

GAME OF HATE AND LIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LJ ANDREWS

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For rights and inquiries please reach out to agent Katie Shea Boutillier at The Donald Maass Agency here: ksboutillier@maassagency.com



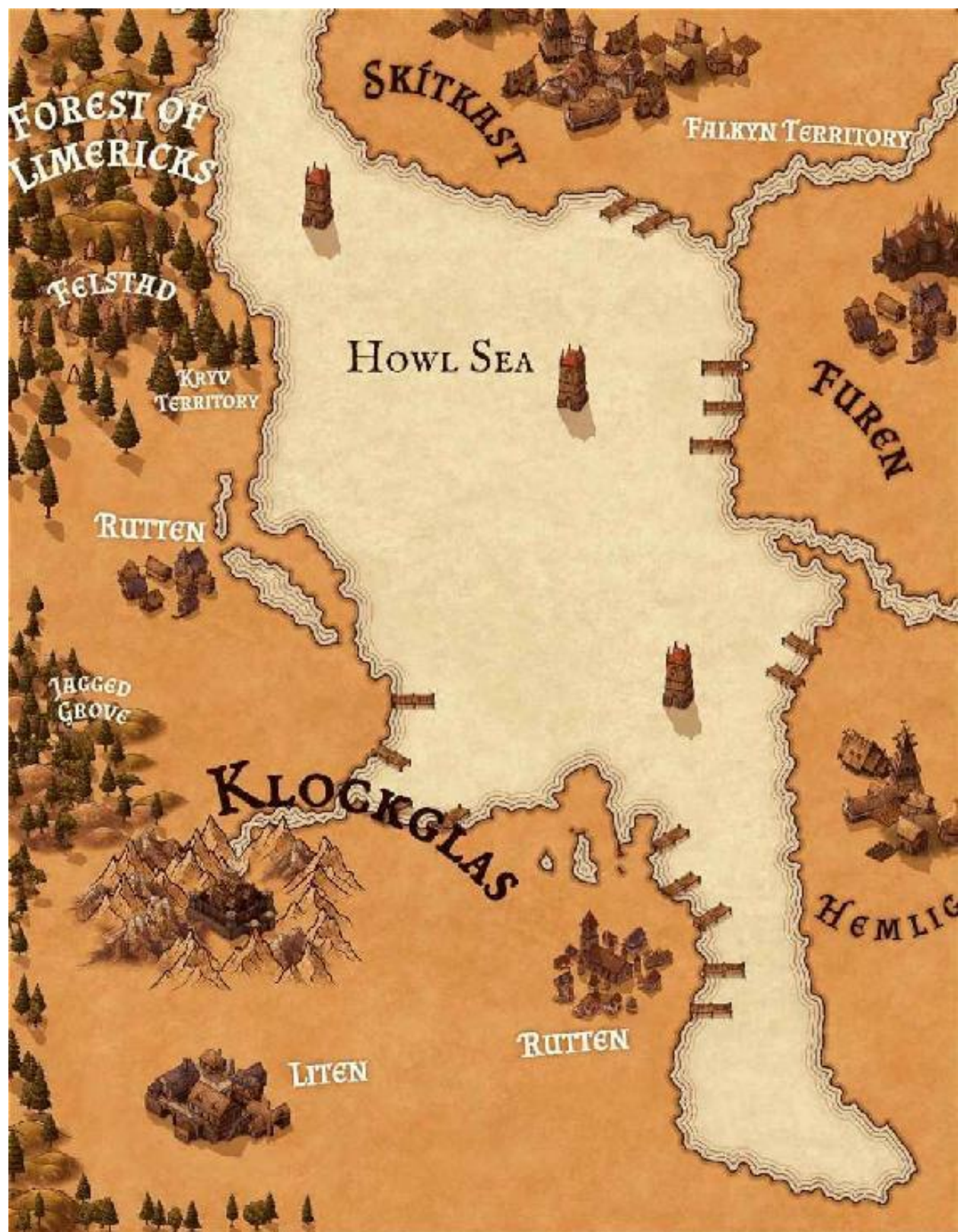
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HYPNOTIK KIND

Masters of Illusion, power found in conscious thought.

MEDISKI KIND

Masters of healing, power found in natural healing

PROFETIK KIND

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

ELIXIST KIND

Masters of alchemy, power found in blood and herbs

RIFTER KIND

Masters of breaking bone, power found in pain

ANOMALI KIND

Masters of unknowns,
power found in emotion & combinations of Kinds

*Dedicated to those who love the
morally grey love interest.
Because you know if someone
hurts you and your love finds out...*

Run.



THE PAST

There were 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. Nights where they were not hunted, where they were unafraid.

They told 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.

Those were the nights that littles could be little, and first loves could be safe and kind and wanted.

But 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 wicked men would tear them apart.

No one mentioned how a killer would be lost to the one who held his heart.

Or how a thief would someday become a queen in the shadows.

I

THE MEMORY THIEF

Morning light warmed my face, but I had no desire to turn and greet the day.

In truth, I had no desire to keep breathing.

My body ached with bruises and welts from the Masque av Aska, but it was nothing compared to the slow-burning agony ripping my chest in two. When the shock of what had truly happened faded, when I'd declared a miserly war against the Black Palace, the mere notion of walking became too great.

Hagen and Gunnar had practically dragged me to a shack near the edge of Jagged Grove, then Niklas supplied me with an elixir to help me sleep.

I'd slipped into dreamless numbness. By the gods, I wished to remain in such a state. The morning was too cruel, reality too harsh.

I rolled over on the rope cot. There was space enough for another body, but it was empty. My face pinched. He should be sleeping peacefully beside me. The place had gone cold. Tears blurred my vision as I swiped my palm over the burlap quilt, holding the emptiness as if my touch might fill it with the face I wished to see, the warm body I wanted to hold.

Kase was in the grasp of Lord Magnate Ivar.

No one told me exactly what it meant, but it did not take much of an imagination to guess.

The way Hanna had silently sobbed, how Ash had yet to speak to anyone, was enough of a sign to know Kase would be tortured. He'd be brutalized, all because he had to gain a damn heart at the wrong moment and push us to safety.

He should've used his mesmer to slaughter the guards.

Junius assured me he could not kill them with fear if they had not feared him in the moment. Kase's power over fear was finicky, and I cursed the fates for playing such cruel games.

A soft knock came to the door.

"Malin." Tova's voice was hoarse. No mistake, the Kryv had sobbed herself to sleep much the same as me. "Are you awake?"

"Unfortunately," was all I could manage to mutter in return.

A click and squeak of hinges broke the silence of the hovel. Tova's feathery steps scuffed over the floorboards. I closed my eyes when the weight of her body shifted the cot, and she sprawled out over the spot where I wished to see Kase sleeping.

She rolled on her shoulder, so she faced me. The bright green of her cat eyes was glassy, and the whites had gone red.

"We take the next step, Mal," she whispered. "We . . . we fight to . . ." Her voice broke.

Good. I didn't want her to finish the Kryv promise, for I could not think of any end at the moment. Kase could not end, he could not.

"How do I take a step when I cannot find the strength to stand?" My fists curled around the tattered quilt and tugged the rough hem under my nose.

Tova reached over my shoulder to the small shelf beside the bed and removed the two vials. One marked in red, the other in black. My pulse quickened as she studied the black-capped vial.

"Have you looked yet?"

I took the red-capped vial, clutching it to my heart, then gently eased the black vial out of her fingers, shaking my head. "No. My thoughts have been elsewhere."

"Yes, I know, but what if it helps?"

I looked at the vials. Two bone-dust memories. One told the truth that the man I loved had been saving me since he was a boy. The other, the final memory of the woman who risked it all to keep me alive, and to hide me away from the wretched burden of the blood in my veins.

All these turns my stepfather, Jens Strom, had kept them close. Tried to make me nothing to the world and the Lord Magnate.

Perhaps I understood his reasons. Perhaps I resented him. What did it matter? I could hardly spin a thought that did not lead back to the cruel reality of Kase being a prisoner of the Black Palace once again.

But Tova's point had merit. No one knew the truth of the bloodlines

better than my mother. If there was even a chance I could learn more of my mesmer, if it could somehow help bring Kase back to us again, I would claw out the will to keep living. Even if it left me battered and bloody to do it.

“You’re right,” I said in nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

Tova propped onto one elbow, the dark curls she kept on one half of her head spilled over her shoulder. “I’ll leave you to see—”

“No.” I took hold of her hand. “Please. Stay. I don’t want to be alone with it.”

Tova licked her bottom lip and nodded.

