin," he said. "Would you see to it that we're clear to leave?"

"If you want to threaten her in private, simply say so," I said. "I do not mind it. Not after what she did to Hob."

Perhaps I was more like the Nightrender than I thought.

He grinned and removed a leather pouch from beneath his tunic, one I'd noticed Niklas handed him before we'd left Skítkast. "I have a few more instructions for our seamstress. I won't be long."

I hoped he terrified her. Once outside, I tugged the cloak's hood over my head now that a heavy, dreary rain fell.

Hells.

Now we would make the trek to Felstad in the dark and cold and wet.

I startled when the door swung open. Kase's hand caught me, steadying me against him before I stumbled off the raised stoop.

His eyes cut through the night like a new blaze of sunrise. I swallowed with more effort. "All finished?"

"Finished."

He took my hand and quickened his step until we were hidden in the surrounding trees.

"How can we trust her not to tell those skydguard brothers we have plans

for the masque?”

“She won’t.”

“How did you know about her ploy?”

“Kryv have eyes in every grimy corner of the region.” He paused, pulling the hood over his head. “As do the Falkyns.”

Ah. So, while the Nightrender teased the Otherworld in Skítkast, he’d still been up to tricks along with the Falkyn guild. I did not know whether to be frightened or marvel at what he’d become.

I tugged on his arm, drawing us to a stop. “What else do you have on her?”

“I don’t give up my secrets, *dännisk*.”

He was the stubbornest fool about his secrets. Giving some but keeping more.

“Then, pray tell, why did you fit me for a gown, and no one else?”

The wickedly seductive grin twisted his mouth again. “Because no one else will be the woman to win the heart of the Heir Magnate at the Masque av Aska.”



31

# THE MEMORY THIEF

FOUR DAYS AFTER THE one-sided deal with Inge, stained bandages wrapped my shoulders.

The Kryv took to heart preparing for the viciousness of the Masque av Aska and sparred mercilessly. Tomorrow, I'd have a ghastly bruise under my eye where Lynx knocked me with his elbow, but Gunnar would have a swollen jaw. Fiske might have a new scar over his brow to always remember me by.

Hip joints, shoulders, and the small of my back protested on my sleeping mat. I rubbed my swollen eyes, exhausted as I strode into the washroom. Without a soothing balm or herb of some kind, I wouldn't be sleeping.

At night, Felstad was magical. Sconces cast ghostly figures across the weathered stones, and the mugginess outdoors left mists and damp on the windows. Light wasn't gilded or white as in the day, but bluer with a touch of violet, as if shadows stood watch over the haven when the sun faded. Galleys and arcades crossed with hallways and stairwells in a scope I hadn't explored entirely.

Wet stone on my tongue, the chill of my bare feet, brought comfort and a sense of home.

Using my shoulder, I shoved out of the washroom, yawning, and rubbing the minty balm on my elbows and the back of my neck.

Light crossed in an adjoining hall one bend from my shared room. Behind the door, parchment rustled. Gods, did Kryv ever sleep?

The old study was small and oblong with shelves of dusty leather books and old vellum, few chairs, and wiry pelt rugs.

And the Nightrender.

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Injury hadn't hindered Kase from molding into a force of strength and power. I studied the planes of his bare, scarred back, unashamed.

He leaned over a long center table, staring at something sprawled over the surface. One hand covered his left eye, then he switched and placed his right hand over his right eye.

"Couldn't sleep?" I asked.

Kase turned, his face discomposd, and he hurriedly slipped the tunic he'd draped on the back of a chair over his head.

He began rolling up the sheets of thin parchment. "You are getting rather sly."

He was distressed, and soon I understood—I had distressed him.

I buried my own unease beneath a grin. "I'll take that as a compliment. Something pressing keeping you up?"

"No, just going over a few things."

"Don't stop because of me. I can't sleep, for I think I've bruised every bone in my body," I said, holding up the jar of balm. "I would very much like a feather bed right now."

"Ah, perhaps in the morning we can see who owes the Kryv a favor and get one."

I snickered and scanned the table.

"What's all this?" I reached for the gauzy paper. Sketches bled through and eventually pieced together layers of intricate drawings of partitions, full rooms, structures of canopies and walking paths through the transparent sheets.

Kase rubbed the back of his neck. "These are your masquerade plans."

"I like how you call them my plans."

"You did the work. The masquerade will be held in the back courtyard of the palace. I was trying to get an idea of any changes to the land and architecture."

Newly added drawings for a fifth tower were plotted on the south side. The building had two main entrances, one facing the sunrise, the other the sunset. But on a second sheet were dozens of webbed corridors and passages built underneath the tents and removable ballroom where the guests of the masquerade danced into the dawn.

"Bleeding skies," I said and held up another sheet. "There is an underground boathouse." Kase didn't answer. I tried again. "Did you see this? It's only been added this last turn." I pointed at the dimensions. "It leads from beneath the palace to the river. Must've taken expert planning to carve out without toppling the entire building. Here, look."

Surely an entire river system under the mansion would be useful, but he frowned and rolled the sheet. "It's late. I'll look at them later."

"I can't look?" My face flushed in annoyance. "Or do you want me to leave because you still aren't comfortable with me being here?"

Kase glowered, then tossed the designs across the table. "Be my guest."

Look.”

“I’d rather know your thoughts. Out of the people in this room, I’m the least experienced at scheming.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

His stance barred against me, as though I were an icy storm beating him down. Perhaps I should’ve felt foolish for thinking Kase might drop his walls and step out of his armor. Instead, I was angry. A delirious kind. I slammed one hand on the table. “Fine. I understand. I’ll leave.”

“What are you going on about?”

“You obviously don’t want me to be here. I thought we’d stepped beyond some things, but I was wrong. Goodnight.”

He followed me with his eyes. “Are you always so sensitive?”

I chuckled grimly. “When I’m this exhausted, this sore, and this furious at life, yes, I get rather sensitive.”

“Sit down.” He took a deep breath and braced against the table. When I didn’t budge, he urged me to sit with a jerk to his head and waited until I complied. His voice lowered to a dark whisper. “I didn’t notice the boathouse.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, even more irritated. “Forgive me. Next time, I’ll let you scan all the pages before I take a look, so you can know everything first.”

“That’s not what I meant, and if you’d still that temper of yours for a damn moment, perhaps I could explain.” His tone was different, vulnerable, and he wouldn’t look at me. “I’ve already checked every page twice, and I still don’t know how many tents there will be, or that a boathouse existed.”

At least seven sheets of new and old design drawings were scattered across the table. The Nightrender was the dark fae of the land, a ghost, slier than any



fox in the brush. And he'd missed a glaring opportunity.

"What are you trying to say?"

Kase tapped one finger on the edge of the table, opened his mouth a few times, then changed his mind as if gathering his thoughts. Finally, he looked at me directly. "I don't . . . read." He quickly recanted. "I mean, I can read, just not well. Something is different with my eyes."

I reeled through my memories of reading with Kase. As children, I told him stories. At Salvisk's he'd tossed the ledger of cheeries at me. "Different in what way?"

The Nightrender shifted on his feet. I couldn't recall ever seeing him so out of sorts. At last, he sighed. "Everything moves about. I'll blink and a term or measurement will flip or jump to the top of the page. Takes me hours to read a sheet. I've always struggled."

For as long as I'd known Kase Eriksson, I never knew this. "You could've just said something. Did you think I'd taunt you?"

"I don't know. I've never told anyone." He cleared his throat and stared at the sheets.

"But you're telling me?"

"Because you stick your nose in everyone's bleeding business, and you have this annoying habit of getting me to talk."

I grinned but heat stung my cheeks. "Someone needs to.

He covered an eye again. "This helps."

I watched him squint at the boathouse dimensions for a time before I blurted out my own confession. "The memories I steal terrify me."

Kase looked up, and I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. He seemed intent to hear more. Didn't he split a piece of his armor, giving me a peek inside? I could do the same.

I scooted to the edge of my chair, fiddling with the corner of one sheet of paper. "I hated stealing them because I knew I'd witness something horrible. Sometimes I would cry, then when I sold them, I would pretend as if they hardly mattered. As if I enjoyed the brutality. Eventually, I started to believe I did."

"There is nothing shameful about despising brutal things."

"Nor is there shame if the written word is difficult to understand." I challenged him with a raised brow. He frowned and glanced back at the parchment, but I had a feeling I was winning the argument. I nudged his hand with mine. "If you'd like me to help, I'd like to stay."

Kase considered me for a moment before turning over the designs to my side of the table. He sat next to me, cautiously, and asked about specific things: ledges with spikes or smooth surfaces, tent sizes and shapes, what would be inside, and how many folk could squeeze in. He asked how windows on the palace were latched, how many stairwells, serf quarters, barracks for skydguard.

Like he did with Dagny's mud drawing, I circled important areas with a charcoal pen, even doodled things like water for the boathouse, or a crown for Ivar's chambers.

Kase rubbed his eyes after the candle melted to nothing more than a bulge of wax. I sipped a pungent tea I'd brewed to keep us awake, and still, my eyes were heavy.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"We're facing a challenge, but I'd expect nothing less."

"We will not have long to pull this off." My fingers drummed over the passage at the top of one page, a sort of schedule of events. There was a single line that'd caught my attention: *slutet av handeln*. Trade end.

We took ‘trade’ to mean the hidden Alver barter for Niall’s future bride.

“Until the twelfth toll,” Kase said soberly. He pointed to a vast circle of chambers under the central rooms of the palace, all connected with crisscrossed corridors and passages built around a center room. “How you described this, I’ve no doubt this will be where they hold the trade.”

“Then that is where you will put me.”

“You’ll put yourself there.”

I didn’t care for this plan. To seduce Doft had been different—he’d been there for pleasure, and to be clear, I did not do an exceptional job at seduction. To convince the Heir Magnate I should be his choice, to pose as some exotic, mysterious woman at the masque, frankly, Tova ought to be the one to go in.

Kase seemed to think Tova would wind up slitting Niall’s throat too soon.

That, and the Kryv were once kept at the Black Palace. Odds were, Niall would recognize Tova, even if illusions were in place.

I hugged a musky blanket around my shoulders. “When Hagen was taken, this moment could not come soon enough. Now, it seems as if we are not prepared at all, and it is nearly here.”

“We’ll be ready,” he said.

“Sometimes I wonder if you say things to convince yourself.”

“We’ll be ready,” Kase repeated. “We’ve no choice. If Hagen is bartered away, finding him again will take turns.”

“But you’d never stop.”

The ferocity in his stare was answer enough, but he said, “I’d never stop.” A collision of fury, pain, and grit darkened his face. He stepped closer. “You were right. If you would’ve been the one taken, I would’ve never stopped fighting. I won’t now.”

"Fight to the end. That's what it means, right?"

"Yes. A reminder to never give up, and never give in to those who delight in breaking others. Who've tried to break us. We refused long ago to let them, and whenever we meet, we will fight until the end of them—or us."

"Maybe after this, we'll find a way to fight for more Alvers. Not only at the masquerade."

"You should live your life," he said softly. "Away from here, Malin. You should leave and be happy far from Klockglas."

"Without you?"

Would the Nightrender remain a man the desperate folk made deals with, a killer defined by dark mesmer?

I turned back to the table and started gathering our horns, but Kase curled his hand in mine. He urged me to leave the mess and turned me around. Those eyes were dark when I faced him, not from mesmer, but something else. Something that sent my blood rushing.

He drew gentle circles over my palm with his thumb. "You would be better off without me."

"You would be better off not assuming you know what is best for me. Or what I want."

Kase locked me in the satin black of his eyes, then pulled my wrist, smashing my body against his. One hand held the small of my back, each fingertip moved agonizingly slow up every divot of my spine.

I prayed he would not notice how my pulse raced, how my fingers trembled as I touched the sharp edge of his jaw.

"You would be better off listening to me." The way he touched me, slow, sensual, needy, I had little control in the way my body arched into him.

"If you said better things, I might listen."

A dark groan rumbled against my body. Kase pressed my back to the wall. Hips, chest, hands, he had them all against me, heating my skin and heart. In this moment, whatever he asked of me I would do. I wanted to scream at him to command me, to take the whole of me.

For a killer, a thief, for a man enrobed in darkness, he touched with a scorching gentility that drew out ragged breaths and embarrassing moans I could not stop if I tried.

"Malin." My name off his tongue came like a plea. As if he were begging me to stop him, to keep him from crossing the line between us.

I would do no such thing.

He'd stolen my heart when we were young, and I'd never asked for it back.

When he lifted his eyes, only brilliant, beautiful gold stared back. He studied me, commanded me. Ansel had warned me the Nightrender would own my soul. Oh, how little my friend understood. I owned nothing, for everything I had to give had always belonged to the Nightrender.

"Damn you." A harsh curse. It was all I was given before Kase kissed me.

Where his touch had been gentle, his kiss was desperate. Fingers tangled in my hair, he pulled me closer.

I clawed at his shoulders, gripped his tunic in fistfuls, circled his neck to allow me to lose myself in the feeling of his hard body.

Kissing the Nightrender was more exciting than lightning on the Howl, drew more sensation than the bite of a winter wind. For a moment, smoke fluttered through my head. I absorbed the memory of his discomfort, then his relief when I discovered his secret challenge with words. Tension from worry about the guild, about me, about Hagen absorbed into my consciousness. Kase felt a great deal he never showed, and I was intruding.

I begged mesmer to leave me, to let me have this moment in its rawest

form.

When I gave into him, thinking only of the now, giving and taking my breath with his, the smoky memories slowly faded.

His sly mouth parted my lips. The warmth of his tongue against mine set me aflame. He tasted like sweet heat. A fierce collision that tilted the ground beneath me.

My fingertips slipped beneath his tunic. I took a great deal of pleasure the way the Nightrender groaned, as if he'd begun to unravel as much as me. As if one spark of touch caused him to lose control.

I memorized the hard planes of his chest, his overheated skin. Kase gripped my thigh, lifting my leg, all to grant his hips space to press into mine.

I gasped. The kiss broke as my head fell against the wall. His mouth, tongue, and teeth scraped down the front of my throat. Desire trembled through me, and if he did not keep his hands on me, I would not be able to remain standing.

Kase explored my neck, my jaw; he kissed me and claimed me.

When he lifted his gaze, those eyes were rife in a greedy flash of desire. With slow tugs, he lifted the hem of my tunic. The chill of his calluses raised the skin of my bare stomach. Beneath my top, his grip was demanding as he dragged his hand up the curve of my waist.

Kase grinned against my mouth when I choked on my own breath as he touched me. The tips of his fingers teased the curve of my breast, learning the shape of me and destroying me all at once.

How much had changed since that first deal with the Nightrender. I had feared him, hated him in some ways. Now all I could think was how badly I wanted him to crawl into me. How his touch would be the memory I'd never give up. One I'd recall again and again, with the hope of many more.

My hand went to his belt. Kase freed a rough breath, revealing his desire as my hands pulled at his trousers. His forehead fell to mine. On the wall, he flattened his palms beside my head, stance wide, giving me freedom to do as I pleased.

I made plans to do just that.

Until the door clattered against the wall and brought us to an abrupt stop.

"What are you doing?" Ash stood in the doorway, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

Great hells.

Kase fumbled back as if I'd burned him. "Ash." He cleared his throat, and maneuvered in front of me, concealing the way he'd left me breathless against the wall. "What . . . what is it?"

"Hanna," Ash said, as if he hardly cared about the scene he'd stumbled upon. There was a delightful innocence about the boy. Enough I could hardly find the will to be irritated he'd interrupted.

"Another nightmare," Ash went on, "she's asking for you."

The moment would end here. I knew the instant Kase turned his eyes to me. He was many things, but even the Nightrender did not have the strength to ignore the call of little Hanna.

His gaze said a hundred things. Regret, need, desire.

Kase dragged his fingers through his tousled hair and followed Ash. He was unsettled, and I knew there would be enough time for him to overanalyze what happened in here.

Enough time for him to build those walls he thought protected me. Time for me to realize if he did, I would be more broken for it.



32



# THE NIGHTRENDER

“YOU NEEDED TO KNOW, so you could prepare,” Fiske said, his hands clasped behind his back.

My shoulders tensed and I nodded. “We’ll watch our backs.”

His brows pulled together. “Do more than that, Kase. Do a great deal more than that. I will not go if I do not have your assurance you will do everything to return with us.”

“Fiske,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. “I have no plans to sleep at the Black Palace tomorrow evening.”

He didn’t look appeased, but Fiske rarely did when it came to these things. He didn’t argue more and left me with a tight smile.