One hand clasped with hers, I used the other to unstop the vial and tipped the edge to my lips. The ashy dryness of the bone dust inside settled over my tongue. With a long breath, I took it in. Some said I ate the memory, but in truth it was as if I inhaled it into my system until it lodged into my mind.

Familiar smoke swirled in my skull. Shapes and points shifted until shadows became solid, until the cold of nothing filled with the warmth of a fire, of soft blankets, and herbal teas.

The face of a much younger Jens filled my sights. To know I was peering at my stepfather through the eyes of my mother sent a shiver dancing down my spine. I gripped Tova’s fingers tighter, and waited as the memory drifted from silence to hushed, weak voices.

“When . . . when I am with the gods, a bit of bone, *Herr*. That is all it takes.”

Jens’s jaw pulsed. He only had one rune inked across his cheekbone back then, and the braid down his scalp was darker, like the red clay deep in the soil. “I’ll see it done.”

A breath of relief warmed me through my mind, down to my heart. My mother had been at peace knowing Jens would trap these moments in dust. A sting of emotion burned behind my eyes. Hells, I wish I could see her face. Study her, remember her for myself.

“You . . . you will keep her invisible. Keep her away from . . . from it until the right . . .until it calls for her.”

“Until what calls for her?” Jens leaned forward. “I don’t know what you speak of.”

“Have you heard . . . heard the tale of four queens, *Herr*?”

“My Lady, I don’t—”

“Four queens, chosen by fate.” My mother laughed, but it fell into a cough. Jens quickly helped tip a horn of water into her mouth until the

coughing eased. From my position in the memory, I made out a slender hand reaching for Jens.

“The Norns have . . . they have blessed the world with gifts. Selfish folk have tried to take their . . . power. But it is said the gifts will be restored. She . . . she could be a queen, *Herr*.”

“My Lady, I do not take stock in legends and fables. I know what is real,” Jens said. “And what is real is your girl is the last true heir. What would you have me do?”

A fog entered my head. The memory began to fade as my mother’s life faded into the Otherworld.

“Keep her safe, until . . . until it calls to her. Help her rise.”

“My Lady.” Jens wore a burdened expression. “I do not know if it will ever be possible. Your folk are slaughtered, hunted. I will keep her from it. To expose her would be a death sentence. She will be unknown.”

My mother let out a shaky breath. “Shadows and light. Do you not think they are a . . . remarkable balance, *Herr*?”

“I suppose. Lady Sig, you should rest.”

“I bore her in the dark . . . kept her there. Perhaps it is a sign of her fate, for I see her rise through . . . shadows.” My mother took a long, shuddering breath in the memory. “The queen of shadows, *Herr*. I wonder . . . I wonder why I see them all around her. A gift from the Norns. A chance . . . to see her when I . . . will not have the pleasure.”

“You see her in shadows?” Jens whispered, taking her hand.

“They follow her.”

“A curse of darkness?”

Though it was not my own, my face twitched as a soft smile from my mother’s memory spread over her face.

“No, *Herr*. Darkness will be her strength.” My mother hacked another cough. It was wet, a tang of fetid mesmer blood filled my senses. She was dying. Her voice softened, nothing but a whisper on a breeze. “A queen of shadows. When it . . . calls to her . . . she will take back what is ours. She must. She—”

When my mother went silent, Jens leaned forward. “My Lady?”

A choked gasp came from my throat, but it was not mine. “She will live . . . survive with . . . shadows. Tell her we . . . we loved her.”

Ashy smoke filled my head, swirling around the warmth of the room until my skin raised in chills. Herbs and teas were no longer there, and the damp,

smoky hint of Jagged Grove overtook the air.

I blinked through the filaments of smoke until Tova's face came into focus. Her bright eyes held mine, unblinking.

"Well?"

"She was delirious, but . . . she kept saying I was a queen of shadows, and darkness would be my strength."

Was I meant to be wicked and monstrous?

Tova arched one brow. "All right. We can make sense of that later, I suppose. Anything else?"

"She was insistent something would call to me when the time was right. She wanted Jens to keep me alive until the right moment. What moment?"

Tova's chin quivered. "I can't say, but . . . what if she could see? Wasn't that a gift of the ancient memory workers? They could see things before they began."

"Niklas believes the sight came from the ring, but no one knows for certain if they could actually see. Anyway, this was more she believed I'd been chosen for something. Like she knew fate had a plan for me. She kept mentioning four queens."

Tova shrugged. "There are many myths and legends about queens."

"I've never read any."

"No doubt because Jens Strom kept such things from you."

True enough. Jens did not permit me to read the same tales as Hagen and Bard had as children. I was left to imagine faraway lands with Kase in the hayloft.

"It is interesting she mentions shadows," Tova went on. "For if anyone is a king of shadows, it is Kase. It could be your path. To live in shadows with him."

She was reaching. I understood, and felt much the same. Any nudge that would give us hope the gods, the Norns, that anything put us on the path of rescuing the Nightrender, I'd build it in my head until I believed it to my core.

"I don't know what she meant through much of it, but she seemed to believe I had a part to play in this kingdom." I hugged my knees to my chest. "But how am I to do it? I feel as though I am made of ice, growing colder with every passing moment."

Tova dug through the quilt and took hold of my hand, giving it a weak squeeze. "You have the belief of your mother now at your back. Take

strength from it. But there is more. I came here for a purpose. I might've found someone who can help you thaw. At least for a short time."

"Who is it?"

Tova sat up. "Come see for yourself. You need to move, breathe new air, maybe eat and drink. Basic things to keep you living."

"He does not have such a luxury in whatever dank cell they are keeping him." I rolled over, putting Tova at my back.

She let out a gruff sigh and shoved my hip with her elbow. "Get up. You may bend, but you cannot break. Not when he is counting on you."

Hells, the woman knew how to drive a knife into the heart.

It was made worse since Tova was right. I could not waste away. To lie here and die would do nothing to help Kase; it would not solve the problem of retrieving the queen's ring. If what Jens Strom told me was true, that ring would prove I was the true heir of the Eastern Kingdom.

A bleeding death sentence in this gods-awful place.

But if claiming the ring and unlocking whatever mesmer lived in it saved Kase Eriksson, I would do it. I would not think twice.

2

THE MEMORY THIEF

With slow movements I crept out from beneath the quilt, shuffling about the shack until I was properly dressed in a loose-fitting tunic, trousers with holes in the knees, and leather shoes. I didn't know whose they were.

Tova gave me a nod of approval and opened the door. I tangled my fingers through the knots in my hair as she led us toward a firepit at the edge of Jagged Grove.

Seated on stones or logs was the entire Guild of Kryv. Hagen sat beside Gunnar. In the light of day, my brother looked healthier. Perhaps it was being reunited with his son, or perhaps it was breathing freedom after so many turns locked in a cell.

Ash and Hanna held hands on a log. Hanna watched as Ash poked at the embers with a long stick. The boy had puffy eyes and streaks of crusty, dried tears on his pale face.

My heart wanted to crumble at the sight of the two youngest Kryv.

I blinked away from the children. There was no time to crumble. As Tova said, bend, but do not break. Not yet.

Raum paced behind Ash and Hanna's log. His face was twisted in a scowl, and he kept shaking out his hands with each step. The rest of the Kryv stared at the flames with a heavy somberness. No one spoke.

Some of the Falkyn Guild scattered themselves among the Kryv. Niklas and Junie sat close to Vali and Lynx. The Falkyn guild lead looked weary and disheveled. Junius stroked the curve of his ear, her other hand on his leg.

Maybe her touch had power. The more she soothed him, the more Niklas

relaxed against his wife.

When Tova and I stepped into view a few eyes lifted. Raum paused his steps for half a breath before picking up his pacing again.

Hagen scooted over, a broken smile on his face as he patted the spot next to him.

I sank against my brother, torn between the relief of having him free of the Masque av Aska, and the pain of replacing one captive with another.

Movement across the pit drew my eyes through the smoke.

My heart stilled in my chest. I'd not noticed the one face which did not belong here.

"What the hells?"

"Luca Grym." The man rose from where he sat beside Fiske and Isak. He was tall, clearly strong enough to wield a blade, and had eyes the color of a clear summer sky.

Unlike his brother, the Lord Magnate's second son had not inked his scalp in runes, and instead had marked his throat in rows of symbols. He'd forgone shaving the sides of his head like most nobles, and left his dark hair tousled to his shoulders with a few pieces pulled back in a strip of leather.

My fists clenched over the tops of my knees. "What are you doing here?"

"The same as you, I imagine."

A rush of anger shot through my veins as I stood. "You do not come here for the Nightrender. If you cared for him, you would be at the palace where you are welcomed. You would be doing all you could to *free* him."