The worst part about Fiske’s premonitions came when they involved you. What was I to do with his twisted, ugly feeling that something would take an unexpected turn for me? There was no time to readjust.

We were to leave in the morning.

More than worry for me, how was I to do this for Malin?

How would I deliver her to the place where cruel men would tear her apart if they discovered her mesmer?

I stood at a precipice of a battle I never wanted. Deep, unforgiving dread climbed my shoulders.

If I refused to take this step, Malin would go without me. She would not leave Hagen. There was no other choice but to remain at her side as we either succeeded in a heist, common for Kryv, or began a war.

My eyes fell to the wrapped gown hanging near the window of my upper room.

Inge had delivered on her promise. This morning Tova and Lynx had gone to pick up the gown, but also oversee the application of the crystal powder to Lord Niall's fine coat.

If ever Niklas's elixirs needed to work, it would be that powder.

Our dealings with the seamstress were officially closed, and now the rest would be in our hands. If we could hit our marks, maybe we would leave victorious and unscathed.

Unless I continued the dangerous game I'd started within our own walls.

I'd lost my head, given into desire, and touched Malin. Kissed her. Tasted her. Gods, I would die to taste more of her.

When I was taken at the masquerade, I'd barely hit thirteen turns. Hardly a little boy, and by then I'd noticed my hayloft companion was a girl who did strange things to my body when I looked at her too long.

She'd caused a stir in my feckless boyish heart then, and now had dug into what blackened, shriveled thing I had left. It was not a kind heart, not giving, not warm. But it was hers. No mistake, it would cloud my mind, and put us all at risk. Better to return to the protective distance between us. I'd done well for the last day and night.

Some might call hiding in one's room cowardly, I preferred the word wise.

I should've realized it would be a matter of time before my luck ran out.

A soft knock at my doorframe interrupted my solitude. My body flinched at her voice.

"Tova said you would have a sheath for the leg." Malin stood in my doorway, holding up a pair of silver-tipped knives.

I clenched one fist at my side, afraid I might grab her and pin her to the wall again if I did not. With a dismissive hand, I pointed at a set of drawers near my narrow bed. "Should be something there."

I turned away before I could meet her eye.

"I look forward to seeing Hagen again," she said. "It will be good to have him home. For Gunnar too."

Bitter laughter spilled out. "Klockglas is no place to call home."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong."

She snorted. "I know enough about you, Kase Eriksson, to know you build walls with anger, indifference, and shadows."

She was angry with me. Good. It would be better if she were, then we could continue as if nothing had happened between us.

But Malin did not retreat. The woman took it upon herself to touch me, wrecking the fragile pieces of any shield I put between us.

Her slender fingers rested over mine, forcing me to lift my gaze. She smiled—bleeding *smiled*—when I was biting back.

"You are trying to goad me into leaving," she said.

My teeth ground together. "You think you know so much about me because we were children together?"

"I wish I knew why you do this sometimes," she admitted. "Why you try to push me away after you've drawn me in. Don't you know by now, I am here for you as much as I am for Hagen?"

"This is who I am," I said briskly. "Accept it or let me be."

"No, you hide being Kase, and I don't know why being him is so terrifying to you."

I cursed under my breath. "You can't understand."

"I can't?" Her voice was strained. Raw. "You think I don't understand what losing everyone you love feels like?" With my ire turned against the window, Malin stepped to my side. "What keeps you behind your mask, Kase?"

The last shield broke.

I seized her face in my palms. "You want to know why I create illusions? Where to begin? Perhaps when Ivar used his Alvers to *rift* my skin, and I wished to hide my shame, the tears in my eyes." I lifted my top, took her hand, and forced her palm over the ridges of the scars on my back.

Malin closed her eyes. I thought she might pull away in disgust, fear perhaps, but fear wasn't there. Whatever she felt was something my mesmer could not sense.

"I became a monster to survive," I told her. "You want me as some stupid boy from your past, and the worst part is, for you, I wish I could be. I told you I hate everything about my past except you, and it's true. At nights, when I was finally left alone for a few moments of peace, I thought of you. Thought of how it always was together. Thoughts of you kept me alive many times, Mallie."

A sob came from her throat. She dug her fingers into my back, pulling me closer. "You are still him."

"No, he's *dead*." I slid one hand to her waist. "Do you want to hear what I did to Ash and Hanna's father when we escaped, Malin? How I stuffed his throat with his own blade."

"Kase . . ."

"Or when we broke free, would you want to know how I hunted the skydguard who guarded our cages? I tortured them with fear until they pissed themselves and begged for death. I wear the Nightrender's darkness because I am not Kase Eriksson, no matter how much you wish me to be."

My voice trembled in rage, but my hands traveled over her face and body gently. When a tear fell to her cheek, I wiped it away with my thumb.

"I wish what happened to you hadn't," she said, her hand traveled to the wing of my shoulder. The touch caused a shudder to run through me. Malin rested one palm to my cheek, waiting for me to look at her. "But I am not sorry to know the man you are now."

"How can you say that?"

"It's the truth."

I closed my eyes when she slipped her other hand beneath my tunic. First to my chest, then around again to my back; her fingers caressed my scars.

I was weak.

I could not resist the spell she had cast over me long ago.

Desire clenched in my chest. Being so near, it was a small thing for me to pull her mouth to mine.

I kissed her. Fiercely.

My hand held the back of her neck; her fingers tangled in my hair. We fumbled against the wall. Even more than the last kiss, this was feral. Unguarded. I did not waste time and pulled at the bottom of her top, slipping it over her head.

Hells, she was a sight. One I'd wanted and denied myself for too long.

I wanted to devour her.

Malin was as greedy, and in the next breath my chest was bare, her mouth

on my skin.

She paused only long enough to remove the raven charm from my neck. She kissed the rose against my heart, smiling as she slid her twine necklace on. "I want it back."

"It's yours."

"Don't think Asger escaped my notice on your bed." She flicked her eyes to that ugly stuffed horse I'd secretly loved so much as a boy.

I laughed and buried my face in the soft, sweet warmth of her neck. Our playfulness faded again into heated kisses and wandering hands. I cupped her breasts, her hips, the pressure of my touch drew out soft gasps from her throat.

"Gods, Malin." I tugged at her trousers, my fingers sliding beneath the waistline. "Everything I want is all that you are."

Frenzied desire caused my hands to shake. I could not unfasten the damn pants. Pulling back, I lowered to my knees in front of her.

Malin hummed her satisfaction. "The Nightrender on his knees, I never knew such a thing of beauty existed."

I rolled my eyes to her, grinning a little wickedly as I finally succeeded in the clasp. I pressed a kiss to her stomach, the bones of her hips. "I only bow to you."

My kisses heated. Malin's voice cut off, replaced by heavy breaths. She tangled her fingers in my hair as I granted myself permission to claim every inch of her with my kisses, my hands, my tongue.

"Kase."

My name said in such a way unlocked a rush of need within me. I rose to my feet, lifted her beneath her thighs, and carried her to my bed.

She arched into me as each kiss blended into the next.

The room spun in a haze when she smiled as I yanked her hands over her head, caging her beneath me. It wasn't long before Malin broke one hand free and went to my belt. With more finesse than me, she pulled away the last barrier between us.

I forgot to breathe. Skin to skin knocked my mind into a blazing flame for a few heartbeats. I kissed her, sweet and raw, then went to her neck, aching to keep her hands on my body.

Malin hooked one leg around my waist, holding me as I rocked against the heat building between us. She gasped once we slid together.

I went still. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head, feverish and breathless.

Time didn't matter as we gave more of ourselves to each other. I rocked against her center, pleasure blurring out conscious thought. All I could focus on was her body, the soft way she whispered my name, the burn of her fingernails on my skin.

I didn't look away from her steady gaze, hypnotized. She was patient; I was frantic.

She met my quickened pace, adding friction and longing between us. Malin's eyes rolled back in her head as she cried out, falling apart in my hands. I burrowed my face against the sweet glisten of sweat on her neck, following behind her. Words choked in my throat as my body collapsed over hers.

Only the sound of our ragged breaths filled the darkness.

Malin Strom was my beautiful downfall. And I would take any pain if it meant more of her. Ruin me. Brutalize me. Just give me her.



IN THE MOONLIGHT, WITH the patter of rain on the battered wooden roof, we laid on the quilts, her head cradled to my chest. She traced a scar running from my middle around to my ribs.

"I could take some, you know," she whispered.

I tilted my head. "Take what?"

"A memory. Many. If they hurt you, I could take them."

"As your burden?"

"If it eases yours."

I pressed a kiss to her head. "I don't want to forget. Those memories remind me why I fight."

"But they chain you to this place."

I cupped her face. "After this is over, I would leave with you."

She closed her eyes and overtook my hand. "How can we walk away when we know what happens here?"

What I would do to get her free of this place. There were no lengths I would not go. No man I would not kill. I would burn the world to the ground to keep her breathing and in my arms.

But she was too good, too bold to fade into the shadows when so many suffered in the east.

"I wish you would say something different but knew you wouldn't." I lifted my hand to my hair. "My fear, what pulls the darkest mesmer from me now, is believing you will die trying to stop what cannot be stopped. The Lord Magnate will not give up his seat without a great deal of death."



She drew small circles over my chest. “We share a similar fear, then. But for me it is sending you back to the place you were lost before. I won’t survive should it happen a second time.”

“I would hope I had more brains than I did ten turns ago.” I kissed the tops of her knuckles as my smile faded. “I am not the boy from the past, Malin. Do you want him, or—”

She silenced me with her fingers to my lips and propped onto her elbow. “I don’t want him. I want you. The scars, the anger, the pain, all of it. But you can’t ask me to stop trying to break the chains locking you behind the mask you wear.”

I scoffed. “Then you will be fighting another impossible war. There is a hate inside me that holds me here, like a cruel master.”

“Maybe so, but it’s my choice to fight for you.” A grin spread over her lips. “And you can’t stop me, Nightrender.”

My laugh was low and deep. “Being demanding will get your tongue cut out of your head, *dännisk* Strom.”

She rolled her eyes, then touched my jaw. “Be a brute as you please, be wicked if you like, but be Kase in these moments with me.”

Then, she kissed me.

I pulled her into a straddle over my hips. Dawn was fast approaching, so I kissed her deeper, memorizing every sensation of her body beneath my hands. When the sun came, this night would be the sweetest memory.

I planned to keep it always.

For there was no way to know what became of us at sunrise.



# BOOK THREE



33

# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE SHORELINE NEAREST TO the Black Palace was packed with ships. Black laths with blue sails, whitewood decks with green and red flags. Longships with a hundred oarsmen. Cutters, barges, and skiffs with ratty flags of Skítkast. At each dock, near each vessel, phaetons, stagecoaches, and boxy road coaches awaited to take those guests, common and noble alike, to the Masque av Aska.

Lampposts were heavy with silver words on thick parchment. A simple phrase:

*Come one, come all.*

*Welcome to the dark ball*

The Guild of Kryv gathered on the edge of slate-gray cliffs rising like dark sentinels above the Howl. Up here, the wind was angry, but I didn't feel the cold. I only watched ahead where Kase studied the arrivals. Blacksteel in one hand, hood over his head.

I'd spent the morning braiding the sides of his hair off his face. Tova braided and twisted mine on one half of my head, so it looked as though one

side was shaved like hers. Next, she'd painted my face to hide my freckles. My lips were stained in a dark blood red, and kohl darkened my lashes and eyes.

I looked like a noblewoman and felt terribly out of place in my own skin.

The others had helped one another paint runes on their faces in green as dark as black moss. Ash and Hanna added streaks across eyes and cheeks. The one rune on my body was from Kase. He'd drawn a symbol of protection on the inside of my wrist when no one was near, sealed with his kiss on the pulse point.

From me, his wrist had one of strength and power.

More than ever, tonight, I needed the Nightrender to be ruthless.

I went to his side. "This feels like a fantasy. Like a night we've talked about for so long but was never going to happen."

Kase looked at me, the blackness of his eyes drinking me in. "Tomorrow will look different. You'll have Hagen back."

I'd have both Kase and Hagen. I refused to see it any other way.

Kase sheathed his sword and led the guild into the thick of the trees. Underfoot the soil thrummed with energy, as though the forest knew what was about to happen.

Our first mark of the night would be in play before the sun finished setting over the Howl.

Down the slope one of the many raked roads led to the Black Palace. There we waited. My pulse raced with all the skittering noises from creatures in the brush, and birds in the trees, the trickle of a shallow creek over rocks and logs, the rustle of damp leaves.

The sound of footsteps approaching.

A sharp whistle broke the night, and I breathed a little easier.

Kase stepped into the moonlight at the same moment as Niklas, Junie, Eero, and the Falkyns.

Most Falkyns dressed in black like the Kryv, but instead of hoods they wore caps, instead of swords they used throwing knives, pouches of potions and elixirs, and brass knuckles or rings on their fingers.

Kase and Niklas clasped forearms, diving into the plans of the night with hardly a word of hello.

Eero winked at me. "We meet again."

I offered a nervous nod, unable to find a steady voice to answer.

Niklas tugged on the sleeve of his jacket. "Shouldn't be too long now before our friends arrive."

Kase silently gestured to the trees, and the two guilds faded as though stepping from one shadow only to get lost in the next.

I startled when someone pinched my arm from behind. "Dagny? You're here."

"I told you we'd meet again," Dagny said.

"How did you get out?"

"Niklas is quite the smuggler," she said.

"As I told you." Niklas helped Junie adjust a black veil over her mouth, so she disappeared into the night.

"I'm glad you're out."

"I must ask you something." Dagny's eyes pierced me. "You are not a stranger to searching for someone who was lost to you, true?"

I found Kase in the dark. "Yes," I said. "I know what endless searching feels like."

"You asked me why I stayed in Skítkast. I, too, am searching for someone who was taken from me. I have a son."

"A son?"

"Still a tiny thing but lost to me. His father used me, then sold me, and took my boy somewhere."

"How? He'd be charged for rape, abandonment, illegal trading, or something."

She closed her eyes. "Not Niall Grym."

"The Heir Magnate?" My voice was rough.

"I was a serf in the Black Palace once." Dagny shook her head. "It doesn't matter who he is. I stayed at the Lark for my son. Traders fill the rooms like flies in a hog pen. I remained there, hoping to hear of anything. Even with a serf for a mother, a child of the Grym bloodline will have worth. The Kryv and Falkyns have helped, but when I heard you were taking your own fight to the masque, especially this one, I decided it was time to take the fight to Niall. Perhaps take the chance to cut off his favorite appendage."

I chuckled bitterly. "You are helping me tonight, and I swear to you after this, I will help you search. As you said, I'm no stranger to it."

Dagny rested a hand on my shoulder. "You are quite a Kryv. Don't doubt it."

Two Falkyns materialized behind a wall of aspen trees. With them was a grain wagon, pulled by a mule with jutting ribs and hips.

"Nightrender," said Eero. "Time to move."

Kase lowered to one knee in front of Ash and Hanna. "Ash—"

"No," the boy snapped right away. His voice squeaked. "I can come. I can fight."

"Inside the masque is not the role the guild needs you to play," Kase said sternly, but still calm. "You and Hanna are our way to freedom. The most important role."



Hanna waved her hands. Kase watched her, but quickly shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm not just saying it. Without you two at your post, there is no point going in at all."

"We're small is why," Ash said to his sister.

"It is why," Kase agreed. "You both are the exact ages the Lord Magnate wants. The most at risk, and I'm not willing to put you in such a spot, understand me?"

"But Hanna can block, I can rift—"

"Yes, and it would be useful," Kase told him. "But not worth the risk of losing you both."

The two children hung their heads.

Kase placed a hand on Ash's shoulder. "Can we count on you to hit your mark?"

"Yes," said Ash.

"You are alone out there," Kase said. "You are the leader outside the gates. Lead well."

Kase took out his favored karambit and handed it to Ash.

"Good for slicing," Ash whispered.

The boy lifted his chin with a bit of pride as he tucked the blade through his belt. Hanna hugged my waist, then rushed about the rest of the guild bidding a tearful farewell. The Kryv were all she knew.

I understood what it was like to be young and lose those you loved most.

The two Falkyns helped the young ones into the back of the wagon. Raum slapped the driver's seat. "Take them to get something warm at the Ruse alehouse. The aleman is with us. Knock four long, three short and he'll let you in."

The Falkyn handling the reins nodded and cracked the leather straps over

the mule. I watched them fade into the misty night.

Raum tapped my shoulder, jerking his head at the others. I blinked through heavy breaths as if it would stop the spinning in my stomach and followed. Tensions were high. Slowly, the guilds faced one another, drawing into a tight circle.