Luca did not flinch; he did not frown. No, the bastard smirked. Like I was a ridiculous child.

"What is it you think I am doing here? If you believe it is so simple as to stroll out with my father's prized Alver, then you do not understand how Ivar works."

"So, you simply sit back without trying and let him be tortured?" I shouted. "The Kryv once told me they considered you their friend."

"Luca's a friend," Ash mumbled, never taking his eyes off the flame.

Luca rounded the pit toward me, his scrutiny growing harsher with each stride. "Think what you will, Memory Thief, but I would not be here if these people did not matter to me."

"Malin," Tova said. "Luca comes with a report. He is our first step in getting Kase back, our eyes in the Black Palace."

I didn't want to believe it, but clamped my mouth shut, folding my arms

over my chest.

At my silence, the Lord Magnate's son tugged on the cuff of his sleeve and faced the fire pit. "I walk a fine line, *dännisk* Strom. My role is to be the incompetent second son who does nothing of note, so attention is never drawn to me. But I cannot be a spectator now. My father has taken no risks when it comes to the Nightrender. Last night, I'm afraid he completed a *förvirring*."

"Dammit." Raum sank into a crouch, his fingers in his hair.

Blood rushed from my face when every Kryv, every Falkyn stared back at Luca with a bit of horror.

"What?" I said, terrified to hear the truth. "What does that mean?"

Luca turned his gaze back to me. "*Dännisk* Strom, like you, Ivar possesses mesmer from the ancient royal lines. You steal memories and share them; my father alters them. He can warp any memory into something horrible, or grand, or whatever he wishes you to see. Why do you think his Alvers are so loyal? They only have memories of his graciousness lifting them from squalor and pain."

I tugged on the ends of my hair. "Did Kase know?"

Luca's mouth tightened. "Yes. Although, your stepfather manipulated his tongue as a boy to never speak of it, thinking it would protect *you* better. He's never mentioned my father's mesmer out loud, not even to me who spoke of it often. I doubt he could. My father has returned his Malevolent to his fold."

"How did he explain his absence these last five turns since we broke out?" Vali asked, his voice dark, like spoken violence.

"No doubt others have had their minds manipulated, but for most, the Malevolent did not ever abandon the Black Palace, he has merely been posted elsewhere at Ivar's command," Luca said bitterly.

I balked. "And folk simply believe it?"

"I do not think they worry themselves much with details." Luca frowned. "So long as Ivar's terrifying Alvers serve them, they are content. Similar mesmer or not, no one knows him as the Nightrender but for those in the underbelly. To townsfolk, he is the Malevolent."

"And he believes this?" I asked, stunned, angry. I could not hide the quiver in my voice and gave up trying.

"He does. As far as I know, Kase believes he has only recently returned to Klockglas. Just in time for the attack on the Masque av Aska. But, in truth, his manipulation isn't the most crucial worry."

“How could anything be worse?” Breaths came sharp and jagged. My head spun. I blinked to the ground, unable to meet the eye of anyone.

“Unlike your Talent, Ivar’s mesmer leaves the old memories behind, but traps them in the dark. But some Alvers resist the altered thoughts.” Luca rubbed the back of his neck. “When they are in a constant conflict, I’ve . . . well, I’ve seen many Alvers wither into a shell.

“Ivar becomes a sort of puppet master. If they resist, he can pull on them until they fall deeper into his grand charade.” Luca hesitated. “The more he drowns them in his mesmer—I don’t understand it all—but something about the spell cast makes them grow ill and weak. They go mad. Most who put up any fight die because they simply lose the will to live.”

“And if anyone would fight manipulation, Kase will,” Niklas muttered, raking his fingers through his hair.

“Exactly.” Luca folded his arms over his chest. “He’ll be fighting whether he knows he is or not. We won’t have long before it starts eating him alive.”

Bile scorched the back of my throat. “So . . . Kase’s memories are—”

“Changed,” Luca interjected. He shifted on his feet and gave a gentle smile toward Hanna and Ash. “For now, he will not know the Kryv.”

Hanna’s eyes welled in tears. The girl covered her face and leaned into Ash’s shoulder, her skinny body shuddering in quiet sobs.

“But what is worse,” Luca went on slowly, “is you, Malin Strom.”

“What about me?” My voice came in nothing more than a dry rasp.

“Kase would not give you up after he was captured, so my father took it to mean you mattered a great deal to the Nightrender. Ivar took particular care with his spell to ensure your face incites fierce hatred.”

Each word rammed into my middle like a dull, hot knife point. I trembled, and hardly noticed when Hagen’s big hand steadied me by gripping my shoulder.

“You’re telling me Kase hates me?”

“Fears you, despises you, wishes to kill you—I cannot say how deeply his disdain will go until the *förvirring* settles.”

I couldn’t breathe. I pressed a hand to my chest until I gathered enough air to speak. “He . . . he doesn’t know me?”

“No, *dännisk* Strom.” Luca wrung his hands for a few heartbeats, then stepped close to me. “In truth, not knowing you will give you a slight advantage. No one, not even Kase, realizes what your mesmer can do. Ivar assumes you are a thief, but not—” Luca cleared his throat and flicked his

gaze to my fingers. “Not the heir of the kingdom.”

Silence shrouded the campfire, but inside my skull was chaos. Thoughts began but found no end. Hatred boiled like a fever through my veins. A collision of wanting to cease existing, and desiring to burn the gates at the Black Palace rolled over my body in a violent shudder.

I took a step closer to the Lord Magnate’s son. “Could I steal the false memories?”

“I think so. I’ve spent the night reading all I have on the ancient gifts, and I don’t see why you couldn’t take a false memory similarly to the way you take others.”

A flicker of something like hope burned in my chest. I’d clear Kase of every soiled thought. The trouble was if the Nightrender wanted to cut out my insides, getting close enough to put my mouth on his would prove difficult.

“You and Hagen should know, your stepfather has done what was needed to be done,” Luca went on.

Hagen rose from his log, concern written in every line of his face. “What has he said?”

“He has made the unknown woman—you, Malin—to be a mysterious guild lead. Hagen devised the attack after meeting one of the woman’s thieves in prison.”

“What reason did he give for my devising such an attack,” Hagen said, almost as if such a tale were expected.

“An act of revenge against Jens for never freeing your Northern family. He has made it seem as if you knew you would be sold, so you and this thief plotted to hire the woman’s guild and attack.”

I shook my head. “But—”

Luca held up a hand, silencing me. “The story gets worse and much more violent. According to Jens, Hagen hired the guild to destroy not only the masque, but House Strom. Starting with Jens’s only daughter. This morning it was reported that Malin Strom was found dead. Her throat slit in the hayloft of House Strom. She was dead long before her wicked stepbrother’s hired thieves had attacked the Masque av Aska.”

Blood drained from my face. “Jens said this? Why would he say I was gone?”

“Because my father knows he has a stepdaughter, yes?” Luca arched one brow. “Even if Jens fought to keep you faceless and a nobody all these turns,

Ivar knew of your existence. This way, my father will have no reason to connect Malin Strom to the woman who nearly destroyed my brother at the Masque av Aska.”

It made a bit of sense, turning Ivar’s attention away from me, but a sick knot grew tighter in my chest knowing Hagen would bear the brunt of the blame. Skydguard would destroy him should he be caught again.

“Does Kase think Malin is dead?” Hagen asked. “He would be more distraught than anyone. Surely he would remember his childhood with us.”

Luca shifted on his feet, as if uncertain how to answer. “As I said, since the *förvirring* he. . . he doesn’t seem to know how connected he has been to House Strom. I doubt he remembers his hayloft girl at all.”

I was like cold stone. Frozen. Hardened. I was shattered into a thousand different pieces inside, screaming and spinning off my foundation while my exterior remained unmoving and stoic.

“But if Kase sees her face . . .” Hagen’s words died as he made a weak gesture to me.

“His memories are altered,” Niklas said, a bite of irritation in his voice. “Do you all not realize what Luca is telling us? True memories might remain, but they are shrouded. Buried. Warped. Look at it as you please, but he will not recognize any of us. He’d slaughter Malin before she could get close enough to even try to steal a false memory.”

“So, there is no hope.” The words slid between my teeth in a low, dangerous rasp. I glared at Niklas, not truly angry at the Falkyn, more murderous toward the whole of the kingdom for the life it had dealt the Nightrender. “There is no unraveling what has been done, so we turn our backs on him.”

“No one is saying that, Malin,” Niklas said, his voice nearly as vicious as my own.

“Luca, why not just tell him what was done?” Raum asked. “If he recognizes you, he’ll trust you.”

“It can’t be that simple,” Niklas muttered, his mood souring with each passing moment.