“We said we’d never go back,” Kase said, meeting the eyes of many. “But we’re ready to face it. We *are* ready.”

The rumble of wheels on the road broke us apart. Kase lifted a fist. This was happening too quickly. I should’ve said something to him, told him I wanted to leave after this. I didn’t want to risk losing him again. I should’ve said it all, but I kept quiet and pulled my woolen hood over my head.

A Black Palace coach rumbled into view, followed by another. Two footmen, two drivers, and a few heads inside each coach.

No one moved. No one breathed.

Then, Kase lowered his fist and we lunged through the trees.

Our cries rose to the stars. With Ash and Hanna gone, two Falkyns pounded ominous drums. My feet kept time with the steady beat. At our noise, the drivers scrambled with their reins, unsure if they should pull back or speed forward.

The coach at the rear was taken before the coachmen had a chance to decide, but the one in the lead had a driver who thought on his feet. He snapped the reins and charged down the road. With the heavy load of the coach, the confusion of the horses, it gave us the delay we needed.

Half the crew handled the stalled coach. The rest of us raced after the lead.

I sprinted on the edge of the road, head whipping back and forth to keep an eye out for a perfect opening to jump.

Ahead of me, Kase, Raum, and Isak were already at the doors.

An arrow flew from the trees, struck a footman, and sent the man stumbling off the back. I flew past the tree branch where Gunnar perched. As I sprinted past, he grinned.

Kase reached out and gripped the handle on the door, and I couldn't look anywhere else. I wished he would use mesmer. He could tear the coach in two if he wanted. But every ounce of energy from mesmer needed to be saved for the masquerade.

Kase heaved his body onto the wobbling coach. In two pulls, he was on the roof. Raum used the luggage rack to pull himself onto the rear. One leg dragged on the ground until he steadied his footing. The last footman tried to kick him off, but Raum gripped him by the collar and tossed him to the ground.

Isak was the fastest runner and took hold of the harnesses. Dangerous, but the redhead gripped a bridle, took a leap, and tangled his legs in the harnesses around the heaving belly of the horse. He clung to the beast like a web weaver on its silken strands.

My lungs were ready to burst. Gunnar abandoned his branch and had already caught up to me.

"Now, Mal!" he shouted.

I focused on the footstep, the handle of the door. I jumped.

My foot slipped and I smacked my head against the window. Before I could be pulled beneath the wheels, I hooked my arm into the handle.

On the roof of the coach Kase was down on one knee. One of the drivers sliced a dagger at him. The Nightrender bent back in time for the blade to swipe a hairsbreadth over his chest. With the driver thrown off balance, Kase kicked out his knee. The man grappled for the edge, but fell over the side, forcing me to smash against the door to avoid being hit.

My stomach lurched when the wheels crushed him. His body rolled for a few paces before it stilled in the road.

Raum took the reins from the second coachman. Only once the blacksteel of Kase's sword was at the coachman's throat did he surrender.

When the horses came to an easy trot, I wrenched open the door and slipped inside. A woman screamed and pulled her two serfs in front of her. On her head was a mask in the shape of a fish painted gold with blue sapphires for the eyes. On the opposite bench an enormous man sat beside two manservants in red cloaks. His cheeks were like round apples poking out the sides of his black and white troll mask.

The only thing slender about the nobleman was the skinny nose of the mask.

Squeezed between the door and the nobleman's plump hips was a fragile young woman in a gown sewn in midnight blue scales. Her mask was more a headdress. A curled shape covered her soil brown hair. Meant to look like the sea snake, jörmungandr, the mask part was nothing but a thin bit of black lace over her eyes.

On her pale lips she wore the slightest grin.

"Who are you?" The man puffed and clutched his chest when I stepped inside. The answer he was given came by the point of my knife in the folded skin of his neck. "Th-the coin purse is in m-my pocket."

"Good to know," I snarled. "But this is where your ride ends."

One serf choked out a sob when Raum's head appeared in the window. He hung upside down from the rooftop.

"Beautifully ominous, lovey." He swung off and ripped open the door. "Well, you heard her. Get your pampered asses out."

The noblewoman whimpered when Raum dragged her from the seat, then

he carefully reached for the two maids. One girl had a glass eye, and the other, like Dagny, was missing a few fingertips. The nobleman proved harder to persuade. Raum pulled him by the waistcoat, but it took Isak kicking him from behind to finally get him out.

The young woman went on her own accord, huddling among the serfs instead of her noble folk.

Kase leaped from the top of the coach, landing in a crouch. With the hood darkening his already mesmer-shadowed face, he appeared like a wraith of the Otherworld.

"We're in need of your coaches and summons, Lord Hakan."

The lord spluttered at the mention of his name. "You will regret this, thief."

"Thief is such a broad word," Kase said dryly. He hardly moved before the cutting edge of his blacksteel was steadied beneath the lord's chin. "We're more than thieves, and we're losing patience. The summons."

"No. My niece is a pitiful creature, but has enough of a dowry to tempt the Heir Magnate. She will have this chance."

The young woman stiffened, her needle-like fingernails dug into her palms.

Kase chuckled darkly. "She does not wish it. In fact, she will no longer be your burden."

The girl's eyes widened beneath the black lace as a man wearing a dark cap and ratty trousers stepped from the trees, surrounded by a few of Niklas's men.

The girl tore off her mask. "Ulrik!"

Hakan's niece raced into the arms of the weary man. He clung to her, holding her tighter as her sobs came against his coat.

"Freya!" Hakan shouted. "You will stop this. Now."

Kase took a fistful of Hakan's dusty hair and jerked the man's head back. "Forget her from your thoughts, or I will use other means to erase her from your head."

The way he glanced at me it was almost as if he dared me to step forward and kiss the odious man until his thoughts of his niece were long gone.

There wasn't a need. From the trees Fiske, Junius, and the Falkyns who'd brought Ulrik joined our group, slapping their knives against the brass knuckles on their fingers. With every side surrounded, the lord's shoulders slumped. He reached inside his coat and removed a royal blue card, edged in silver.

Raum plucked it from his fingers like a weed.

"You think you're sly," the lord muttered. "You bastards won't survive inside the Masque av Aska."

"We'll see." Kase took the knife sheathed across his lower back and handed it to one of the servants. Eero, Fiske, and Isak did the same until each servant was armed.

"Do with your masters what you will," Kase said, then faced Ulrik. "We delivered on our agreement, speak of this to no one and our dealings are at an end."

I grinned. Kase told me before we'd left Felstad that Ulrik had approached the Kryv a turn ago, desperate to free his secret noble lover from the clutches of her guardians. Kase turned him away. The desperation was not potent enough. Until Hakan planned to offer his niece at the masquerade for the Heir Magnate's bed, desperate to have a child born of the Grym line. Even if his niece was destroyed in the process.

Today everyone received the wish they'd desired most. The Kryv received

their coaches and noble name as our guise.

Ulrik and Freya would be given forged travel papers to the Western Kingdoms to live their lives far from here.

Kase signaled the guilds to take the coach. Junius snatched the fish mask off the noblewoman as the two maids lunged and pinned their glamorous lady to the dirt, a knife at her neck.

I dreaded this part and hugged my middle, watching as Isak kissed Fiske with meaning. Fiske smiled with the ache of goodbye and brushed his thumb over smudged paint near Isak's mouth.

"Junius," Kase said in a low voice. "Watch after the Kryv going with you."

She nodded curtly. "And you, the Falkyns. We'll meet soon."

We were to separate, and I hated it. The others had a precarious route. Through the aqueducts underneath the courtyards and manors of the Black Palace.

"Don't look so despondent, Malin," Niklas said as he gathered most of our weapons. "I am the greatest smuggler in Skítkast. If you want your knives and blades, we'll need to go underground."

"Be careful." I spoke with firmness before hugging both Junius and Niklas.

Kase reluctantly handed Fiske his blacksteel. They took our largest weapons, but no one was entirely unarmed except me. Kase would hold my two small knives and rune pouch until the right moment.

By the time they left, the Falkyns, Fiske, and Junius were armed in totes and satchels filled with our supplies. We kept one bag inside the carriage with masks and costumes needed before we met at the festival.

When they were gone, Lynx emerged from the trees. He stared at Lord Hakan with contempt. "This is the one?"

Kase nodded and jabbed his knee into Hakan's back, so the lord fell

forward. The Nightrender pinned him with a heavy boot on his head.

"Get dressed. Another coach is coming," Kase said. The distant rumble of wheels sent a trill through my stomach.

Lynx hurried and slid into Hakan's oversized coat and took his troll mask.

Kase glanced at Hakan's serf. "We'll be needing your cloaks."

"Don't you dare, Philip." Hakan still argued, even pinned down.

The servant hesitated. "He'll pursue us."

"He won't. His coffers are empty without his niece's dowry." Kase pressed on Hakan's neck with more force. "My Lord, your brother left his daughter plenty to live a grand life. There is nothing left for you but a disgraced name filled with gambling debts and rotten investments."

"Philip," Freya said, her fingers tangled with Ulrik's. "Join us. All of you. We'll live simply, but we'll be free."

"My Lady Freya, we need no more urging than that," Philip said, gesturing at the other serfs.

Freya grinned. "Good. But no more, My Lady's. I am to be a dock worker's wife."

She kissed Ulrik. No mistake, the freedom, the relief they felt, knotted a tangle of envy in my chest. Perhaps after this, I would kiss the Nightrender in such a way.

Kase turned to me. "Are you ready?"

"If I say no, will you tease me?"

He caressed my cheek with his knuckles. "Never."

From the trees Tova and Gunnar appeared with Inge's gown.

"Time to become hopeful mistress of the Black Palace, Malin," Tova said with a laugh in her voice. She found this part delightful. No doubt since no



one here knew how to be noble and Tova expected it to be entertaining to watch us try.

The gown was stunning. Delicate blue lace. Silver beads. Dashes of rich green ribbon across the bodice. I'd never worn such a gown.

As I pulled off my clothes, Kase's prophecy came true. I did not ask him to turn away a third time. In fact, the Nightrender was the one who helped me step into the endless pleats of fabric.

When he'd fastened the silver clasp behind my neck, he turned me around and trapped my face in his hands. He kissed me softly and it ended too soon.

There wasn't a need to say anything. The game was in motion, and we needed to keep moving.

"Enjoy yourselves," Raum said to Ulrik. "Keep to the trees until you get to the alehouse written here." He handed over a crumpled piece of parchment. "There will be people there who can give you passage to your new lives. We need to be going. Isak, I'm driving."

Raum took the driver's spot in the coach next to Isak. A Falkyn handled the remaining driver, dragging him into the trees as Gunnar took on the role of footman with Eero. Tova would be a lady's maid in the second coach behind us with Vali and more of the Falkyn Guild.

Kase helped me step into the coach with Lynx. He would put me forward tonight as my cousin from the Hakan estate. Once Kase was inside, tugging on a black jacket from one of the satchels, he waved a hand over his face. Elof reappeared. The steward of our false noble house.

I grabbed his hand. His new smile was still comforting, and he squeezed my palm in return.

"Let us be off," Lynx said in a pompous tone that didn't fit.

The coach jolted forward. For the first time in ten turns, Kase and I would

return to the Masque av Aska.



34

# THE NIGHTRENDER

CLOUDS FORMED RINGS AROUND frosted peaks and cliffsides. Roads carved through tunnels and bridges from all directions. Watchtowers manned with six skydguard loomed over each entrance.

To escape them, a criminal or runaway would need to know the overgrown trails through the thick forests, or, for the more daring sort, place pouches of powdered elixirs which would turn into pungent mists by the twelfth toll. Mists capable of causing dozens of skydguard to fall into a deep sleep until dawn.

We happened to be prepared to do both when the time to escape arrived.

On cue, the second coach behind us skidded to a stop.

"Damn harnesses are twisted," Vali's voice grumbled, loud enough any patrolling guards might hear.

To us, it was a verbal signal. I counted the next moments with my fingers. Slow. Even. I held my breath until his voice came again.

"There." Vali huffed. "Untangled. Let us be off."

At my side, Malin let out a breath. She gave me a quick look. I squeezed the tips of her fingers. One mark done.

While Vali had stopped, Tova would've slipped into the shadows, placed the powders beneath the watchtower, then returned unseen. They'd done it. We could expect the skydguard of the southeast tower to be numb to their world by midnight.

Hakan's coach rumbled forward through the heavy wooden portcullis of the Black Palace.

Not built in the traditional sense, the wooden walls grew to four levels, and the tops were spiked in carved wolfish heads of Sköll and Hati, as if the two mystical beasts were already chasing the sun and the moon at that height. Windows were made of stained-glass lancets, and exotic wooden doors opened to balconies across all four levels.

We drove past a black carriage. Crossed swords and thorny vines were painted in gold on the back, and a dozen skydguard surrounded it.

"Ivar," Malin whispered.

*Don't let him take you.* I took hold of her hand as if to prove she was still here, with me, not in danger. Yet.

I had to release her eventually. Servants did not touch their noble ladies, but more than that I needed to be the Nightrender, not a man right now. Certainly not a man in love.

"Welcome to the Masque av Aska," a masked skydguard said through the window of our coach once we arrived at the main entrance. He took the personal summons of House Hakan and inspected it in a onceover. "My Lord, noble folk will be led to upper sections."

Lynx waved dismissively at the guard with his sapphire beringed fingers. "Then hurry us along."

Lynx was too damned skilled at giving orders.

The skydguard bowed. "Your coachman may take hold at the stables, just

there. And the lady, will she be presented?”

The guard turned his eyes to Malin. She played her part well, lifting her chin, but using a paper fan to hide the tremble.

“My cousin,” Lynx informed him. “While my father tends to business in the isles of the South, I shall put Lady Freya forward as a potential match for the Heir Magnate.”

The skydguard dipped his chin respectfully. “Lady suitors will enter the masquerade through the staircase into the courtyard. There she will be presented to the Heir Magnate. Should he wish to dance—” The skydguard grinned. “The lady should be prepared.”

Lynx waved them away dismissively and Raum drove the coach to the wide stables, large enough to house at least forty draft horses. Skydguard at the doors directed Raum and Isak around the back to a stall.

The second coach pulled into the stall behind us. Tova burst out, already masked in the golden fish with a matching shimmering robe.

“This comes off the second I’m atop the roof.” She lifted the mask to scratch her forehead.

“Do as you please, so long as you hit your mark.”

Vali emerged with a few Falkyns and blocked off the doors to the stables. He pressed his ear to the door, standing watch while we worked through the next step.

My hands were cold with nerves when Raum hopped off the seat and met with two guards in front of the stall. Three days was all it took to learn exactly which guards would be in the stables.

This was the moment of truth to prove if my threats had bought us loyalty or not.

Raum came to my side. “We’re on time. Three tolls before midnight.”

"Then we better show our faces." I crossed the space to the two skydguard, voice low. "You don't let anyone in this stall. You don't speak a word about us, and when our folk return for the coaches, you let them go. Remember our deal?" They hung their heads, as if looking at me was too painful. "I have the missives at the ready should you decide to betray us."

I backed up my word. Always. From inside the breast of the jacket, I produced the addressed parchments. One to a high general in the skydguard explaining why his grandchild looked nothing like his worthless son-in-law and a great deal like one of his warriors. The other to a game den with an outstanding, unpaid debt and a missing debtor.

"Do we have an understanding?" I pressed once more.

They nodded, still unwilling to look me in the eye. One guard produced a folded set of fatigues worn by lower ranked skydguard and handed them to Raum.

Their hands trembled. Hells, their fear was potent. It was all the proof I needed to take them at their word for silence.

"Did you bribe them?" Malin asked.

A subtle grin played over my mouth. "Threatened. They understand they have nothing I want, but I have the power to ruin them. It is the best sort of deal to make."

I helped secure the dainty black lace mask over her features. Instead of the sea serpent headdress worn by the real Freya, Inge supplied a mask to fit the gown.

On one side was a yellow diamond pinning smooth raven feathers to the mask. With the sapphire blue of her gown, her loveliness took me from behind. Even without our schemes in place to ensure Niall found her in the crowd, Malin Strom would catch every eye at the masque.

"Raum," I said as I tied a long, satin cape around my shoulders. "Watch yourselves. Units can be close; you might be found out if they get a good look at you."

"Ah, but I have Isak," Raum said with a grin and began to strip and dress in the fatigues.

"They w-won't doubt us, Kase," Isak said. "And if they do, they w-won't see much."

I needed to merely look at Tova and Vali. They both nodded and went their separate ways. Vali would be our ears. A backup. He'd listen to the walls, acting like a drunkard. If he caught a hint of any way into the chambers below the palace, if Niall did not behave how we hoped, at least we would have another shot at getting into the trade.