“Unfortunately, Niklas is right,” Luca said. “I’m afraid the Norns when they blessed the first bloodlines with memory gifts were in a particularly cruel disposition. An attempt to shatter Ivar’s spell by telling the Nightrender he is trapped with mesmer, would have the opposite outcome. He wouldn’t believe us, and any doubt he builds for his true memories only strengthens

the *förvirring* magic.

“If we go shout at him, tell him he attacked the Masque av Aska, if we tell him Ivar manipulated his mind, I fear it will only draw him closer to my father, and leave him viewing us as traitors and enemies.”

Hagen snorted in frustration. “So, we are faced with limited time before he quite possibly loses his mind, yet we cannot tell him the truth, or he will be locked in an unbreakable spell cast.”

Luca’s jaw pulsed. “That is what we face, yes. His false memories are strong, but from what I’ve read they can be broken. Enough that it may earn us some trust, so he might let Malin get close.”

“How are we supposed to do this? If he looks at us—at Malin—with murder, how are we ever going to get close enough?” Raum snapped, quickening his endless pacing. He looked ready to cut a throat should someone come near.

“Raum,” Vali clapped a hand on Raum’s shoulder and squeezed. “Do we shy away from the impossible?”

A muscle twitched beneath Raum’s eye. He held Vali’s dark gaze for at least five breaths before he shirked him off with a bitter grin. “No, but we bleeding better get paid to do it. And I don’t want penge this time. I want blood.”

“Good. This is where the cleverness of the Kryv and Falkyns will shine brightest,” Luca said.

“We should be there,” Niklas said, rising from his seat and pacing, “to keep watch on him, see if we can stir any memories by interacting with him.”

Luca shook his head. “Too much and, as I said, it could—”

“No, I know,” said Niklas. “We would play a part, as we often do. Go in under guise, let him interact with familiar faces even if he does not know they are familiar.”

Luca considered the idea. “It could help. But you must play the part. No whispering he’s been taken by the Lord Magnate.”

“One problem,” Tova said in a raspy tone. “We all could be recognized.”

“We’ll work something out.” Niklas waved a hand dismissively. “We are not amateurs at hiding in plain sight, Tov.”

“Good,” I said. “Then send me in, and—”

“No,” Luca said abruptly. “You have been targeted by Ivar’s curse, so hiding you from Kase will be nigh impossible. Likely the same can be said for Niklas and most of the Falkyns.”

“Why?” Junius asked.

Luca’s jaw tightened. “Not to mention the man who betrayed you has already described you in great detail to my father. Without a plan and clear way inside, you would be recognized straightaway.”

Niklas cursed but insisted sending in a few Kryv could be enough. My mouth kept silent, but inside I screamed and raged, desperate to be tossed in Kase’s path this instant. I would take the pain; I’d take him home.

“A new game is underfoot, my friends, and we must plan our steps,” Luca said when discussion slowed. “But this scheme is not only to steal back the Nightrender. We will be stealing a kingdom.”

He softened his gaze when he glanced at me. I wished he wouldn’t be soft. I wanted hardness. Jagged, sharp rage. I wanted all the reasons to hate House Grym, even him. Perhaps he was helping, but I would keep Ivar’s son at a distance, untrusted, and watched carefully.

With a low voice, Luca went on. “I expect to know how much Kase truly has been affected by sunset or tomorrow’s dawn. It is no small feat to overshadow a good memory and change it to something wretched. But for now, be careful. He has you marked in his mind.”

A thousand questions battered my skull, but I lost my voice to each one. How powerful was Ivar? How could he be stopped? If I went to rescue Kase, how would it be possible if he wanted to slit my throat?

By the gods. I yearned for his touch. Those brutal hands killed, stole, and caused pain. But with me, in quiet moments, I’d never been touched so gently.

“I wish I brought better news,” Luca said when I remained silent.

Niklas clapped his hands. “We have no time to waste. Luca, any written word you can provide on mesmer, I will need to study it.” The Falkyn guild lead stared back at me with a new ferocity in his eyes. “All mesmer has weak points, a thread to pull to unravel whatever power it conjured. Memory mesmer may be one of the strongest, but it also fights the largest battles to remain strong.”

“Meaning?” Hagen asked.

“A person’s own will. Kase has protected Malin for turns,” Niklas said. “That will not be easy to erase.”

“But I am his enemy.”

“In a false memory, Malin. We will make him question it as Luca said.” Niklas placed his hands on his hips, staring at the fire. “I’ll find a way.”

As the gathering around the fire pit murmured and plotted with Luca, I faced the rising sun over the trees.

If it came down to willpower, no one in this awful kingdom had more will to defy the Lord Magnate than the Nightrender.

I pressed my fingertips to my lips, closed my eyes, and held onto the thought of the bright sunrise gold of his eyes. “Fight, Kase. Fight, and be ready. I will tear this kingdom apart to get to you.”

3

THE NIGHTRENDER

There was a hate inside me.

For him. For *her*? I could not say. Each cold dawn was the same.

Sweat on my brow, a race to my pulse, and a torrential pressure in my lungs, until it grew difficult to breathe. Only to have the whole of the turmoil fade as the sun rose.

But for those moments, when the city was coated in dreary mists from the Howl, I was locked in a darkness I could not escape. A darkness which brought little comfort to me.

To whittle down where the hot spark of rage came from grew tiresome. It seemed as if sleep brought clarity, only to be washed away when I woke.

Through the open window a bite of frosty air burned against my face. I tore my gaze off the eaves of the rounded tower room and turned my stare to the haze of sunrise.

The upper chamber of the skydguard tower rose above all the others of the Black Palace. Here, the Lord Magnate kept his favored ones. The Alvers who would give their service and lives for the Grym bloodline.

I was a favored one returned home.

After turns of service overseas . . . somewhere. Hells, my mind was slipping, and it sparked a rush of anxious blood to my head. For weeks, I could hardly recall a night beyond the masquerade, and I did not know how to stop the holes in my thoughts from spreading.

I was the Malevolent of the Black Palace. A dark Alver who frightened folk with one glimpse into the inky black of my eyes. I would not be brought down by a broken mind.

I'd devoted my existence to defending my Lord Magnate and his position

as the highest law in the regions of the East. With each steady thrum of my heart, I knew this as truth. Then why, when the shadows of night came, did I despise him so?

In dreams her face was there, haunting, beautiful. A torturous reminder I was not worthy of such a favored position in the Black Palace. How could I call myself loyal when the woman who had tried to assassinate the Heir Magnate lived inside my head? In my most impure thoughts.

Another night of tumultuous, wretched dreams.

They always began the same. The thief in my grasp, a chance to rid the regions of her cunning and violence, but instead of ending her, I kiss her. Hard. Greedy. I strip her bare. We claw at each other until we're raw and ragged, sated and panting.

It seemed with each passing night, the dreams grew more vivid, more horrifying. How was it a woman could haunt my mind so much when I had never spoken a word to her, never touched her, merely survived the night she'd come to attack?

I deserved a knife to the throat, not a place of honor.

When her face filled my head, Ivar's was blotted out by pure, wretched disdain.

Hells, in darkness I dreamed a thousand ways to take my blade to his heart. In sunlight the assassin was still hunted by the Black Palace, and Lord Magnate Ivar was the merciful benefactor to lift me from a life of squalor.

I tossed the quilt off my legs and sat on the edge of the bed. Why did I question? I slept atop a goose-feather bed while folk slept in hog piss below me. I was fed from the cooking rooms of the Black Palace while waif littles begged for blood apple cores in compost bins.

But the gods—gods I was not certain existed—tormented me.

A heavy-handed knock came to the door of the chamber. "Malevolent."

My grip on the edge of the bed tightened at the sound. My temper flared from the mere notion he stood close.

"I'm awake, Sabain."

He addressed me as Malevolent, my true title, but I could not bring myself to call him Benevolent. Seemed wrong. Even in our shared devotion to the Lord Magnate, there was a darkness inside Sabain Lura that was anything but benevolent.

"The Lady Magnate wishes to have a meet with you, then we are to search the grounds for the young lord," Sabain said.

My jaw pulsed. Lady Magnate had sent the missive at the evening meal last night that I was to meet her in her bed chamber. My stomach tossed in sick waves. She was not a woman a man should take on without a witness.

But to ignore the Lady Grym, I might as well cut off the tips of my fingers and swallow them whole.

At least Sabain had given us an excuse to seek out Luca. No doubt he'd be loitering around the grounds, but I hoped to be present when Sabain called him *young lord* to his face. It would be enough to push Luca over a ledge and we could plot and scheme ways to sneak a boil-causing elixir into Sabain's brän.