Tova would be our watch from above with her arrows.

Eero hopped off the back of the coach, securing a wolf mask over his face. "I'll head to the lower courtyard. Let us pray Niklas didn't dawdle or I will be caught out of place and unarmed."

He laughed. I didn't see the humor.

"You understand the importance of being there to open the hatch for them? The mark cannot be missed."

Eero grinned smugly. "I know my part well. Never fear, Nightrender."

There was a great deal to fear. "She will need us armed."

"Understood." Eero tipped his head and looked to Gunnar. "Coming?"

Gunnar shouldered a bow we'd smuggled in beneath the benches in the coach. He'd reel back around to see that the watchtower guards were fighting to stay awake, then join with Tova on the rooftops.

I gripped his shoulder. "This is the night we've worked toward. By dawn you will have good news to send your mother."



Gunnar's hazel eyes brightened. "I will never be able to repay what you've done."

"It is a good thing you won't have to. Go. We have marks to hit."

Gunnar surprised me and took Malin in an embrace, whispered something in her ear, then hurried after Eero to fade into the revelry.

I removed an elixir pouch from my pocket. The same as the crystal powder used for Niall's jacket but darker. The coal dust powder breathed a hint of honey into the air. With my fingers, I dusted it over the dark beading across the neckline of Malin's gown and mask.

Her eyes stayed with me all the while. "You will stay close?"

I quickly wiped off any powder residue and held her cheek. "I will always be close. Even if you do not see me."

"Cousin," Lynx said, smoothing the feather eyebrows across the troll mask. He'd draped a blue mantle around his shoulders as part of his costume and looked regal when he held out one arm for Malin to take. "Shall we go meet your future husband?"

Malin snickered, but fear, dread, all of it surrounded her in a dark aura my mesmer devoured.

Before Lynx walked away with her, I gripped her hand. "You are stronger than you know, Mallie."

She gave me a trembling smile. "We leave here together this time."

I kissed her knuckles, then let her lead with Lynx three paces ahead of me. I removed the black raven mask from the satchel we'd brought, placed it over my face, and lowered my gaze. A signal I was nothing more than a servant overseeing his master's wellbeing.

Once more, I walked into the colors and ribbons and glitter of this wretched place.



35

# THE NIGHTRENDER

*COME ONE, COME ALL. Here, the weak run for cover, but the fools stand tall.*

Stewards chirped the same message in shrill voices as they weaved through the sea of glittering folk. Dressed as imps, fae, and underground nyks, the flexible entertainers hopped about the tabletops, smashing wine glasses, kicking drinking horns, but always drawing laughter.

Lynx led Malin through the crowds of folk behaving as stupidly and merrily as the slums of Skítkast.

A steward dressed as a troll, clambered up one of the towering posts draped in blood red sashes and tossed handfuls of false penge coins at the delighted guests below. When unwrapped, either a chocolate treat would be found or a dare of sorts the guest could accomplish for a prize.

Tents of all shapes reached for the velvet sky like jagged teeth.

A blue tent with glittering stars hosted children and their guardians, all clapping gleefully as Hypnotiks, dressed in their Kind's shimmering currant shade, created illusions of the night sky.

A wide tent with stripes held fortune tellers and their runes of fate. The

largest white canopy in the center hosted the ball, where couples danced and waltzed until their toes bled.

In the narrow corridors and alleyways between tents, Alvers were greeted with wonderment as folk begged for something magical. An illusion. A prediction. They tipped hats, batted fans, and obliged. What other choice did Black Palace Alvers have?

The festival was rife with sweetness. Candied pomes dipped in thick, sugar sauce. Breads and rolls oozing in glazes and icings of all sorts: sweet cream, vanilla, cocoa, and butter.

A vender strode past with a tray of honey cakes topped in lingberry cream and tart jelly. Popped corn with pink salt, and sugar blown into delicate curls. Roasting pigeons with savory gravies over open flames, and endless glasses of cherry wine and hard brän kept guests full and lightheaded.

I weaved through the streams of beautiful folk. My black robe tangled with fine gowns spun in white silk from Furen or heavy cloaks hemmed in crystals and bells from Hemlig. Those from Klockglas were easy to spot—elaborate masks with peacock feathers out the tops and hoop skirts impossible to sit in, or quite the opposite—a hideous creature on their faces with skintight suits.

I was devoured by it all. Memories of a different masque, of the fiercest fear I'd experienced, tightened my chest in a strange sort of panic.

No time to lose my head.

I stretched my hands once, twice. Each breath had purpose, and I drew them in deeply beneath my mask until my pulse settled to a manageable thrum.

In the daze, I'd fallen behind. Already, Malin and Lynx rounded a corner that would lead them to the head of the staircase.

I quickened my pace, cutting around lyres, drums, and horn players and

their endless melodies. Dodged performers on stilts and black cloaks. From underneath the stilt walkers, a second masked face burst out and tossed glittering silver and crimson dust, simply to make guests scream in delight.

Everywhere was filled with spinning, dancing, and drinking, until at last I arrived at the top of the stone steps.

Lynx cast me a quick look, his mouth in a hard line.

Although he could not see me beneath my raven head, I glared back. I didn't need him questioning about my delay, didn't need anyone knowing how the very scent of this horrid place was burrowed deep in my skin.

In the courtyard below us, couples were well into the masquerade ball. Brilliant costumes sparkled beneath torches and tall lantern posts with flames made larger, more colorful, through Hypnotik illusion.

"Name, My Lord," a pious palace steward said, his voice so contrived I had a heady desire to strike him in the mouth.

"House Hakan presents Lady Freya Hakan for Heir Magnate Niall."

The steward gave a slight nod, then faced the ball. On the stones, he clapped a carved wooden cane with Huginn and Muninn as the pommel. "House Hakan presents for Our Honored Lord, Lady Freya Hakan."

I held my breath, waited to the count of ten, then followed behind Lynx as he descended the staircase.

A few curious people turned their heads. Most of the announcing was done as a formality. I took a guess that many were losing interest in the potential brides. Already tucked off to one side was a growing crowd of ladies in expensive gowns, looking rather dejected.

If only they knew how blessed they were not to win the favor of Niall Grym.

My eyes scanned the crowd. We had roles to play, and everyone should be

in their places. If not, something had already gone wrong. I flicked a finger as I took in each mark point without turning my head.

The east wall.

Seated in a wooden chair, a man with an owl mask laughed loudly. At his side was a woman wearing a gown hemmed in bells and a golden sparrow mask on her face. Between them a broad man, masked in a checkered bear face, poured another horn of sweet wine. Junie, Niklas, and Fiske.

I grinned beneath the raven. They'd made it through the water ducts and through the opening provided us by the two spineless skydguard. A grimy journey, but they'd done it. Our weapons would be accessible.

The southeast corridor.

Two skydguard trudged the edges of the courtyard. Their faces familiar. Isak had covered his red hair, and scanned the crowd, no doubt searching for a sign of Fiske. Raum pointed toward the east wall. In half a breath, Isak nodded, then turned his focus back to marching.

The Lady's estate.

The rooftop of a massive manor for the Lady Magnate's use. Difficult to see without looking behind me, but I tilted my head enough to catch the gleam of something shiny. A signal from Gunnar. He and Tova were in position.

I lifted one hand and gave a quick tug to my left ear.

The gleam disappeared.

How many dancing guests were Falkyns? I couldn't say, but it was an intoxicating bit of relief to know we were in place.

"All is well, My Lord," I said.

Lynx nodded. "Good report, Philip."

"The night is bright," Malin said her signal phrase.

My eyes shot ahead the palace dais. Her code was meant to signal we'd caught the attention of the Heir Magnate.

Now was the time to find out if the crystal powder threaded throughout the Heir Magnate's festival jacket connected to the dark dust on Malin's gown.

I'd either praise Niklas's name or be forced to kill a friend.

Niall sat atop the platform with his family in gaudy thrones as if they were truly kings and queens. There was the Lady Magnate on his righthand. A stern woman who loved Ivar's power, not the man.

I'd been privy to her strong hand for discipline before. Still, the woman did have a heart for her sons.

Behind the lady were consorts of Ivar, and also the lovers of his wife. Never ones to be afraid of sharing with the world they were together to breed heirs, nothing more. House Grym fed their pleasure elsewhere.

The youngest son slouched in his seat, bored and disinterested. I scoffed. Bleeding Luca. For once could he behave as a Grym, not the man who'd rather be nose-deep in a book beneath a tree, or somewhere else his family would not be?

Luca cast his blue eyes about as if he sensed my watch. He couldn't see me, but he paused for the slightest moment, I almost believed he knew exactly who was beneath the raven mask.

Ivar, with his coal-black eyes, sat beside Luca instead of in the center chair. Tonight, was for Niall after all. Ivar had a silver fool's mask with vibrant white ribbons sprouting out the top; he'd laid it over his lap and muttered something to Niall.

Niall was desired by many women throughout the regions. Hard to see why. I hated the bastard.

He was cruel and loved to exert his power on those beneath him. Dagny

had been harmed by the man, but she was not alone. He'd meet an end worthy of his viciousness, no mistake. I simply hadn't decided how to do it yet.

Now, I would be placing the one who brought my soul to life in his path.

We'd reached the dais and I lowered to my knee. Ivar kept speaking to his son, but his heir was not listening.

The way Niall tore back his trickster mask and drank Malin up, head to foot, a bit of fear receded off my chest. With the crystal powder connected to the coal powder, desire and passion would be insatiable at his first glance. If his stun were any clue, the elixir was working.

With his mask removed it was easy to see how much he'd changed since I saw him last as a wicked younger man.

The Heir Magnate stood tall with dark stubble on his chin. He'd shaved the sides of his skull like most noblemen, and inked runes across his head.

He looked like a younger Ivar while Luca favored the lady with paler hair and sharper features.

"What is your name?" Niall asked, his voice strangely breathless.

"Freya," Malin said, billowing the impressive skirts around her as she kneeled, head bowed. "An honor, My Lord."

Niall stomped down the steps of the dais. Couples stopped twirling, intrigued. Even the minstrels ceased their lutes and drums, watching as the Heir Magnate abandoned his seat. Niall stood before Malin and Lynx, his mask tucked in his arm, head canted to one side.

"My Lady, you are . . ." Niall wore a foolish grin on his face. His eyes were glazed. "Breathtaking."

Instinct demanded I step between Niall and Malin while schemes and ploys held me in my place.



She knew her part. Without a personal invitation there were no guarantees we'd find our way in. Even with Vali's ears. Without getting in, we would never see Hagen. The heir lusting after Malin was needed. Still, it did not mean I had to be glad about it.

"Perhaps your escort may permit me to take you for a dance." Niall held out his hand.

Lynx pressed a hand to his heart. "Of course, Heir Magnate. My cousin would be delighted."

Niall paid Lynx no mind and took Malin's hand in his, tugging her back to standing.

My fists clenched at the sight of him pawing at her back, holding her close. He kissed her knuckles, the same as I had not long ago. Maybe we needed to pivot and cut him down where he stood. Start a bleeding war in the courtyard of the masque.

Should she ask it of me, I would take to battle for her. Without question.

Niall snapped his fingers and the music spilled across the courtyard once again.

Ivar watched curiously as his heir abandoned the women who'd come before us and took to the center of the yard with Malin in his hands. His wife beamed. Luca took another drink from a horn, rolling his eyes.

"So it begins, Philip," Lynx muttered to me.

"Yes," I said through my teeth. "So it begins."



36

# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE HEIR MAGNATE HELD my hand tightly in his and led me to the center of the courtyard.

My smile was not my own. This smile was pretty, so grateful to be blessed with Niall's attention. If he could see the hate inside, he would not hold me so close to his body.

"Freya," he said, holding my hand out, and guiding me in a twirl around him. "I have never seen a woman so lovely as you."

It was the elixir speaking, but I wanted to vomit all the same. "I have heard a great many things of you, My Lord. All do not do you justice."

Gods. I disgusted myself.

Niall was a cock preening his feathers. He grinned and guided me to the spritely beat of the tune. His body was broad, strong. A warrior's shape, and his eyes reminded me of tilled soil. If he were not so wicked, he might be handsome.

"Tell me what brought you to the Masque av Aska," he said.

I fluttered my lashes. The lace mask on my face was intentionally thin and revealing. Others would need to be convinced Niall saw enough of my face to

be knocked off his feet by my miraculous beauty, after all.

"Why, because of you, My Lord," I said shyly. He spun me once more, the layers of fabric curled around my legs, then back again when he pulled me into his chest. "I could not miss an opportunity to meet you."

"Then I shall thank the gods tonight, Lady Freya."

I giggled stupidly, stroking his pride as well as I could. All around, even with masks, I could feel every cut of envy from the other girls who'd come to be the next Lady Magnate. They may not know it, but we had certainly granted them a mercy by saving them from a life of the hells being vowed to a man like Niall Grym.

As he held me, I thought of Dagny. The horror he'd caused in her life. I thought of the ways we could make him pay for it.

For three more dances, Niall did not take his hands off me. My arms were raw from the countless times he'd dragged his fingernails over my skin.

By the gods, once or twice could prove rather seductive. Dozens of times was just painful. It was no wonder Ivar needed to dedicate an entire Masque av Aska to his heir. Niall did not know how to handle a woman in the least.

When we stopped at the end of the tune, Niall took my hands in his, smiling like I lit up the sun. "Lady Freya, I wonder if you might join me at a special event of the masque. It is exclusive and designed to honor a lady of my choosing."

I gasped, hand to my chest. "My Lord, you wish me to join you?"

He chuckled and tucked my arm through his elbow, leading me back to the dais. "The most beautiful woman at the masque, yes. She deserves the attention of the Black Palace heir."

By the gods. Was he complimenting me, or himself?

"I'd be honored, My Lord."

Niall made a sound of approval and stood me in front of Ivar's seat. I'd never met the Lord Magnate. From a distance I'd witnessed him step foot inside House Strom many times. I was always banished to the stables.

Up close, his harsh, black gaze cut down to my bones.

I took a bit of solace when Lynx and Kase stepped in beside me. My protective cousin and loyal steward.

"Father," Niall said. "I've invited Lady Freya to attend our trade."

Ivar was unmasked. Like most highly ranked men his hair was braided in a ridge down his skull. Across his shoulders were thick pelts and furs. Kohl lined his eyes, making him look formidable, and the three blades visibly strapped to his body were strategically placed to intimidate others.

He studied me with a touch of suspicion. "There are more women coming to see you."

"I want none of them," Niall bit out. "This was my choice, was it not?"

"It was." Ivar's lip curled. "Very well. We shall begin the trade, but the lady will need to be searched."

Kase shifted on his feet at my side. We knew this would happen, the reason I came in unarmed. Ivar obsessed over the notion of losing his power, and he took few risks.

Niall nodded and gestured to a place behind the dais. "It will be swift, Lady Freya, and I shall be beside you."

I shivered against the hungry tone of his voice. His eyes held no shame as they dropped to the cleft between my breasts, then remained there too long.

"My steward will stand with my cousin as an overseer," Lynx demanded. "The woman has not been with a man, and it is customary in the south for unwed ladies not to be alone with unwed men."

Did we know if the Southern Kingdom had such laws? No, but I breathed a

sigh of relief when Ivar gestured to his personal steward and Kase to follow through the curtain behind the dais.

Niall clung to me like an insect looking for a proper bite. I fought the urge to roll my eyes when he brushed a hand over my shoulder, as if trying to console me for the embarrassment I would face.

The man I wanted was dressed in a raven mask, stiff and tense, ready to lunge at the Heir Magnate should he touch me again.

"The lady is to undress, and I will inspect her," said Ivar's steward.

I stood straight, hoping to hide the sick tension in my belly. My gaze locked with Kase as I slid the fine gown off my body. The Nightrender's fists tightened when my nakedness was exposed, and Niall groaned.

The bleeding heir was a sod and grabbed between his legs, turning away to readjust.

He behaved like a boy who'd gotten his first glimpse at a bit of feminine skin.

The steward padded at my body. Kase's frown deepened. I did not breathe until the steward cleared me of sneaking in weapons and permitted me to dress again.

Once the dress was on, Niall forced me against his overheated chest. I choked on bile when his tongue glided over the curve of my ear. "Forgive my boldness, but I would take you now if possible. Later, My Lady. We shall get to know each other later."

Niklas warned the powders could cause a bit of obsession. We needed to be done with this before the Heir Magnate lost the last grip of his mind and tried to claim me in front of everyone. Should it happen, a bleeding war would begin when the Nightrender cut off Niall's hands in front of Ivar.

The small space darkened.

"My Lord," Kase's voice broke Niall's possessive hold on me. "Did you not have somewhere you wished to take the lady?"

I shot him a stern look, silently urging him to pull back his bleeding shadows and contain his rage a little longer.

A bit of the glaze pulled away from Niall's eyes. "Yes. My gift. This way, my love."

Back at the front of the dais, the steward gave his report. Ivar seemed reluctant, but gave his approval for us to continue.

"Your escorts may accompany us for now," Niall said with almost a giddy excitement. "This way, Lady Freya."

I fell into step, but fear dominated my body. Kase likely choked on every bit of it. Pressure gathered like a slow knife inching toward my heart. If I took one wrong step, it would land a killing blow. But I fissured my emotions. Kase knew how to detach during a fight, and I'd need to do the same.

With his lead, we'd get through the night.

Niall led us through arched doors at the lower level of the Black Palace. The corridor was musty and cold.

"It will be rather dim where we're going, My Lady," Niall said. "Hold tightly to me."

I obliged, tightening my grip on his arm. A little longer, that was all, then I could cease the charade of enjoying this fool's company.

We descended a spiral staircase one full level beneath the palace. Tunnels crisscrossed where serfs were to keep out of sight as they traveled to different rooms, but there was a wider corridor which broke from the rest. The corridor coiled around the center circle where the trade would be held.

Niall guided me through a narrow door that opened into a large suite. It

was lit with only a single tallow candle. A plush chaise and twig chairs furnished the space.

"Sit," Niall said.

"What is all this, My Lord?"

He sneered at me. I thought he might've been trying to smile with a touch of passion, but it only looked demented and ugly. "This, My Lady, is your trade."

"My trade?"

"Yes." Niall sat beside me on the chaise, one hand tastelessly high on my thigh. Perhaps a trick of my mind, but I was certain shadows, once again, darkened the space. Niall leaned back. "A gift from me to the woman I plan to claim as mine."

"My Lord." I gasped again.

"You've captivated me, Freya. I did not believe such a thing possible so quickly."

Not without mesmer. And in truth we did not have long before the effects of Niklas's powder wore thin.

"You are to pick a dedicated servant," Niall said. "An Alver for your own. When we are vowed, you will be given the best servants, and you will find the best in Alver folk."

"My Lord, are you not Alver folk yourself?" Ivar was an Alver, it was well known, though no one knew what he could do exactly. It was common knowledge his sons were as well.

"Yes. A Mediski," Niall said, missing my tone completely.

I wanted to howl with laughter. What a twisted sense of humor the Norns had. To give a man such as him the gift of healing. He did not deserve it.

While he lived in his palace, trading his own folk, Alvers fought and



clawed in the streets, all to survive.

Niall pulled on a frayed rope. Straightaway a door opened at the back of the trade circle. My heart stilled in my chest. The Master of Ceremonies stepped through. Donned in a loud violet cloak and a fool's mask with gold and black checkered squares over the brow.

The things he must do to ensure this festival entertained and robbed folk of their freedom at the same time was a feat all its own.

His insides must've been blackened and dim.

Behind the Master of Ceremonies, a line of people was ushered in. They were dressed in plain robes in a bright shade of red. One girl had ghastly welts where her wrists were bound. A small boy with hair like the deepest midnight and a childish roundness to his cheeks bore an ugly gash from brow to jaw.

I held my breath as the last, the tallest, was led inside.

Hagen.

His body was thinner. His face had been shaved, and his dirty golden hair had been trimmed close to his scalp. I gripped the lace of the gown to keep from reacting. From where he stood near the door, Kase tilted his head side to side. To Niall it would be a simple gesture, but to Lynx it was a signal our mark—my stepbrother—was there.

Bandages threaded under Hagen's arm and shoulder, brown with dried blood and a swollen lump had turned green on the side of his head.

"What do you think, Freya?" Niall said with clear expectations for praise.

"It's . . . it's remarkable, My Lord."

Niall grinned. "The choice is yours."

I had my choice made, but my heart ached. Hagen stood among others. What would become of them? Did I have the freedom to even care? We could

not save everyone. Like the advice Sigurd gave me—a time that felt so long ago—sometimes cruel things happened.

I lifted my eyes to Kase. As if he knew the storm brewing within me, he gave me a nod. Silent permission to do what needed to be done.

We could not right all the wrongs in one night.

"My Lord," I said, gently resting my hand on Niall's arm. He seemed rather delighted by it, so I added a squeeze of pressure. "The tall Alver. The one on the end. What do you think of him?"

"Ah, a disgraced nobleman, My Lady. He is accustomed to the life we lead, and with his brutish size, no doubt would make a fair watchdog."

I grinned. "I couldn't agree more."

"Although," Niall went on. "The girl on the end has remarkable skill as a Rifter."

"They're terrifying."

Niall seemed to enjoy the way I leaned into him like the Rifter girl might attack any moment. "I assure you, Freya. I would not let a single Alver in your sight without the proper shackles. Besides me, of course. We have ways of taming magic."

Brutal, vicious ways.

"The boy," I asked, playing the part of curiosity well. I did not want to select Hagen too hastily, in fear it might cause suspicion. "What does he do?"

"I was told he is a Hypnotik. Skilled for his young age. He would grow to be loyal, but I do not think such a frail child would suit as a guard for a Lady Magnate."

"Yes," I said, nodding. "You're right. It is such a difficult choice."

"Choose well, cousin," Lynx muttered. "This is for your protection."

I tilted my head side to side, my hand stroked Niall's arm. "A nobleman

would know the blade. He'd be a fair guard, I should think."

"Have you made your choice, then?"

"This is so remarkable, I'm not sure I know how to choose." Play a part. Don't seem too eager. Convince him he is the only fine thing in the world in your eyes. A dozen little pieces of advice had been thrown at me from the Kryv the last two nights. They served me well in the moment. I faced Niall squarely. "I can hardly believe you're offering this to someone like me."

Niall used his fingertip to lift my chin. "Someone like you will be the mistress of this palace."

"You honor me, My Lord. After so short a time, I am flattered to even be considered."

"Yes. It is strange." Niall slumped back, a bemused furrow to his brow. "I would not normally be captivated so swiftly."

Blood rushed to my head. The elixir—it must've been wearing off.

One look at Kase, I knew he agreed. His hands twitched at his side. Lynx rolled his shoulders. What did they expect? If Niall broke free of the potion, would they fight him? Kill him?

I didn't want to find out what would become of us if we fought our way out of this place.

"I choose the tall Alver, My Lord. If it pleases you," I tacked on.

"Wise choice." Niall stood and stepped into the center. He snapped his fingers at the Master of Ceremonies. "The lady has made her choice. This one."

It sickened me the way the Heir Magnate dismissed them all as if they were nothing. The Master of Ceremonies hesitated, even cast a glance at Hagen.

Odd. But it was over quickly before he dipped his head. "It will be

arranged, Heir Magnate.” His voice was altered. Too low. Too broken to be a true voice. No doubt some type of Hypnotik illusion was to blame.

Niall returned to the dim suite, smiling. “Lord Hakan, your steward can see to your cousin’s choice.”

Lynx smirked. “Philip. See to the man. Bring him to us.”

I hated this part most of all. The moment I’d separate from Kase until our next mark. He behaved as a steward, but I caught his eye through the mask over his face. To give us away now would be foolish, so I dismissed him as a spoiled noblewoman might.

We’d done it. I should have a bit of gladness, and I did. Kase would go to Hagen. He’d be free of here.

I tried to breathe easier, but the hair stood up on my arms as if some deep sense inside me knew something would go wrong.

Once we were up the spiral staircase, back to the main level of the Black Palace, Niall took my hand and led me toward the door that would return us to the masque. But when he reached for the handle, the doors flew open as someone came in.

“Oh, Heir Magnate, you were just who I was seeking out. If you’ll permit me, My Lord, I’ve come to barter for the release of—” The man cut off his voice when his eyes fell to me.

My heart sank to the pit of my stomach.

His mouth turned down in an angry grimace. “Malin?”

I didn’t know what move to take, what step came next. We had not planned for Bard Strom to step in the way of our plans.



37

# THE MEMORY THIEF

“MALIN?”

My name hung between us. I froze. Bard looked murderous. But I had to wonder why he was here. He'd been speaking of bartering for the release of . . . he could only mean Hagen.

Bard cared?

Out of my two stepbrothers, Bard Strom was not a man I would consider caring. Doubtless he had more affection for Hagen than he ever had for me, but enough to come and try to buy him back? In all the different ways this night could shift, a sudden appearance by my stepbrother was not one.

Lynx cleared his throat. “I'm afraid you're mistaken. This is my cousin, Freya Hakan. Come along, Freya.”

“Lord Strom,” Niall said, his voice lest wistful, less filled with longing as he darted his gaze between Bard and me. “I am in no mood for business tonight. Your brother has been purchased anyway.”

“Purchased?” Bard's face flushed. “By whom?”

“My Lady,” was all Niall offered before he dragged me to the door.

“Malin.” Bard snapped. “What are you doing?”

I turned over my shoulder. "*Herr*, forgive me, but I am not this Malin."

Bard's eyes flashed dangerously. "I'll figure it out, little mouse."

"Strom." Niall's voice could be commanding, almost frightening. It was enough to shut Bard up. "You will respect the lady and step back. Or you will join your brother in chains."

Bard had no time to respond before another familiar face joined the circle. Eero bowed his head, looking a great deal like a Black Palace servant in his blue coat and black trousers.

This was not his mark. He was to aid Niklas at the walls, then the boathouse for our escape.

"My Lord," Eero said. "The Lord Magnate would have a word with you and the lady's cousin."

Lynx gave a subtle shake to his head which Eero returned with a subtle nod.

Plans were shifting.

"I will not leave Freya to fend for herself in this crowd," Niall protested.

"Yes, My Lord. I am here to escort the lady to the dais to speak with your mother until you return."

Niall seemed ready to protest, but repulsive as he was, no one would gainsay the Lord Magnate. Not even his son.

The same reason Lynx would be expected to leave without question. He would need to find a way to escape the Heir Magnate without too much suspicion.

"Until we see each other again, My Lord," I said, shrinking beneath Bard's glare. I took a step toward Eero.

Niall kissed the top of my hand. "I look forward to it, My Lady."

Lynx left me with a sharp glance. A silent warning that I better keep

myself alive until the Kryv could regroup.

"Malin," Bard hissed.

"Leave. Do not say another word," I snapped in a harsh, raw voice. "Do not interfere."

I must've stunned him. His mouth clamped shut.

In truth, I was almost positive that was the most Bard had heard me speak to him at one time and in such a way. Even when he'd abandoned me to the skydguard at House Strom, I had not snarled at him.

Eero took us outdoors. We avoided the crowds. I knew we would not head for the dais. What was the point when we had Hagen? At least, I hoped all had gone well. It would be time to prepare our exit.

"Eero, what's happening? Is all well with the Falkyns? The Kryv?"

"Yes," he said, picking up his steps to a near run. "Everyone is where they should be, but we had to adjust. I'm to lead us to the boathouse by another route."

"But what of Lynx?"

"He'll find another way."

It didn't seem so simple. Kase meticulously planned this night to the very step we would all take. Such a fast change, when I was not even certain Kase knew Bard had unraveled pieces, seemed odd.

He would not take the shift well, and I had a feeling he would not want to do such a change without eyes on each other. Right now, I had no idea where Kase was.

"Malin, in here," Eero said, holding back the flap of a gold tent.

I should've questioned. Should've paused. But I simply followed.

My mind spent less than three heartbeats taking in the scene. Filled with glamorous gilded ribbons, velvet tapestries, and a runner made of woven



lace. In the center was a polished wooden box without a lid. On a satin pillow within was a glass ring, black runes embossed on the edges. By the gods, this was the tent for the queen's ring.

Surrounding the box—five skydguard.

Their eyes were not on protecting the precious ring that would never fit anyone. No. Their eyes were pinned to me.

"This the one?"

I startled at Eero's forceful hand. The Falkyn gripped my arm, digging his fingers into my skin until I winced. "This is her."

"Bring her here."

"Eero." I resisted. "No. What are you doing?"

Eero was unrelenting. Where I resisted, he dug in deeper, dragging me forward. I tried to drop to the ground, hoping to break his hold, but two skydguard added their hands to my body.

I fought, clawed, bit. Panic seized my heart with cruel hands. Eero had turned me over to skydguard. Why? Why would he betray his guild, why risk betraying the Nightrender? Whatever plan he had must be worth the risk.

I scratched one of the guards across the face. His blood and flesh lodged beneath my fingernails. The skydguard cursed me, then struck my face with his closed fist. My head spun. The cloying fetid taste of my own blood burned my tongue.

The next move had me slammed against the ring box. A bright spark of heat filled my veins. As if mesmer churned inside me, begging me to fight back. How, I didn't know, but I would fight until my last breath. I would not be another casualty of the Masque av Aska.

"Gods, look at that." The skydguard who'd struck me said, aghast.

"What did I tell you," Eero said. "You want to be honored by the Lord

Magnate? Get a noble title in front of your name? Tell me this has never happened. He will honor you until your last breath.”

I cracked one eye. They’d bent me over the pillow, and below my nose the black runes along the ring were no longer black. They’d transformed into a fiery burn.

If the strange heat that had come to my veins had a color, it would be the burning runes.

What was this? The ring was a myth, a twisted game for the Lord Magnate to give folk hope they might be able to take his seat in the palace. All my life, I’d believed Ivar had forged the ring himself, but called it ancient.

If it was not of his making, why keep it? Could he not dispose of it? Did he use it truly to find potential challengers to his power? A hundred questions wheeled through my head as the skydguard ripped me back and tossed me to the ground.

“It’s real,” he said.

“As I said.” Eero sounded irritated the guard held any sort of stun. “Put that ring on her finger and Ivar is ruined. Imagine what he’ll pay to wipe her from existence.”

“You coward,” I snapped at Eero. “You betrayed your people, your family.”

Eero shrugged. “Some things are worth it, Malin.”

“I am not a threat to Ivar’s throne!” I shouted. A lie. I had mighty plans to bring down the cruel rule of the Black Palace. But not to claim it for myself.

“The penge,” Eero said.

“There,” another guard pointed to a satchel near the back of the room. “Come with us and the Lord Magnate will stop hunting you. Give you position at the palace.”

Eero inspected the stacks of paper penge in the satchel and shrugged. "Perhaps I will."

"Get her up," said a guard. "Ivar will want to meet her."

Before they could take a step, the tent flap flew open again. My heated blood went cold.

The Master of Ceremonies, still in his fool's mask, stepped forward. "I will take this from here."

The skydguard hesitated, they dipped their chins in respect. The one who'd struck me stepped forward. "My Lord, this woman is a threat to our Lord Magnate."

"Yes, I've been made aware." He lifted the box with the queen's ring, then tilted his masked face at the guards. His altered voice crawled up my arms like a frigid wind. "Give me your names, your position, and the Lord Magnate will be made aware of your service, but you will be unable to speak the truth to anyone of the girl's name, nor her connections."

There was a spark in the air. Like a flare of heat. The skydguard, even Eero stared at the master with a touch of confusion. The Master of Ceremonies studied them from beneath his mask for a few breaths. What had he done to them?

With the skydguard and traitor befuddled, the master curled his gloved hand around my wrist and lifted me back to my feet.

I was as ice. Numb. Unfeeling. I moved with stiff, jerky steps as the Master of Ceremonies dragged me away to my fate.



38

# THE NIGHTRENDER

ONE OF THE BLACK Palace servants took me to a small room on the main level. The room reeked of herbs and dried lavender from hanging bunches of seasonings over the door.

I looked out one window to the sky. The position of the moon hinted we were down to the last toll. At the stroke of midnight, the masquerade would fade away for another turn.

Not to mention the elixir keeping Niall in a bit of a dreamy haze would be wearing off.

I needed to retrieve Hagen and find Malin or I would start drawing blood.

What was taking so bleeding long? To bring a purchased Alver should not take half my life.

I shook out my hands. Paced the room. It felt like turns before the click snapped and the same servant who'd brought me returned, a thin, magisk-chained Hagen at his back.

"Your lady's serf," said the servant. He bowed his head and slipped out the room.

I'd played this moment out in my head. It was meant to be strategic. Take the mark to the boathouse, get him to freedom, take the penge and satisfaction Gunnar had his family restored.

But like a thief, emotion stole my indifference and replaced it with pain, relief, and—gods—something hopeful. My head was not right. This was not strategic. This was personal.

Hagen had not lifted his eyes. He looked defeated. "Where shall I go, *Herr?*"

I scoffed. "I expected a little more fight in you."