Schemes. Tricks. Manipulation. They all came naturally to me, and I hated it. Such things placed me in the leagues with the thieves who'd attacked the Masque av Aska and their wretchedly beautiful guild lead who had a death wish.

"Malevolent!"

"All hells, I'm coming, Sabain!" I rose from the bed, tugged a black tunic over my head, and secured a dark gambeson over the top.

I secured a boiled leather baldric over my shoulder and peered down at the bustle of the Black Palace courtyard. Serfs and grounds keepers worked to keep the stones clear of brambles. They pruned and trimmed, clipped and swept.

A ribbon, woven with starlight silver thread, billowed from a tree branch below.

The Masque av Aska had ended not two weeks back, but since the night of the festival, there had been a shift in Klockglas, in all the regions. Ivar was staking more power, more of a voice. Some suspected he planned to claim the throne. It had been empty too long, and he was already revered as the sounding authority.

The Lord Magnate needed the power of strong mesmer at his back should he make a move for a crown.

I would be the one to defend it.

I sheathed a skydguard seax blade behind my back and abandoned the room.

Sabain stood against the wall. His clothing challenged the pitch of mine with silver and gold threads over a pearl tunic and gambeson. The only darkness on him was his belt and blade. A blacksteel sword.

I envied the weapon, and did not believe his story about how he found it

in the armory and Ivar insisted he take it for his own use.

Such a weapon would be given to the Lord Magnate, or one of his heirs. Somehow this bastard held it.

Sabain glared at me. He stood half a head taller, but his body was narrow and thin. A slight, tapered point tipped his ears, and I suspected he had a bit of fae blood running in his veins. Made him more powerful and much trickier. Made me hate him a little more.

He was not intimidating by stature. Next to me, he'd be seen as the weakest.

But those eyes were always doused in a pale gleam, like starlight. A bit of mesmer to hide the darkness of his true nature.

"You overslept," Sabain said, his voice contrived and rough.

"Perhaps you rose early." I rolled my shoulders back and glanced down the corridor leading to the spiral staircase.

"You think it wise to keep the lady waiting?" He scoffed, thinking things in that twisted head, no doubt.

"Do you think it wise to keep your hair the way you do?" I rubbed a hand over the cropped top of his head. Absent the braids and knots common for the Alvers and skydguard style. "Makes you look a bit like an infant pushed straight from between your maj's legs."

I picked up my pace and took a stride ahead of him, all to hide my grin.

"You would be wise to show respect." Sabain quickened his step and pressed his lips close to my ear, his hot breath on my neck. "Even if you bed the lady behind the Lord Magnate's back, you will not always be protected, Malevolent. One might think your lack of respect is bordering on treasonous."

If only he knew how much I despised this place. The folk in it. If only he knew how much I could not explain why, he would toss me onto Ivar's blade without question.

I stopped at a thick, polished door and flipped the latch. With a smug grin, I faced him before stepping inside. "Jealousy is rather unbecoming, Sabain. I cannot help if the Lady Magnate finds me more . . . desirable. Tell Luca I might be some time. I have excellent stamina."

I chuckled darkly and slammed the door in his face.

To torment Sabain was a bit of light in the sea of chaos and shadows I could not clear from my head.

The Lady Magnate's chambers always reeked with too much saffron and

burning sage. She was a superstitious woman who depended too much on seers who spoke to the imaginary gods and stars, who then reported back to the lady all the dreary things that would become of her.

Perched on a three-legged stool near a washbasin was one of the seers. Hooded in a black cowl, all I could make out was his kohl-painted lips. They glistened in damp spittle since the horrifying fool kept licking his fat bottom lip. Like I was a meal who'd strolled into his trap.

Hells, all these witchy seer folk sent harsh prickles of fear down my back.

In the main chamber was a small stone inglenook, a floor covered in rough carpets of fur and rope rugs. The lady had several wicker benches and chairs, but she had created a small, raised dais in the center, facing the fire, and an ostentatious chair which she claimed like a bleeding queen.

At the sound of my arrival, she whipped around, facing me. Britta Grym was younger than Ivar by several turns. She had dark hair with a few strands of frost woven throughout her head. The woman had the same sharp blue eyes as Luca, and might be lovely if not for her endless fits of worry, and her lashing temper.

Seated on the bench off to the side of her dais were two men dressed in fine tunics. Two more of her lovers, no doubt.

"Malevolent," she said, a little breathless. With the snap of her fingers, she gestured for the lovers to leave her space. They complied, each touching her in their own way. A brush through her hair, a kiss to her fingertips, but they looked at me with envy. As if I'd staked a claim on what was theirs.

Once we were alone, the Lady Magnate pointed at the bench for her lovers. "Sit."

I didn't want to sit. Every instinct within me resisted anything demanded of me in the Black Palace. Like a petulant child, or as Sabain preferred, a traitor. The more I tried to resist, though, the more pain gripped my skull until bits of black dotted the corners of my eyes.

I sat on the edge of the bench, hand on the hilt of my seax.

For a long, tense moment Britta studied me. A smile broke over her lips, and she stroked the curve of my ear. "You've become so . . . formidable, Malevolent."

Her touch was a knife to my skin, sharp and painful. All my focus turned into not recoiling. With careful movements, I eased away and squared my shoulders in her direction. "What can I do to serve you, My Lady?"

"I can think of many ways." She huffed. "But I assume you have had no

change of heart since the last request?”

Bile lined my throat. “With respect, I cannot. The Lord Magnate is my master, and it would be an act of betrayal.”

Every meet with the Lady Magnate turned into a request to join her in bed. No mistake, most believed as Sabain and suspected I had my way with her. Let them. Truth be told, Ivar had nothing to do with my refusal, but I was beginning to believe I was defective when it came to women.

I had no other explanation.

When Alvers found pleasure with each other, when skydguard went to cheer houses, I could not find a desire without feeling ill. Without seeing the face of a bleeding thief whose throat I wanted to slit and kiss in the same breath.

Britta sighed and sat deeper into her chair. “Alas, I have not summoned you here for pleasure, Malevolent. It is under the direst of circumstances in which I’ve asked for this meet. And I must command your discretion. Should you breathe a word of what I am going to tell you to anyone, I shall inform the Lord Magnate of all the ways you’ve forced yourself upon me. As you said, he may have little affection for me, but I am still his. He will see it as a betrayal of the highest degree.”

My blood chilled. What the hells? This woman had always been a nuisance, but a manageable one.

All at once she’d become the most dangerous part of my day.

I cleared my throat and took the sour ice of fear pulsing in her veins and blackened my eyes. To intimidate, perhaps to hide my own disquiet, but something had her on edge, and I used it to silently remind her I was not made of simple, light things. I was here to bend fear, to kill with it.

Her eyes widened at the sight of mine, but she made no move to recant her threat.

“Should I betray anyone in House Grym . . .” A fist curled over my knee as I fought to shape the words. I wanted to betray them like I wanted to breathe. But there was a respect for the position of Lord Magnate I could not shake. “Should I betray you, I would offer you my own blade to cut me down, Lady Magnate.”

“Good.” She shifted in her seat and held my gaze. “You have been a good companion for my youngest son.”

“As he has been for me,” I said.

“Yes.” She made a noise in the back of her throat and studied a clay bowl

filled with water and floating blossoms. “He is different than us. Naturally, we give him free reign to do as he pleases since he has little interest in matters of politics and power.”

In truth, House Grym gave Luca little notice at all. He could raise up an army against them and they would never see it coming.

Britta went on. “You can help my son continue to live in bliss as his family reigns over this land.”

“Is there a reason he would not be able to do so, My Lady?”

“Our lives are soon to change, Malevolent, and I require your help to see that it is done as painlessly as possible. It does not escape my attention that you have a particular skill with folk. In getting information from them, I mean.”

My jaw tightened. I hadn’t realized she’d noticed my proclivity to manipulate others to my will. I’d been subtle, I’d thought. Learning crooked pasts about a few Alvers in the skydguard towers, so they kept out of my way in my rise as the lead of the Lord Magnate’s Alvers. I twisted a few townsfolk with threats of telling wives and husbands about game debts, secret lovers, or skimming extra penge from their trade tables.

To bend and twist and crush others was a second nature. I didn’t waste time trying to puzzle out if it made me wicked or wise.

“Well?” The lady pressed when I went silent. “Am I correct, or have I made an error of judgment?”

“I have ways of finding out information, Lady Magnate.”

“Good. For there is something I must tell you, a place you must find, and . . . lives you must take.”

“You wish me to kill someone?”

“Two someones,” she said. “They are a great threat to our future kingdom, Malevolent.”

“Future kingdom?”