A muscle popped in Hagen's jaw, but his eyes remained trained on the ground. "There are consequences for fighting, *Herr.*"

"Yes. Consequences that might fall back on your family in the north, no doubt."

Ah, that was what spurred Hagen to life.

He lifted his eyes, darkness in his glare. "I do not know how you know of them, but do not threaten them again. Unless you do wish for a fight, *Herr.*"

"I would never threaten them. Don't tell them, for it would ruin my hard-fought reputation, but I like them too much."

Hagen's face paled. "You pretend to know them to taunt me. It will not work."

"Why? Because you think your family is still imprisoned? So, how could I possibly be acquainted with them? Is that what you're thinking?"

Hagen shifted on his feet, eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

Time for pretenses to end. I did not anticipate the tightness of nerves to take hold. But as I lifted the raven mask, my heart raced in my chest. My tongue stuck to the top of my mouth.

It had been ten turns. I looked different and wasn't surprised when he

studied me as if he could still not place my face in his memory.

"Time to go, Hagen. Your freedom is waiting." I turned for the door.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

"Just a man keeping a boy's promise to always look after her. You were purchased by your sister."

A rough breath scraped out of his throat. "Malin is here? No. No, she can't be." He hurried to my side. This close, it was not long before his eyes widened in recognition. "By the hells. Kase."

The knot in my throat was unwelcome. I cleared it away and blinked shadows over my eyes. "We need to go. Our time is short."

"Kase—"

"Hagen," I snapped. "We can embrace and tell each other all about our wretched lives later. We need to go. You'll need to wait to remove your magisk shackles but take this." I handed him a dagger sheathed to my ribs. "Be ready to fight."

I hoped it wouldn't come to that. We'd had little disruptions so far, and I'd like to keep it that way. In as a whisper, out like a shadow.

The layout plans Malin had recited to me reeled in my head. Make our way to the next floor up. Find the third chamber on the left. Climb down the trellis out the window. We'd slip out through the back gate, take a two-level staircase into the underground boathouse. Cross the river. Done. Survival.

Fate had little affection for me. I suspected it was because I often spread nonbelief for the Norns. We'd hardly made it out of our room before a door slammed open and a bloodied Lynx, Niklas, and Fiske appeared, blades in hand.

"Kase," Lynx shouted. "They knew we were here."

My stomach turned. He was supposed to be with Malin. Niklas handed me

my blacksteel in the next breath. “Where is she?”

Lynx shook his head. “Eero came, said there was a change, and he went with Malin.”

“And you bleeding left her?”

“Malin is gone?” Hagen said in a rough voice.

Lynx ignored him and looked to me. “The Lord Magnate called me. I could not refuse and keep our façade. She was with Eero, but—”

“The bastard betrayed us.” Niklas wiped blood off his nose with his sleeve. “He told them our marks. Kase, he told them where Junie was taking the rest of those Alvers from the trade.”

“How?” I gripped his arm. “No one but us three knew we’d smuggle them out.”

Niklas held the sides of his head. “I don’t know. Dammit. I don’t know how he knew anything. How did he hide his lies? Junie would’ve tasted them.”

If Eero had planned on deceit tonight, no doubt he took precautions around Junius. Niklas had dozens of Elixirs that hid intentions, concealed thoughts, for all I knew, Eero could’ve used the Falkyn’s own mesmer against his guild.

The Alvers in the trade with Hagen would’ve been met with Falkyns after they were not selected. It was not out of goodness that we made plans to free them on the side. More to cause Ivar discomfort. I had expected Malin to give me grief about being a good person when she found out. But if she was gone .

..

I wouldn’t allow the thought to form and focused again on Niklas.

“Eero told them,” he raged. “A unit went for the canals, and I tried to chase them, but more came. They blocked us off. I won’t lose her again. I won’t.”



I gripped the side of his neck. Niklas was spiraling in memories of a time his wife had been captured and shipped to the Northern Kingdom. Junie's connection to the distant kingdom was how we came to know Gunnar's folk. How we all ended up here.

My voice darkened. "Where is Eero?"

I'd peel his skin off his bones. Slowly.

"He took her into a tent," Lynx told me. "But we'll be hard pressed to reach it without fighting through Black Palace guards."

Fiske looked at me. "Remember what I said."

*Dammit.* I'd nearly forgotten his bleeding premonition about the night not going to plan. If a traitor had Malin, not even fate would stop me from reaching her and burning Eero where he stood.

I turned my dark glare to Hagen. "As I said. Be ready to fight. Niklas, release him."

The Falkyn didn't hesitate and tossed a stone at Hagen, directing him to rub the mesmerized rune stone against the collar. Hagen drew a breath of relief when the eldrish poison inside the silver band absorbed into Niklas's tricky stone.

Without another word I shoved through them and raced out the doors of the palace.

Wild yells already rose from the courtyard, the sweet aromas of the masquerade were buried under the scent of smoke and blood.

I bit the inside of my cheek, heart throbbing, and entered the festival, overturned by mesmer and blades.

Bitter smoke burned my throat. One tent was set aflame, the rainbow ribbon pole too. Every ribbon hissed and cracked as the vibrant colors

scorched black. At the east gates, a few Falkyns forced out young ones screaming in the arms of ammas and their mothers.

We came for blood, but not the innocent kind.

I had only stepped outside when a frenzied skydguard chopped his blade against my blacksteel. Pressure burned. I jabbed at his side, missed, but a different dagger took the guard from behind.

Hagen wrenched the blade from the neck of the skydguard. He spun the dagger in hand, a fierceness in his gaunt face he hadn't had before.

Blades sliced and stabbed in the courtyard. I took it in. Kryv and Falkyn battled skydguard and inner palace warriors. Raum and Vali fought nearby like an underwater dance. It was how we usually survived. Together in pairs, playing off the skills of another.

When a guard made a swipe for Vali's face, Raum jumped in front and rammed his dagger up through the man's chin.

A breathy *ffftt, ffftt* brushed past my head. Two arrow points gouged the chest of a skydguard in my path. On the roof, Gunnar raised his bow for a new round. He fired, loaded, repeated, Tova at his side acting as a mirror.

"Kase." Hagen noticed. His face turned to steel. "Kase Eriksson is that my bleeding son?"

"Yes." I wouldn't explain more and jumped into the fray. Steel met steel as a guard was tossed into my path. He dodged my strike, kicked at my knee. He stumbled, and I slammed the pommel of my sword against his skull.

I made quick work of running him through and moving onto the next.

The two guilds chased back the skydguard; calls for evacuations of the noble folk rose over the screams. The common people in attendance were scattered. No guards cared if they lived or died.

Near the back gates, Isak and Fiske fought together. Isak bent forward,

Fiske rolled over his back, slitting an exchanger's throat as he went. Lynx worked with Niklas. The Falkyn was a fine Elixist, a brilliant smuggler, and a deadly fighter. Those who came too close, didn't live long.

"I'll kill you!" Dagny's screams drew me into the hue and cry. I squinted through the smoke. A Falkyn dragged her by the waist to the stables where the coaches better have been waiting for half our people to escape. She kicked and flailed; rage pointed at a group of skydguard. "Give him to me!"

Between the guard, Niall, who no longer was locked in a wistful trance, laughed a wicked sort, and disappeared into the protection of an armored coach.

I'd found nearly everyone but Malin Strom. This festival would burn to the ground until I did.

Like a bloody waltz, I dropped men at my feet. A daring guard grabbed my arm. I cracked my forehead into the soldier's nose, then opened his chest. Blacksteel in one hand, my palm opened at my side.

Three men in front of me, donned in simple, feathered masks fell to their knees. They grasped for their throats. The fear of death opened the doors for creativity, but tonight they would simply break.

One wave of my hand and their necks snapped.

Skydguard with pelts and animal heads over their skulls emerged through the iron gates in boxy units. The Lord Magnate's personal armies.

But I wasn't looking at the new guards. My gaze trained at a covered podium near the front wall. As if no one else stood between us, I stared unblinking at the Lord Magnate.

The flames tinted the blackness of Ivar's eyes eerily red.

Walls of inky filaments erupted from the soil. I pulled mesmer from every crevice. Hatred boiled inside and it made everything simpler.

Shadows devoured the courtyard. Guards were pummeled, others swallowed by darkness. Ivar hissed at his forces to keep steady and signaled to someone over his back.

Bleeding gods.

A familiar face split the darkness with glimmers of precious gold and ribbons of light spilling from his fingers. He stepped forward in his pearl-white robes.

A staggering violence overtook me as I raised my hands. “Sabain!”

The Benevolent of the Black Palace. My opposite. There was something off in his head. I’d never met a soul so dark who could create such light.

Sabain matched my stance. He spread his palms. A shocking white shimmer was all I saw before our destruction collided. His brightness tangled with the shadows. With ropes of gold, Sabain flung the destruction we’d caused back at the guilds. Where they stepped, they would stumble over tent poles and broken stones until skydguard moved in, ready to strike them down.

I took the fire. The fear of burning alive filled the courtyard, and was easily spread as I tossed ashes and embers throughout the skydguard lines, shoving them back from the Kryv and Falkyns.

Matched in power, I stumbled when Sabain tossed his misty light at me. But I flung darkness back in the next breath.

Hope and fear twisted across the burning masquerade.

My heart burned in exhaustion. A little more. I needed to find Malin. To find her meant staying alive. A little more.

Darkness grew. Sabain gasped, but narrowed his glare at me. With furious cries, we reeled our opposing magicks once more.

In a flash of gold and pitch, the two veins of mesmer erupted in a

deafening boom that rattled the cobblestones at our feet. I was knocked back, coughing against the rotten taste of Alver blood between my teeth. I reached for my blacksteel.

"Take him!" Ivar shrieked, pointing at me. "Take him, damn you!"

I wouldn't go. I'd send myself to the hells before I left without seeing Malin and my guild to safety.

Like his had done to me, my mesmer had pummeled Sabain to the ground. But he stood first, raised a hand to deliver what I expected was a killing blow. In the next breath, Hagen lunged in front of me. His hands out, muscles tense.

At once, Sabain's light died.

"Go, Kase!" Hagen shouted. "They spotted her near the ring tent. She's being led away by the Master of Ceremonies."

He gave me a significant look. My heart pounded. Would she be safe then? Or what was the master planning?

"I can't leave you here. You were the mark, the job."

"Go get my sister." He gripped my shoulder. "For all our sakes."

Sabain unsheathed a blade. He would fight Hagen. Perhaps he'd win and I would fail to finish the job successfully. But choices needed to be made, and Hagen had made one. Sabain would fight our mark, but he'd do it without mesmer. Hagen would make sure his power was numb and deadened.

Arrows spilled over our heads, aimed at Sabain. The Benevolent dodged, and he was fortunate he was just out of range of Gunnar's shot.

Hagen would have defenses, and he was right—Malin needed to be taken from here more than anyone.

In the distance, from the Black Palace, the great bell tower boomed the twelfth hour.

Time was up.

At the sound, the guilds folded their weapons, and joined the rush of those fleeing through the stone walls.

Ivar roared commands, but even his personal guards tugged him and the Lady Magnate off the dais, dragging them to safety. I didn't see Luca. Hopefully, he'd disappeared before the fighting broke out.

I had to trust the others would get Hagen to the boathouse. That the rest would hit their marks of escape. We all couldn't go by boat. Some would leave through the gates with sleeping guards, or the canals if Eero had not destroyed our plans there too.

I winced with each step. Bruises and open wounds were across my body from Sabain's attack. None of it mattered.

I sprinted for the back tents. I'd get Malin back.

Not even the gods could stop me.



39

# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE MASTER OF CEREMONIES kept a wicked pace. Smoke and screams rose over the spires of the Black Palace. Dry tears burned behind my eyes. All thought spun to Kase, the Kryv, to Hagen. Eero had betrayed us and there was no telling what damage he'd done to the plan of the Nightrender.

"In here." The master stopped in front of a black tent. He shoved me inside first, then looked over his shoulder before sliding in after me.

All around the dark room were mirrors, taller than me, and placed in an orderly glass maze. A tent for folk to get lost in illusions and confusion as they wandered amongst their own distorted reflections.

"Malin."

My heart squeezed. That was not the altered voice of before. I held my breath and turned over my shoulder.

The Master of Ceremonies tucked his thumb beneath the chin of the mask and removed it. Jens Strom stared back at me.

"Malin," he said, desperately. Almost gentle. I'm not sure what unnerved me more, Jens as the Master of Ceremonies or the way he looked as if he might fear for me. He reached for my arm again.



I ripped it back. “You . . . you were *there*. With Hagen.” Hot, blinding anger replaced fear. “You were going to watch him be sold!”

“You do not understand the precarious position we are in. Bard told me you were here—”

“Bard?” An ache bloomed behind my eyes. My stepbrother went to my stepfather—the Master of Ceremonies—and told him I was in distress? Or did he go to rage that his stupid little mouse had slipped into the masque once again?

“Malin,” Jens said, drawing me back to the moment. “I have overseen the Masque av Aska for no other reason than to protect the children in my care.”

“Protect?” I was spinning in a heady sort of madness. “Protection would mean saving your son from an evil trade.”

“I did! There were arrangements in place,” he roared in my face. “I am not here to defend my position to you. I am here to get you out alive. You will leave Klockglas, Malin. You’ve gone too far and meddled in dangerous things you do not understand. I promised your mother I would always protect you, and by the gods, that is what I will do.”

I pulled back again when he reached for me. “I am here with the Nightrender. If anyone would protect me, it is him. Not a man who would sell his own son.”

Jens’s face deepened into an angry purple, as if he held his breath and forgot to release it. “The boy has led you straight into danger. He knew better, and yet—”

“The boy?” My fingertips tingled. “All gods, you know the Nightrender is Kase.” A flurry of rage boiled beneath my skin. In the next breath, my fists swung, striking Jens in the chest over and over. “You got rid of him, you

bastard! You're the Master of Ceremonies. You *knew* he was an Alver and you traded him!"

Jens gripped my wrists, forcing me to stop my attack. "I would have guarded the boy as I guarded the rest of you. He made his choice."

"What choice?" My voice broke, but no tears fell. I was too angry to cry. Too murderous to sob.

"To keep you from the curse of this." Jens held up the glowing glass ring.

I blinked. "Why is it doing that?"

"Because of you. It is yours, Malin. *Yours.*"

"No. That is a game, a jest, a legend, and—"

"It is real." Jens slammed the ring in my palm. A blast of heat, something warm, strong, and comforting rushed through my veins. He curled my fingers around the glass. "You are the heir of the Eastern Kingdom. Malin, your mother was the last heir and murdered for it. She was not my wife."

"What?"

"She'd lived her life in hiding but was discovered. Still, she managed to find me, knowing the fates had called me to protect the royal lines with their gifts. I made a vow to protect you from the curse that comes from the greed for that ring."

"My mother did not die from plague?"

"No. She died two days after arriving to my home from a knife wound. But I was known to those who needed refuge, having already taken two children." He paused. "You, Bard, and Hagen are from the royal lines, but *you* are the one born of the last heirs."

"But Hagen and Bard, they don't work in memories."

"Not everyone born of the royal bloodlines shares the same mesmer. But your mother came from the line of the first prince, your father from the line

of the second. They are both dead, but between them was born the true claim to the throne. Like your parents, such a claim is a death sentence. I have made it my duty to ensure the lines live on and never fully die.”

This made no sense. Bard and Hagen were not his sons? He was not my mother’s husband?

“If this is true, why hide us? What does it matter to keep me here, if not to put me on the throne?”

“To let you live,” he said with a heavy sadness.

“You’ve kept me in a stable, working until my bones ached. You do not care for me.”

Jens closed his eyes. “You were to be no one. A little mouse no one looked twice at. Perhaps, I did not do this right, but everything was to keep you hidden and alive. I’ve seen such slaughter in my life.

“Ivar, and many before him, have hunted anyone with a drop of blood from the royal lines, killing them off as children, as *infants*, Malin. Your parents were the few who were grown, but even they were destroyed. If the bloodlines died off, what would become of us?”

I said nothing. Simply paced, heart racing.

“Anyone who suspected the truth of what I was doing, I twisted their tongues,” he said. “I am a Profetik with spoken word, but my Talent resides in the truths and lies we speak. I can force folk not to speak the truth. Should they try, only lies will spill out. Now, please. We must go. I will pay for your passage away from Klockglas, but you must promise to never return.”

“No!” I held up a hand. “I want to know what you did to Kase. Why you took him from me.”