She fiddled with her skirts. “What I am to tell you has the potential to destroy us should the wrong folk learn of it. You understand?”

“I understand. I’ll tell no one, My Lady.”

She nodded and looked at her lap for a few breaths before locking me in her icy stare. “Ivar is dying, Malevolent.”

The words hung between us like a rush of bad air. Poisonous. Rancid.

“How, how do you know this?” Ivar was a man of power. A Hypnotik—at least, I thought—who could cause such great illusions, folk believed what

he told them to be true. I'd witnessed his strength, and he was not so aged that the Otherworld should be calling him yet.

The lady sighed. "The fool trusted the wrong Elixist it seems. The bitch poisoned him, slowly. By the time the effects took hold, it was too late. His blood is destroying his insides and no elixir, no Mediski can stop it now. Ivar, you, and I are the only ones who know. Speak nothing of it to my sons."

Luca did not hold much affection for his father, but Ivar was still his father. It could be a blow he did not know was coming.

"Why have you told me this, My Lady?"

"Because when the Lord Magnate enters the hall of the gods, the kingdom will need a new ruler. A king. Ivar is already arranging the first ascent to the throne since wars of old. Naturally, the honor will be given to my eldest son, Niall."

"A king? But the prophecies of a queen—"

"Yes, I know what the old myths say," she said bitterly. "It will be Niall. Ivar and I will see to it that the House Grym becomes the royal house. Still, those prophecies are troublesome; there are secrets burdening our household that could weaken us. I wish you to rid us of those briars in our garden."

I did not follow her analogy, but the hair raised on the back of my neck. "If there are threats to House Grym, I will rid you of them."

A cruel grin played on her pink lips. "I hoped you would say that. Use your talents with finding information, Malevolent, and you shall be rewarded."

"What information will I be finding?"

"The location of a boy and a young woman. All I know is they are hidden somewhere in the region of Hemlig. These two have blood that could likely give them a claim to the throne."

Then the prophecies were true. I swallowed through a wave of apprehension as I waited for her to continue.

"Find them, Malevolent. And when you do," she said, voice low and dark, "I want you to kill them."

4

THE MEMORY THIEF

“**W**hen is Luca going back?” I grunted as I lifted the end of a heavy trunk filled with old wooden ewers.

To put ourselves a mere five lengths away from the gates of the Black Palace was a risk. We’d taken refuge in the Ruse alehouse; the aleman, Dryck, was an old dealmaker of the Guild of Kryv. One of their friendlier connections. A man with few morals and a proclivity to make deals of the seediest nature.

I suspected he enjoyed watching the Kryv work.

Still, he did not take the news well that the Lord Magnate had imprisoned the Nightrender and would use him as a weapon against the folk of the East.

“He’s a bleeding weapon of the underbelly,” Dryck had muttered no less than a dozen times since we’d arrived last night.

The Nightrender was not a weapon. He was the whole of my heart.

Dryck allowed the guilds to stay in his alehouse on the border of the Black Palace township, but he expected us to pull our weight.

Tova winced as she gathered the other end. “For the fifth time, he’ll be leaving within the clock toll.”

Dagny snickered from across the room where she tried to polish the grimy front window. I shot her a glare, but it did nothing to change her smile. Ash and Hanna helped Gunnar and Hagen lift tables and chairs, scrubbing the ale and vomit-stained floors.

All around, Kryv had turned in blades and bows for soap and scrubbing.

Tova and I dropped the trunk, gasping, behind the alehouse counter. A thick cloud of dust plumed around our ankles.

Tova stretched out her shoulder, then leveled me in a narrowed glare. “Mal, I’m rather fond of you. Not just because you’re an exiled queen—because that makes you rather fascinating on its own—but because you’re a damn Kryv. But I swear to the gods if you ask me one more time about the plan, I might sew your lips shut.”

I frowned. “Forgive me for feeling a few nerves about today. Without this move, we cannot make another.”

“Yes, I know,” Tova said. “But you are making yourself ill with those nerves. We’ve prepared, we’re in place, and he is in our sights.”

I bit my bottom lip, hesitating. “Do you ever fear seeing him, knowing he will not be the same?”

“Yes,” she said. “But I also have the hope he will be more like him than we think.”

“He’s too bleeding stubborn not to be.”

Tova snorted a laugh, but it ended abruptly when Niklas, Raum, Vali, and Luca stomped into the main aleroom. Luca and Niklas muttered back and forth to each other as Niklas handed Luca a package of parchment.

Raum fastened a skin with deer antlers over his head, skydguard leathers over his chest. Vali looked much the same, but he had raven feathers tied with rune beads in his hair instead of antlers.

Both Kryv adjusted elixir soaked masks from their noses to mouths. A strange, rapidly made potion coated the threads. Niklas explained that when the masks were pulled up, it would alter their voices and eye color.

“We need something to change our faces,” Raum had muttered once Niklas proffered them the masks.

“Oh, you need an illusion elixir that changes your whole damn face, huh? Hells, why didn’t I think of that,” Niklas snapped back. “Did you know an elixir powerful enough to alter an entire face in the mind of others takes no less than nineteen sunrises to be stewed, and boiled, and measured in just the right amounts? And if you haven’t noticed we’ve been stuck in the damn forest with limited supplies.”

“I think Niklas needs sleep,” Raum had muttered to Vali with the full intention of allowing the Falkyn to hear.

Niklas’s eyes had burned like a wild flame. “Yes, Niklas does need sleep! And he needs all you bastards to stop your complaining that he is not *elixing* swift enough. I work with what I bleeding have.”

No one said another word of complaint over the voice-altering masks. It

would be enough if Raum and Vali avoided those enemies at the Black Palace who would notice them the most.

It had to be enough.

“I still don’t understand why I cannot use one of those masks and sneak in myself,” I pouted as Raum let his fall under his chin.

Raum grinned. “Too risky, lovey. The whole palace is looking for someone just your shape.”

His reassurance did nothing to stop the pounding anxiety pulsing through my veins since the masque. I should be going after the Nightrender, not standing idle in an alehouse watching the others make their moves.

Behind Vali and Raum, Inge fussed over their attire, trying to place patches and emblems in the exact spots on their body.

“Hells, woman,” Vali snapped when she tried to readjust the guarder over his forearm. “It’s fine.”

Inge puffed out a breath, blowing a bit of hair off her face, and propped her fists over her hips. “Out of anyone in this place, I know the skydguard most. They’re meticulous in their bleeding leathers. Do it right, or do not go.”

I almost found the desire to smile, almost grinned at her tone. Inge had a tongue that could be sweet as new blossoms and sharp as a barbed lash.

“Don’t disrespect.” Hob stumbled over the lip on the step into the aleroom. He tugged a woolen cap over his mussed dark hair and cursed the stoop before glaring at Vali. “She knows what she’s talking about.”

Vali rolled his eyes but held out his arm so Inge could adjust the guarder properly.

I went to Raum and handed him one of the stolen skydguard seax blades we’d snatched after Raum and Isak had posed as guards at the Masque av Aska.

“Should you see him—”

“I know, Mal,” Raum interrupted, taking the blade from my hands. “I’ll do all I can to stir up his doubts.”

“He is close to you,” I whispered. “He’s spoken with you already.”

I bit down on my cheek to hide the dripping envy tightening the back of my throat. For nearly thirteen days, Raum and Vali had posed as skydguard at the palace. They’d perfected their marks to avoid sights of Eero and Ivar, but they’d also had several conversations with the Nightrender.

I could not help but hate them a little for being able to stand beside him, laugh with him—hells—to simply look at him.

“Mal,” Raum said softly. “He and I are close, but you will be the one to bring him back. Of that I am certain. Your turn will come.”

Raum could see impossible distances, but I was certain the man could see into hearts too. For the last two weeks I’d watched Kryv and Falkyn, anyone but me, step into Kase’s path. Even if he did not realize it.

I’d become the worthless ornament gathering dust on a mantle.

“All right.” Niklas’s voice carried over the ale room. Everyone stopped working and faced the Falkyn. Niklas lifted his napless cap and scratched his forehead, meeting my eyes first. “We’re ready to drop our first call to the past.”

“He’s curious,” Luca said. “Tormented. But he’s naturally taken to Raum, to Vali. Even to Lynx in their various roles. Not to mention, he has everyone in the palace terrified of his very presence because he still manages to find out their deepest secrets and fears. He’s beginning to use it against everyone.”

Gunnar chuckled. “Sounds like he’ll be the Nightrender again by week’s end if we did nothing.”

Luca grinned, but there was a heavy sadness there. “I wish it were true. His instincts remain, but he is still lost and horribly convinced he must be loyal to the Black Palace.”

“Today is our first attempt to crack a bit of that loyalty,” Niklas said. “Hob, this is your moment to shine.”

Hob straightened his oversized canvas coat and tipped his chin. Inge laced his fingers in hers and stared at him like this would be the last time they met. I supposed there was a bit of risk for Jakoby Hob. More because we still did not know if Inge’s skydguard brothers patrolled the Black Palace, or if they remained in the townships of lower Klockglas.

Hob kissed Inge’s forehead as he readied to leave. Luca stole a look at Dagny, who seemed rather intent to keep her glare pinned to the window and nowhere near the man.

I did not know their story, but the thick bitterness from Dagny and longing from Luca boiled my blood. Made me ache for Kase. Even if he hated me because a damn spell told him so, to see him, to smell him, to hear his voice, I would give it all.

No question.

“Fight to the end,” Ash shouted as Luca gave up on Dagny and opened the door.

“Hob,” I said, gripping his arm as he passed. With all eyes following Luca, I handed my hawker companion a thinly folded piece of parchment. “He’ll want to know what we’re planning today.”

Hob dropped his eyes to the parchment, then he slipped it into his pocket with a nod. “I’ll see it is delivered to him. You ought to tell the others you’re speaking.”

“Not yet. It’s too dangerous for everyone.”

Hob popped one shoulder in a dramatic shrug, then made a condescending bow to irritate me, and followed Luca.

I stared at the empty doorway long after they’d gone. Wait. All I could do was wait to know if Kase might remember even the smallest piece of the hayloft girl who loved him.

5

THE NIGHTRENDER

“You’re certain, Canute?” I studied the young serf with a bit of reluctance.

The boy served on the grounds crew of the palace and in the last weeks, I’d caught him stealing from the root cellar no less than five times. Our deal was, he could pick out the ripest blood apples, but his knowledge of the underbelly in the township would be mine.

With a ravenous bite into his apple, the boy nodded. “Yes, Malevolent.” He used his dirty sleeve to wipe away the juices, leaving a smudge across his chin. “If you’re looking for someone tricky who knows Hemlig, it’ll be him.”

“He’s a crook?”

Canute raised one shoulder and held it in his shrug until he took another bite. “Never been caught, but I know he’s got tricky fingers. Plus, he’s fae. Aren’t they naturally tricky?”

Couldn’t disagree with the boy’s logic. Canute offered a few more bits and pieces before I sent him on his way with an extra apple, and made my way back into the main levels of the palace.

The moment I’d left the Lady Magnate’s chambers, my mind set to work trying to devise a way to find these marks she knew so little about. It was a reach, and I did not revel in the idea of adding assassin to my list of skills, but her desperation had left me . . . curious.

Truth be told, I wasn’t certain if I planned to find this place in Hemlig for Britta Grym’s sake, or to satisfy my own questions.

“Gods, it’s about time.” I fought the urge to groan when Sabain rounded the corner. He glared at me. “We have grounds to search.”

“No sign of Luca?”

Sabain pulled air through his teeth, a snarl in his expression. “The *young lord* has not been seen since last night.”

I refused to call Luca the young lord for a number of reasons. First, it irritated Sabain. Second, Luca Grym would split my lip if I did. Third, the second son of the Lord Magnate was nearly twenty-five turns. Older than me *and* Sabain.

“And you have not gone to look for him?” My skin still rolled in unease since leaving the Lady Magnate’s chambers and I wanted to be anywhere but here. I quickened my step as hatred for myself, for the Lady Magnate, for the whole of this wretched kingdom burned like dying embers in the pit of my stomach. “What have you been doing while I was otherwise occupied?”

“I am to keep you supervised.”

“One of your imagined rules, Sabain. The Lady Magnate already supervised me.” I leaned closer, voice low. “Thoroughly.”

The lie was worth every line of his frown until Sabain gripped my shoulder.

In an instant my eyes blackened. From rage or fear, I didn’t know. I was beginning to lose the ability to tell the difference.

“Get. Your hands. Off me.” Each word dripped in poison.

Sabain ignored me. “You would do well to remember who leads here. You claw your way to approval with the Lord Magnate, while I already have it. One slip, Malevolent, and I will see you tossed into an illusion tent at the next masque, taking copper pence from little as they point at you and taunt you.”

A piece of my sanity slipped. Anger, hatred, fear, all of it collided and spurred my actions without a thought for the consequences. I took hold of Sabain’s wrist on my shoulder and wrenched it back. In a swift twist, I had the man slumped over with his arm bent high up his back. With one hand, I unsheathed the knife from my baldric, rolled it until it was blade down, then curved it against his throat.

“Have you lost your bleeding mind?” Sabain coughed, some of his golden mesmer coated his palms.

Enough fear bled through him, I easily squashed it with shadows.

“Never touch me again, Sabain.” I pressed my lips close to his ear. “My loyalty does not run so deeply that I will not gut you. Understand?”

“You’ll never change. I knew it. You’re nothing but a bastard villain who roams our streets.”

I shoved him away and watched him scramble for the sheathed blacksteel sword like a bumbling fool.

“Leave it, Sabain. We both know you are no master with a blade.” A smug grin on my face, I smoothed the front of my gambeson. “And you’re right. I favor darkness like the villains in those fables you read at night. Do not provoke me. Now, help me find Luca, or leave me in peace, I have somewhere I must be in town.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere that does not include you.”

“You are not allowed to leave without—”

“Yes,” I interrupted. “You seem to think I must keep you as a bleeding tail, but today is different. Today I go on behalf of the Lady Magnate. Perhaps you would like to explain to her how you do not trust her judgment and must follow me to deal with her private matters.”

From Canute’s instruction, I’d find the fae at a place in the aspen grove. He would be sly, but if he was the creature of habit the boy seemed to think he was, the fae would be there. An odd thrill pulsed in my veins. I reveled in the idea of schemes, tricks, and manipulation. Just like the bleeding beautiful thief.

Sabain clenched his fists, but he said nothing as he took the lead to the outer doors of the palace. He moved with a bit of a sway to each step, and took a great deal of care to hide the twitch to his lip whenever he used the right leg.

“You ought to see a Mediski,” I told him, not truly concerned, but perhaps it would give me a day without him. “About the limp. You never did tell me where it came from.”

“It is none of your concern, Malevolent.”

I shrugged in indifference as he led us into the great hall of the Black Palace. Here, Ivar took council. Here, he welcomed new Alvers who came to take an honored position with the palace. I spared a glance at a stone bowl, stained a bright pink on the bottom as if blood had once been in it, then scrubbed clean. A shiver danced down my spine at the sight of it.

I didn’t know why.

The whole bleeding room raised the hair on the back of my neck. I clenched my jaw and buried the unease until we were outdoors.

A sea wind blew in from the Howl, but the peaks surrounding the Black Palace added a layer of bitterness to the air. With the frost season

approaching, soon the cliffsides would be hardly tolerable without thick furs.

“Then I offered her my damn coat.” A familiar voice lifted over the gardens. “With my mother’s bleeding jade bangle inside. Gods, I’m not certain what disappoints me more—that my favorite coat is gone, or the beauty will not give me another go now that she has what she truly wanted from me.”

At the final gate two boisterous skydguard laughed with a third man.

My shoulders slumped in relief. Luca stood between them, looking like he’d rolled out of bed. His tunic was half untucked from his belt, hair tousled, and he staggered like he might still be recovering from the evening drink.

Luca kept a dark stubble on his chin, but he never let his beard grow out like his older brother’s and father’s. No doubt to agitate Ivar. In each ear a stud made of black, polished stone pierced the lobes, and his face was clear of nobleman runes inked into his skin.

Instead, he’d inked lines of runes down his throat and neck. One from the hinge of his left jaw to the top of the shoulder. The same was inked on the right side, but he had a double track of runes tattooed down the middle of his throat.

A subtle attempt to forever be seen at the outcast of House Grym by permanently inking his skin differently than his brother or father.

“Young Lord,” Sabain called out with a new cheerfulness in his voice. The way he yearned for Luca’s attention was pathetic. I had few doubts half the resentment he held for me was because I got on so easily with Luca Grym.

Luca faced us, and grinned. “Ah, my favorite Alver.”

I wanted to pluck out Sabain’s eyes the way he brightened. What a bleeding fool.

“Malevolent, you missed a grand night.” Luca took a few paces away from the two skydguard and approached us. “Someday I will get you to disobey your pointless curfew and you shall join me.”

I laughed, more because of Sabain’s fallen face than what Luca said. “If it leaves me staggering like you, My Lord, I’ll pass.”

“The Malevolent will always have a curfew,” Sabain added, like he simply couldn’t help himself.