Jens sighed, closing his eyes for a few breaths. He dug beneath his fine, pressed shirt and pulled out two vials on silver chains. “Never did I think I’d

give these to you, but after Bard came to me, I knew these were no longer mine to keep. I am glad I have them.”

Bone dust.

Jens held up one in a black capped vial. “The last thoughts of your mother. Her request was to store her memory for you. She taught me how it was done.” He tucked it into my trembling hand, then held up a vial with a red cap. “I created only one other in my life. One I felt would have importance for you someday. Taken from a masquerade ten turns ago.”

I ought to feel ashamed for choosing the red first over the dying thoughts of the woman who gave me life. But my heart was the Nightrender’s, and I burned to know it all.

“Whose memory is it?”

“My former steward. You remember Jarlborg? How he tailed me like a shadow.”

“You killed him?”

Jens winced. “Necessary. This was too important.”

Oh, the villainous lengths we all took. Truth be told, we all were a little monstrous in our own ways.

I snatched the vial of the old memory, counting on it being weak, but when I tipped the crushed bone onto my tongue, the smoke came sharp, smells were pungent, everything was bright and in color.

The first scene was familiar because I had the same memory. The only difference was the vantage point. My own childish laughter echoed. Two children ran around the bright ribbon pole, teasing each other. My red braids slapped my cheeks, and Kase’s dark messy hair fell into his eyes.

My stepfather had been near us. I never knew.

“She shouldn’t be here.”

“She snuck out. They’re too clever for their own bleeding good,” came another familiar voice.

Hagen stood beside Jens.

Jens, in the memory, let out a long sigh. “He knows of her. We must take her from here now.”

“He only knows you have a powerful Alver in your house,” Hagen said. “It could be me. I will take the blow.”

“And abandon your boy? Your woman who carries your second child?” Jens pressed. Hagen’s eyes shadowed as he looked to the ground.

“He’s coming for her,” Jens went on. “I’ve failed. They’re going to take Malin and kill her. I know it.”

“Who’s taking Mallie?”

My heart fluttered as I observed Hagen and Jens whip around. Jarlborg’s sight followed to a skinny boy with tousled hair and bright golden eyes.

Eyes so alive back then, so innocent.

“Kase,” Jens said, straightening his shoulders. “You and Malin should not have come here. You’ll be disciplined when we return.”

Young Kase shuffled his feet, head down. “Yes, Lord Strom. But—” He hesitated, gaining his nerve. “But who’s taking Mallie?”

“No one, Kase,” Hagen said.

“You said they’re going to kill her. I heard you.” He grew bolder. I desperately wished I could reach into the memory and touch the boy, warn him to run and never look back.

When no one answered him, Kase stepped forward. “It’s the Lord Magnate, isn’t it? Tell me the truth, Lord Strom. I know he likes to cut throats, and if he’s going after Mallie, I won’t let him. I won’t.”

Jens looked at the boy with a tormented shadow in his eyes. “We have a bit

of trouble, but it isn't for you to fret over."

"They know she's a creepy Alver."

I almost smiled at his innocence, but tears came instead as I watched it all unfold.

"They know strong mesmer is in our household," Jens said firmly. "Now, both you and Malin get on home. It is not safe here."

"They don't know it's her?" Kase kept pressing. His damn stubbornness would not allow him to let up easily. "But they know mesmer comes from someone and they're going to start killing folk at House Strom to find it?"

In the memory Jens looked to Jarlborg, as if he hesitated to speak so openly in front of the steward.

"I'm not a little," Kase snapped, then sobered when my stepfather shot him a narrowed look. "With all respect, Lord Strom. I'm not a little. Tell me if they're going to take Mallie and test her mesmer."

"Daj," Hagen warned when Jens lowered into a crouch, so he could meet Kase in the eye.

"Yes," Jens said, ignoring Hagen, and leveling with his stable boy. "Yes, they will start testing mesmer, and will start with Malin since she is a girl."

"Girls make the Lord Magnate nervous," Kase said more to himself. He scratched his head, voice trembling. "But what if they had a different Alver? What if they thought the one with creepy mesmer was . . . someone else?"

"Kase, I know you care for Malin," Hagen said. "But a Rifter isn't going to be enough to convince them we don't have Anomali mesmer at House Strom."

"But it is an answer." Kase kicked a pebble and looked to Jens. "Isn't it, Lord Strom? I listened to you, you know? I've not shown anyone what I can really do."

Hagen furrowed his brow. "What you can really do? Daj?"

Jens was conflicted. Written in every line of his face, he battled with his next steps. Protect the girl or the boy. "You love Mal, don't you boy?"

"I don't ever want to stop being friends," Kase said. "I don't want her dead. Makes me sick in my stomach to think it. Does that mean I love her?"

"I say that is love," Jens told him.

It was so unnerving to witness such kindness in the man, such a soft demeanor. I hardly knew what to think.

Kase clenched his fists the same way he did now. "Put me forward then, Lord Strom. Send me; tell them I'm the one they're after."

"Kase," Hagen stepped forward. "Don't. We'll find a way to get you both safe. All of us."

"Where Hagen?" Jens snapped. "To the north? You know better than anyone how vicious that kingdom is to magic folk. Do you truly think any wretched place in this world would not sell back the heir to a broken throne to the tyrant who holds it? If Ivar thinks she exists, he will not rest."

Kase's eyes widened. "Mallie is the heir?"

"Daj, Kase will not appease Ivar forever," Hagen said. "He'll begin his obsession again once he catches wind of some rumor that an heir exists. This is a cruel solution for a problem that won't end."

My stepfather sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Kase gripped my father's arm, the way children reach for something soft and warm when they're afraid. "But it might give time to think of a different plan, right, Lord Strom?"

Jens lifted his eyes to the boy.

Kase didn't blink away. "He can't have her. I won't let him."

"If you're telling me to put you forward in her place, be certain," Jens said.

Kase blinked a few times, then nodded. "I am, Lord Strom."

"Kase, no," Hagen said, but stopped when Jens held up a hand.

"You realize the dangers of this?" Jens asked. "You understand it will be hard to ever be free of Ivar?"

Kase swallowed. "I know."

"Daj." Hagen looked ready to tear his hair out. "No."

Jarlborg had a nauseous turmoil, and I thought I might retch if the steward did in the memory.

"The boy is right," Jens said, a little more tortured than before. "He is not a child. He can make his choices."

Hagen cursed under his breath and paced.

"Will I die?" Kase asked, voice soft.

The question drew my stepfather to pause. "I will be around the Black Palace, Kase. I will do all I can to make sure that doesn't happen."

"It's just, if I die, I want someone to tell Mallie not to be sad," he said, tears in his eyes. "Tell her I was brave."

A bloom of reluctance shadowed my stepfather's face. A chill danced up my spine.

"You're certain?" Jens asked.

"I am."

Hagen gritted his teeth. But he did not stop the boy. No doubt if Gunnar had not existed, my brother would not have allowed this. He would've gone instead. The torment of being torn between two worlds cut deep grooves into his face when he gripped Kase's shoulder.

"You are brave, Kase," Hagen said. "You promised me you'd always look after her, and you have honored that promise."

Hagen tugged the boy against his chest. Kase shuddered when he let out a



gasp of air.

No. I couldn't see this. The pain, the fear, it breathed through every thought in the steward's mind as he watched my stepfather tie Kase's tongue to never speak the truth of me, to never speak of what happened that day. Jens did the same to Hagen.

It was no wonder the Nightrender insisted he could not explain how he came to be at the Black Palace.

From there I witnessed Jens facing Ivar's personal armies. My heart skipped at the sight of Boswell Doft standing in the doorway of the Black Palace, grinning. In mere moments the future Nightrender was surrounded by skydguard.

Somewhere in the distance, still in the memory, my voice called for Kase, happily oblivious to what was about to happen. The boy's lip trembled as the guards took him by the arms. My young voice grew louder, more frantic as I searched for him.

"W-Will you tell Mallie," Kase stammered through streaks of tears now. "Will you tell her I didn't leave her because she was a bad friend? She isn't. She'll cry. I don't . . ." He hiccupped. "I don't want her to cry."

Jarlborg's heart raced, the thrum flowed into my own heartbeat as his memory deepened in my own mind.

Jens's voice croaked. "I'll tell her."

He did. I recalled the night Jens explained Kase would always want me to know I was his dearest friend, and I should take solace for being a lucky one to experience such a friendship. One of the few moments of softness the man had given me as a girl.

The smoke faded at the last word. My stepfather must've ended Jarlborg soon after. The man never did return to our longhouse, and now I knew why.

I slumped over my knees. Hot tears blurred my sight.

"It was his choice, Malin."

I clutched the sides of my head. "You should've saved him, protected him."

"Who do you think made certain their escape was unhindered? Who do you think suggested the boy be the Alver of the kind son? I did all I could."

My breath caught in my throat. Truth could be a curse. I'd come to the masquerade believing a great many things, and I would leave with a burden I could not bear. The weight of it already crushed every piece of me.

Something pounded outside the tent. My stepfather's eyes jumped to one corner, then back to me. "You must leave."

I shook my head. I was drowning, unable to draw breath.

When a loud snap of tent poles bending echoed through our silence, I jumped back. The canvas blocking us from sight, shredded as a blacksteel blade dug into the threads. I let out a cry of relief, of devotion, of love, and scrambled toward him the moment the Nightrender shoved inside.

Shadows enrobed his shoulders like a misty cloak. Kase held his blacksteel so tightly, his knuckles were white. The gold of his eyes deepened to hot, coal black. He took in the tent—me, crying on the ground, my stepfather locked in a stunned glare.

It lasted only a moment before Jens shook his head. "No! Kase, don't."

Kase didn't listen. He lifted a hand and a whirlwind of dark mesmer swallowed me whole. Within moments I was in Kase's arms, his shadows dragging us away.

I screamed against his chest as stone and canvas split. My feet lifted, my stomach lurched, and soon I was thrown onto the ground outside. The clink

of glass on stone echoed in my ears as the ring spilled out of my hand, rolling a dozen paces away.

"Malin!" Kase picked himself up from his knees and ran to me. He'd broken us out of the tent and crumbled it. Jens Strom was alive but lost in a sea of canvas and poles. Kase lifted me to my feet, his hands slid over my arms tenderly. "Hurry. We need to go to the boathouse."

"You took my place," I said in a gasp. "I saw the truth Kase. I was supposed to be taken and—"

He silenced me with a fierce kiss. It hurt more than it was sweet. Teeth and lips cut against each other, and it ended too soon. "I would again a thousand times over."

"Kase . . . the ring." I pointed at the glowing runes on the glass.

"Don't." He pulled me in the opposite direction. "Leave it. Please Mallie, do not touch it. It brings misery and death. Now, hurry. The Lord Magnate is coming, and we are well past the twelfth hour."



40

# THE NIGHTRENDER

I KEPT SLIPPING ON the stairwell to the boathouse, every step was covered in dirty ribbons and bits of fabric. Damp air wet my mouth with a hint of mold and dirt. The stairs coiled around a small tower lit by torches, and the end of the staircase opened to a few small skiffs tethered to docks. Brown water, thick with twigs and leaves from the riverbank, lapped at the wooden walks, and ugly black moss climbed the walls.

Tova and Niklas were in a black skiff next to Raum, Lynx, and Isak, who readied the oars. Behind them sat Hagen.

Relief twisted in my chest. Either Hagen had slipped from Sabain, or the Benevolent was dead. One could hope.

Hagen whipped around as we approached. “Mal.”

In two swift motions he was out of the skiff and had her in his arms.

“You bleeding fool,” he said against her hair.

“I have a great many questions to demand of you,” she murmured back.

“I’m sure,” he said. “But let’s get out of here. I don’t know why the *Nightrender* did not put my son on the same path as me.”

Hagen glared at me. Let him. It was a simple answer. Gunnar's escape was safer to go through the gates, then through the short passages and bridges leading to the opposite side of the river. I did not need to defend any choice to keep a member of the guild safe.

Raum's eyes were red and exhausted. Niklas trembled with barely managed fury; his hard eyes glared at the bottom of the skiff. I had few doubts he was plotting violent ways to destroy Eero.

I slipped my fingers into Malin's and squeezed her hand. "It's time. Get in the boat."

She released me as Lynx helped her over the edge. Soon we would be free of the Masque av Aska for good. I could almost breathe the freshness of the trees across the river.

"There!" A shout rattled in the night.

"Kase!" Malin screamed as a flood of skydguard filled the boathouse.

Guards came from doors unseen. Bits of wall shifted, revealing passages that were not written on the plans stolen from Klaus. We'd stepped wrong, missed something crucial. In the back of the guard Lord Magnate Ivar stepped into the boathouse. At his side was Eero, whose smirk was enough to seal his death in my mind.

"You bastard!" Niklas shouted. He ran for the dock, but Lynx held him back.

"Sorry, brother," Eero said with a wink. "I'm tired of living in the dirt. Besides, the pay's better here."

Rage blinded me. I reached for my blacksteel, but guards hidden in the eaves dropped on me without mercy. They pinned me face down on the stones. My mesmer was nearly spent. The thought of using too much too soon ached in my limbs and chest.

Malin shouted my name. The Kryv scrambled with raised weapons, but everyone halted when the guards forced me to my knees, swords trained on my neck.

"Another move, and he dies," Ivar said in his silky voice.

Raum and Lynx paced like wolves on the prowl, searching for a way around this.

"This girl is the thief who tried to rob the Heir Magnate?" Ivar clasped his hands behind his back, glaring at Malin.

Eero seemed rather frustrated, as if he could not find the right words, but nodded stiffly. "She's the one."

Ivar tilted his head.

"Lady Freya, I presume, is not your name. I do hope you'll tell me what it is and the meaning of your interest in Lord Strom." Ivar glanced at Hagen, then curled his long fingers around my chin. "Tell me or your Malevolent pays the price. I have missed him."

I'd kill him. A thousand ways to open his throat reeled through my head.

"Fight back, Kase!" Malin's voice quivered.

She couldn't be discovered, not by Ivar. Why Eero had not given her name, I didn't understand, but I would not slap the hand of good fortune away. One more threat from Ivar and that reckless woman would give up her name. Hells, I loved her for it, but she wouldn't get the chance.

I despised this place, but the thought of a world without Malin, without the Guild of Kryv was a thing I despised more.

There was no choice to make. I already knew what to do.

One glance at Malin, and I swear to the gods she knew. Her eyes filled with fierce panic. She shook her head and gripped the edge of the skiff, struggling against Lynx and Hagen as they pulled her back.

The girl who first saw me cry, who stayed up with me if nightmares burdened my dreams. She was the first girl to tell me I was brave and strong. Malin was the first, she was the only one, to hold my heart and soul in her hands.

I would always choose her life over mine.

The fear came too heady from my guild, from Malin. It overpowered that of any guard. Any mesmer I had to give would go to the Kryv. It would go to save Malin.

One more act. One more step in the dance. I could pull off one more.

I held her gaze, a wide smile filled with madness spread over my face. "I'm afraid!"

"Kase, no!"

She lunged for the side of the boat in the same moment my eyes closed, and I commanded my darkness to swallow the skiff whole. Like daggers to my chest, mesmer took from the fear bleeding through me, the fear of being trapped here, it took from the pain of being without her.

Dark emotions danced in my heart, creating mesmer powerful enough to command something to move, something like a skiff across the water and out of reach.

When my shadows faded, the skiff had landed nearly into the center of the river.

Raum, Tova, Lynx, they all cursed me. Niklas and Isak looked more stunned than anything. Malin was half out of the skiff; Hagen was the only thing keeping her from spilling into the water.

She raged, slapping at her brother's arms, screaming my name.

I slumped back, energy spent.

The skydguard took hold of my arms and in a few breaths a burning



magisk collar was slapped around my neck. It scorched the skin much like the eldrish did in Skítkast, but what did it matter?

I could not even think of mesmer without spinning in my head.

Skydguard forced me to my feet. The gates barring the boathouse from the river clanged to a close. I looked once, allowing myself a final glance of her face. Malin sagged against the edge of the skiff, defeated, and sobbing as the river current pulled them out of sight.

I smiled.

The plan had not unfolded right. We'd trusted the wrong people, but in the end, it would be worth it if she lived another day.

I could die for all I cared.

I'd loved her, and had loved her well. For me, it was enough.

Ivar's eyes narrowed into dark slits when I was forced to kneel in front of him.

"Welcome back, boy," he said, those spindly fingers curled around my chin once again. Ivar lifted his eyes to the skydguard. "Bring him to the council room. I won't be taking chances with this one. Not again."

Ivar spun on his heel and was followed out by two guards.

"I hope penge was worth your soul, Eero." I laughed a little maniacally as the skydguard dragged me past the Falkyn.

"You did something to me," he growled. "I don't know what, but I will find a way to tell the truth of her."

"You can try." I tugged against the guards. Perhaps they were curious enough to see how a confrontation played out. They stopped, allowing me to lean close to Eero. "But remember, I have marked you now. I never lose sight of my marks."

I clung to the way Eero blanched at my not-so-subtle vow. The pleasure of

drawing out his fear would buoy me against what was to come.



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# THE MEMORY THIEF

THE ACHE IN MY skull was as if fire cracked the bone down the middle. I retched over the side of the skiff as Lynx pulled the boat out of the river. Groaning, I wiped my mouth and gathered my bearings in the velvet night. The riverbed was rank and burned my nose.

"They're here." From the shadows of the surrounding forest Ash and Hanna appeared.

I slumped onto the bank, indescribably relieved to see the youngest Kryv at their mark. Despite Ash's protests at being told to stay out of the masquerade, Kase hadn't lied to the boy about the importance of their task. Their job had been to go to rogues awaiting the signal in the trees and bring them here to help us disappear.

"Hurry, the ride's here," Ash said. "Where is he?"

I knew exactly who the boy meant. With Ash's scrunched face, Hanna's frantic search, a sob broke out. I curled forward as the other Kryv took hold of the youngest among us, gently explaining that plans went awry.

"No!" Ash screamed, racing for the bank of the river. Raum had to catch the boy and pull him back. "No. We don't leave Kryv! We don't leave

Kryv!”

I hugged my middle, weak and broken. The slightest breath seemed too great a feat to take.

Soft hands lifted me gently off the damp earth. Hagen pulled me against him. “Malin,” he whispered, “we must keep going. We’re too close to the palace.”

“I can’t leave him,” I muttered.

“We’ll regroup. We’ll plan.” It was Niklas. He came up behind us, face as stone. “It is what Kase would do, and it is what we will do. Ash spoke out of emotion, but it is no less true. We do not leave Kryv, we do not leave Falkyns, we do not leave our folk behind. Today is not the day we start.”

Without another word, Niklas wheeled into the trees. He had a gift. The proclamation struck me to my core, and I believed him. I had to believe every word, or I would bend and break under the pain.

Tova walked beside me, silent tears on her cheeks. I squeezed her hand. She gripped mine back.

When we broke through the thorn hedges, there on the edge of an overgrown road a wagon and horse waited. A man and woman with beautifully familiar faces sat on the driver’s bench.

“Ansel?”

The grounds master released a long breath, hopped from the seat, and wrapped me, then Hagen in his arms.

“I promised we’d see you again,” he whispered.

His wife, Sasha, stepped down from the wagon, and we traded weak hugs until Lynx cleared his throat and nodded at the cart. Lynx sat at the front with Ansel and Ash, who was horridly quiet. Not even a curiosity about the wagon, or Ansel’s knife.

The rest of us filled out the back of the wagon, lost in our own thoughts and silence. Ansel snapped the reins, and it wasn't long before the blood of the masquerade faded into nothing but a memory.

The ride to Jagged Grove took through the night and into the dawn. By morning, my shoulders slumped, and my eyes drooped. Lynx picked at black seeds in his palm. Ash slept on Raum's lap, Hanna on mine.

"We're here," Sasha said wearily.

Ansel stopped the wagon between two mammoth trees with leaves as large as my head. Jagged Grove was made of bowers, tents, and slat houses. Some were new, and others were built turns ago.

Fires burned every few paces, most with big pots of boiling ragged clothes, savory stews, or spits of rodents sizzling over the flames. A few burly men dressed in wiry pelts and axes on their waists walked to a tent where a pretty woman handed out tin cups of brän.

The Grove had grown its scruffy population in recent turns and looked like a small township beneath the thick canopy of trees. Folk dressed simply, some littles ran around naked as could be, but there was laughter.

At a kettle of simmering tea, I caught sight of a familiar face. "Hob?"

Hob lifted his eyes. "Ah, hello again."

My brow furrowed when Inge leaned forward scooping out hot water for tea. "Made up with your liar, I see?"

I did not want anyone untrustworthy here, not after a traitor had ripped Kase from me a second time.

Hob took Inge's hand. "Don't act like you're going to cut her. Misunderstandings have been cleared away."

Inge's chin quivered. "I sold secrets to my brothers to keep Jakoby safe, *dännisk*. They backed my shop with penge, and said I owed them. I've been

scrimping and saving to buy my debt off, but sold out crooks on the side. If I did not, they would've gone after Jakoby, locked him away, and . . . if they discovered I was to have his little one, they'd have killed him. I was planning to leave as soon as I could buy them out."

My eyes widened when Hob pressed a kiss to her middle.

He winked at me. "Speaking of paying debts. Where is the Nightrender? The bastard thinks he's sly. I know what he did."

"What—" I cleared my throat. "What do you mean?"

Hob chuckled. "Don't tell me he didn't have something to do with the noble lady who commissioned Inge's work in the exact amount she had left to pay off those sods of brothers."

"And the wagon parked outside the morning after his guild retrieved your gown, packed and ready to bring me here," Inge said, smiling at Hob like he lit up her skies.

My jaw tightened. Bleeding Kase. I loved him. Fiercely. Enough I thought I might hate him for all those wicked things he tried to do to hide the good man inside.

"He is not here," I said.

My tone was rough, sharp, and violent. Hob's smile faded, but I did not wait around to answer any more questions. I spun away, moving deeper into the huts and shanties.

A few strides away from the edge of the grove, Gunnar erupted through the trees, still wearing his clothes from the masquerade.

"Daj!" His voice cracked.

"Gods," Hagen breathed out and raced for his son.

My heart wanted to soar at the sight of it, but I wasn't certain there was anything left of my heart remaining.

Hagen swallowed Gunnar in his arms. They were close to the same height, but in the moment, Gunnar looked less Kryv and more like a boy. He buried his face against Hagen's shoulder. My brother kissed the side of his head, pulling him back to look at him. He'd laugh, then embrace him all over again.

I made my way slowly toward them, not wanting to break the moment.

"How are you here?" Hagen asked, a quiver in his voice.

Gunnar tightened his arms around his father's waist. "My uncle won the kingdom; the Kryv helped, so Kase vowed to find you for Maj. I came with him."

"Uncle?" Hagen's mouth parted in stun, but he blinked it away, gripping Gunnar behind his neck. "Your sister, your mother, they're—"

"Waiting for you, Daj." Gunnar beamed.

Hagen's face twisted with emotion. He hugged Gunnar again as if he might never let him go.

"Where is Kase?" Gunnar said. "We owe him everything."

The somberness returned.

"The Nightrender was taken," was all Lynx offered his fellow Kryv before falling deeper into Jagged Grove.

"What?" Gunnar flashed his eyes at me, then Hagen. "No. No, he can't go back there."

Vali broke through the trees, a drinking horn in hand. His eyes were shadowed. No mistake, he heard the news. Dagny followed, her dress torn. Next came Junius and Fiske. Everyone but the Nightrender had made it to freedom from the Masque av Aska.

In one breath, Niklas had his wife in his arms, her back against a tree. He took her mouth hard and desperate. Isak held Fiske's face, laughing softly before kissing him much the same.



"When do we make plans to return, then?" Dagny asked.

It was a welcome relief to know I was not the only one who would demand a swift, brutal scheme be made to retrieve the Nightrender before Ivar could destroy him. I'd only gotten him back, and I would not lose him again.

I would never stop.

My fist gripped what was left of my shredded gown. Around my neck hung the two vials Jens proffered me. I clasped them in my palm. My mother had been the heir and had died because of it. I'd look into her final moments soon, take what knowledge she could give, because I would not be hiding like others before me.

I took in the haggard group. Exhaustion, rage, fear, it all lived in the eyes of the guilds. But there was a flame too. Our battle was not over.

And I knew how it would be won. The Nightrender would need to forgive me. "I am the heir of the Black Palace."

The words hovered in the trees like a whisper, no one was sure if they heard or not.

Gunnar broke the silence first. "You're the heir? As in the . . . what?"

"As in the queen's ring will fit me. An item we should retrieve since I, unfortunately, dropped it and ran. If we have any luck, the Master of Ceremonies will have found it."

"Why is that lucky?" Raum asked.

"Because he is also my stepfather."

"There is more to this than all that," Hagen interjected. "Our father—" He gestured to me. "Is not our father by blood. He is an Alver who can twist the tongues of those who know truths that should not be spread. Like the true heir to the queen's ring.

"It is what Jens Strom does. Protects those of the royal lines from Ivar's

assassins.” Hagen gave me a swift glare. “Malin, that ring is a curse. They will hunt you, kill you, and destroy anyone who knew the truth.”

“But we have allies,” I argued. “Jens being one. He has concealed the truth of all of us for turns. He is an enemy to Ivar in plain sight.”

“Yes, but they will know you belong to him, right?” Lynx asked.

Hagen tilted his head side to side. “We don’t know. Jens has worked tirelessly, perhaps cruelly, to make Malin someone invisible.”

My brother offered me a tender look. All those turns of sleeping outside House Strom, of being dismissed, were all to keep eyes turned off the forgotten stepdaughter in the hayloft.

“Even if Ivar learned I am his stepdaughter, Jens could act as if he disowned me,” I said. “He could keep his rank and demand my head as a ruse.”

“And he will,” Hagen said. “If it will help keep you alive, he will play whatever part he must play.”

I did not know if the warmth in my chest was affection for my stepfather, but it was new and strange. I shook my head, focusing on other ways to get to Kase. He was what mattered here. “What about the second son of Ivar?”

“Luca,” Tova said. “He can be considered an ally. There is little love between father and son.”

I took in the group. “We are not utterly alone. We have hands to play.”

Kase had begged me not to touch the ring, but he was not here. Once again, he’d stepped into harm’s way for me, and it was long overdue for me to take the fight to the ones who kept stealing him from my life.

“I do not know what exact steps to take,” I admitted. “What I know is this is a move we can play, and if we succeed?” I grinned with a touch of venom. “It will be the thread to unravel Ivar’s rule.”

"Malin," Niklas said, "it will unravel our world. With that ring, you will see what more your mesmer can do. It will change everything."

He'd known about me. Whether it be instinct, or the way he looked at me now with lack of astonishment, Niklas Tjuv knew what my mesmer meant when we'd visited the Falkyn nest.

With a deep breath, I faced sunrise, a cruel grin on my face. "Then I will learn exactly what I can do with it. There are no lengths I would not go to get Kase Eriksson. He would do the same. He would not stop. Nor will we."



42

# THE NIGHTRENDER

THE BLACK PALACE WAS made of narrow corridors, sitting chambers, long ballrooms where Ivar spent endless penge entertaining the richest in Klockglas, or foreign dignitaries. He boasted his power. He reveled in it since the technicality of not officially having a king left the four regions with a weakness. Civil strife could shred the land apart, but Ivar took a great deal of vicious pride in knowing no one would dare stand against him.

Of course, power was easier to keep when he could change the very thoughts of others.

I straightened my spine as the skydguard led me into the large council room. I would not bow in front of Ivar. To crumble like some weak thing he'd conquered, I would rather cut out my own heart.

Heavy wooden benches with beautifully carved symbols of the gods were lined in a large square in the center of the room. Covering the stone slab floor were thick, wiry bear pelts. Tables were adorned in horns and ewers of brän and sweet wine. Cakes with honey sauce and berry custards as if what was left of the Masque av Aska was simply brought into the palace to carry on the festival indoors.

Gathered on the benches were members of Ivar's inner council. A few generals and captains of the skydguard. I cared little about them. My gaze went to the high-backed chairs at the head of the room.

If Ivar were a king, this would be his throne room. Even without the title he'd created quite a show of looking like a royal. The Lord Magnate claimed the widest chair. He looked at me with a rage that simmered below the surface. Beside him Niall sharpened a curved knife with the head of a wolf as the pommel.

The weapon was used in ceremony, and for my ten turns in this place I'd avoided that knife. I clenched my jaw to keep from giving away how the sight of it burst through boyhood fears of that wolf pommel.

The Lady Magnate was seated on a bench between two of her lovers. Then, leaning against one of the posts holding the arched doorway in the back, Luca Grym had his nose in a book.

He lifted his gaze, mouth tight. He'd kill me for getting caught, but the way he rolled his eyes, I had few doubts the second son of Ivar was already scheming something horridly dramatic to try to fix this. A Hypnotik with mesmer, a trickster by nature. Luca would be planning.

At least that was another hope to cling to.

"Malevolent." Ivar stopped drumming his fingers. Dread coated the room, every fiber on the rugs, every page of every book on the shelves was thick with it.

I lifted my chin, grinning. "That is not my name."

"Malevolent, you will not speak unless invited to do so." Ivar rose from his chair. He never used my name. To him I was the missing piece of his precious set of light and darkness. His pristine balance of power. He would

not rest until it was complete. The Lord Magnate took the steps off the raised floor and crossed the space to me. "Tell me who the girl is."

"No."

The strike to my face didn't surprise me. I did not groan. Did not wince. I took the hit, spat the blood, and returned my attention to the Lord Magnate as if nothing had happened.

"Tell me who the girl is."

"A thief in the Guild of Kryv."

Ivar chuckled and glared at his oldest son. "Duped by a thief. Are you so desperate for a woman to fill your bed?"

"There was mesmer at play," Niall snapped back.

"And as the Lord Magnate you must be keen to tricks of magic." Ivar's voice rang out across the room. It was powerful, cruel, it silenced every breath. His eyes narrowed. "You disappoint me."

Niall's cheek twitched, but he had the brains to keep quiet.

Ivar circled me, a hawk on the hunt. "Why does she matter to you? Don't deny it. Your mistake was made the moment you looked to her first when we arrived."

"Everyone matters in my guild."

"I'll find out the truth, Malevolent," Ivar said like a promise.

I had nothing more to say.

Ivar held out a hand for the knife. Niall hesitated for half a breath, then handed it over. I steeled against what would come. To finally grant Ivar what he'd always wanted was worse than the hells.

"Since you insist on telling us nothing about the girl, I will make her nothing to you." He grinned viciously and grabbed my arm, forcing my hand out. I clenched against the cut of his blade. Deep and swift, enough blood

Ivar could fill the bottom of a mortar bowl. He leaned close; his brow nearly touched mine. “She’ll be nothing but a nightmare in your head, Malevolent. I’ll make you fear her, despise her, wish a torturous death for the girl.”

I looked past Ivar. If he met my eye, he’d see the fear in there.

Ivar chuckled like he’d already won. “I know there are some who believe there are still memory oracles among us, but I rather like the gift of memory manipulation. It makes the world a great deal more interesting.”

Ivar dipped his fingers into the bowl, soaking the tips in my blood. How many times had I observed this very thing? When new Alvers came to the Black Palace, through trade, through the masque, through foreign routes, he would ruin their memories. Twist them until the Alver boiled with recollections of unwavering loyalty to the Lord Magnate.

All other thoughts, faces, and loved ones were destroyed. Only Ivar and his palace remained.

Malin took breath or bone to steal a memory. Ivar used blood to alter thought. The same as legends of old, one line would use thoughts to see, and the second would change the mind to believe something else entirely.

The things Malin did not know, things I’d wanted to tell her time and again, were startling.

All I could do was hope the Guild of Kryv, the Falkyns, and Hagen would protect her from it all.

Ivar’s inner circle watched with a bit of twisted awe as he swirled my blood around, no doubt concocting horrid images he’d use to replace the few tender moments. I brought a hand to the rose over my heart.

With two fingers, Ivar drew the runes he’d use to cast Malin’s face from my mind on my forehead.

My grip tightened on the rose. I closed my eyes.



He could warp her face, my thoughts, but I prayed to the fates—if they existed at all—that he would not touch where she lived in my heart. Even if it was hidden from my mind, let my heart hold tight to her.

I loved Malin Strom.

I'd lived my life loving her. If asked, I'd die loving her.



*Hello Wicked Darling. Malin, here.*

*This battle isn't over. In fact, it's only the beginning. The Masque av Aska was but on piece. I refuse to abandon Kase to the black palace again. Last time I was a child. This time, I'm a bleeding queen in the making.*

*You can continue fighting with us in [GAME OF HATE AND LIES HERE](#)*

*If you're not ready to accept the Nightrender is in the clutches of the Lord Magnate, I hope you'll step into some happier moments with these bonus scenes. One of the day my mesmer came alive thanks to Kase, and the other from the morning of the masquerade.*

*You can get your bonus scenes [HERE](#)*

*Fight to the end.*



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May we all be the good,

LJ Andrews