Luca snorted. “Oh, will he? Can you see the future, Sabain?”

“Young Lord, I must insist you address us by our Alver titles.”

“And I must insist you cease speaking so loudly. Go fetch me some herbs

for my head, Sabain.” Luca said, contrived like a spoiled nobleman.

Sabain frowned, but tipped his chin, then hurried toward the cooking wings for Luca’s herbs.

Luca rolled his gaze back to me once we were alone. “Did you fret for me all night?”

“Not in the least,” I said. We returned to the two guards at the gate. I gave them both a nod. “Raum. Vali.”

The two guards nodded back, shifting and adjusting their uniforms as though they did not quite fit correctly. They were new to the rotation, and I was glad for it. In truth, they were the only skydguard I liked.

Raum winked, his silver eyes big and hardly stern enough to be a skydguard. “Good of you to step into the light, Shadow Prince.”

Anyone else, I might take a finger for giving me such a ridiculous name, but there was something about the guards that brought the chaos inside to a calm.

“Any trouble besides the drunken lord?” I asked.

Vali smirked. “None. The gates are odiously quiet.”

“Yes,” said Raum, “what I’d give for a bit of action.”

“They are being bleeding fools today,” Luca said. “I only wish to attend the trade square.”

“You just returned,” I said. “Already you wish to go back?”

“I have an inkling to buy something lovely.” Luca sighed and dramatically pressed a hand to his chest. “For the girl who holds my whole heart.”

I chuckled. “Ah, but the thing is cheer girls don’t expect more than your penge and your manhood.”

“All the same, I wish to leave, and these sods will not let me go alone. Like I’m a damn little.”

“Wise. For once,” Sabain’s voice grumbled behind us.

In an instant, Raum and Vali tugged half-masks over their chins and hoods over their heads.

“Your herbs, Young Lord,” Sabain said, handing Luca rolled bit of cloth filled with pungent, mind-numbing herbs. “I urge you to heed the guards and never be unaccompanied.”

“Ah, I have longed for your praise, Benevolent. All damn morning. Now my day can truly begin,” Raum grumbled. His voice was low and sharp. It was different.

When I looked back at him, I tilted my head. The silver in his eyes had shifted to something more like sapphire blue. That was madness. Surely, they'd always been blue. I was seeing things, no mistake.

Luca barked a laugh and stumbled against Vali's shoulder.

"We did not think it appropriate to send him out there in this state," Vali said, glancing at me.

Hells, he sounded different too. I needed more bleeding sleep.

"True," Raum went on, "he'd get snatched by thieves, or end up vowed to some goat farmer's daughter."

Luca patted Raum's face. "What is your prejudice against goat farmers? She could be a delight."

"I can accompany him," I said, unsure how I would handle a private meet with a particular Hemlish fae if Luca stayed close by.

Luca's bright eyes widened in delight. "Wonderful. See—" He shoved Raum's shoulder. "I will be well guarded by our breaker of night and fear."

A chill danced over my shoulders. The way he'd described my mesmer settled strangely in my head. Almost as if a shadow of a memory of someone describing me the same way existed.

"The young lord should see to the Lord and Lady Magnate first," Sabain said.

"Should I, Sabain? Is that what I *should* do?" Luca narrowed his eyes. "When did you become my wet nurse, Benevolent? Gods, let me be and make yourself useful elsewhere."

Raum and Vali shared a look, one that said a hundred secret things, but before I could press either guard, Luca made a move for the gate.

"Enjoy the lovely day youngest, bravest, handsomest Lord," Raum said, contrived and mocking, but in a way that left Luca grinning. Vali and Raum bent at the waist like Luca was a bleeding king and opened their arms wide.

"If I may suggest replacing these two guards, Young Lord," Sabain said, following despite Luca's dismissal.

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"It is unwise to have such feckless guards about," Sabain said. "And I cannot place it, but . . . something is off about them."

"Well, I rather like them, don't you, Malevolent?" Luca asked.

I glanced back at the two guards, unnerved by how much I'd like to spend the morning talking nonsense with them. "They are entertaining."

"There you have it," Luca said. "If they entertain, then they stay."

Sabain glared at me but said nothing as we trekked into the town. “I will accompany you as well, then.”

“No. I have need of only one nursemaid, thank you, Sabain. No mistake, my father will put you to good use.”

I winked at the Benevolent, reveling too much in the disappointment on Sabain’s twisted face as he had no choice but to return to the palace.

Twenty paces from the entrance to the trade square, I leaned closer to Luca. “You look like you rolled with goats all night. I take it this desire to leave so soon is because you desperately don’t wish to return to the palace.”

“Ah, perceptive, my friend. But I beg to differ on my appearance.” He inspected his wrinkled tunic. “For all you know it could be a cunning plan to attract a lovely companion to warm my bed.”

“Do women find goat-pen attractive?”

Luca waved a hand down his body as if putting himself on display. “They look at me and suspect I’ve spent the night giving another lover a memory that will never be forgotten. So, naturally, another will want to experience all this for herself with the hope of stealing my heart by the time it is over.”

I shook my head. “A fool’s dream.”

“Yes. My heart is as stone, you see. It cannot be won.”

To hear words unsaid was another tricky talent I was fortunate to possess. Luca tried to hide the lull in his voice, the dip of pain, beneath brevity and laughter. He’d never admitted it, but there had been someone who’d stolen his heart once.

I knew it. Somewhere in my hazy brain I could almost recall her face.

Like most things, the woman who’d likely destroyed Luca Grym was nothing but a shadow in my mind.

Streets bustled with hawkers, foreign traders, and craftsman pushing their goods. Whenever their eyes looked to me over Luca’s shoulder, their fear was potent like vinegar on my tongue.

I kept my face frozen as cold iron, blackened my eyes, and kept a hand on the hilt of my blade. The more folk feared the Alvers at Luca’s back, the better.

The people here were unsettled the Malevolent had returned, and I reveled in their disquiet.

But there were those who looked at me with a different scrutiny. Foreheads scrunched, heads tilted, as if they were confused at the sight of me, as if they saw me as someone who did not belong here. Those were the folk I

avoided. They caused the instinct that something was horribly wrong to grow like a disease.

By the time the sun had chased away the cold gray of the early morning, Luca had been greeted by half the upper trade square, tossed in front of no less than a dozen eligible women, propositioned to invest in a new fleet of longships, and he'd purchased two sugared blood apples for us to enjoy as we walked.

"Where do you wish to go, My Lord?"

Luca groaned. "Hells, Kase. Stop with the titles. I can hardly stomach it another day."

"It is what I've always called you in public."

"So you think." Luca's voice was nothing more than a rumble of a whisper. I wasn't sure I'd heard him right but had no time to press before Luca moved on to a ratty trade cart. "Is there somewhere you need to be? You keep glancing over your shoulder."

Luca wasn't a man to pry. I could finagle a way to deposit him back to the palace and still make it to my mark. "Actually, I do have a meet with a particular trader for the Lord Magnate. I'll see you to the gates, then—"

"A meet?" Luca's eyes brightened and I had an instant wash of regret for opening my bleeding mouth. "You have a meet? With someone in the shadows?"

"No, I never said that, and—"

"Ah, my friend, you don't need to say it. There is that conniving twinkle in your eye." Luca laughed and clasped his fingers together. "Show me some kindness and let me join you. Tell me you are bartering for shipments again. Hells, I enjoy watching you scare the piss out of those cunning river captains."

Luca couldn't know what his mother had told me, even if it was enjoyable to barter with him there for added intimidation. "Apologies, My Lord—"

"I will kill you if you call me that again."

I snorted. "This meet is more of a *private* nature."

Luca stopped walking. He faced me, one of his dark brows lifted high enough I thought he might get it to touch the hairline. My palms grew damp with sweat. Would he demand I tell him? I had at least three lies at the ready, but Luca seemed to know whenever I stretched the truth.

But, like his brow, his lip started to twitch in a curve until he was

practically beaming at me. “Kase Eriksson, are you scheming?”

“No.”

Luca’s grin widened. “You are. Damn you.” He chuckled and spun around, glancing in all directions. “Who’s the mark? A skyd? An Alver? A crooked trader?”

The trouble with having an odd sort of friendship with a man as observant as Luca meant he knew my draw to schemes and manipulation.

“Let me accompany you,” he said.

“No. Go find one of those women who love a goat-pen man.”

“You can’t dismiss me,” he said through a laugh. “I am an heir to the Black Palace.”

I glanced over my shoulder to ensure no one was near enough to hear what I planned to say next, then leaned in. “Since when has that mattered to you? Don’t begin playing your status like a lucky hand. It’s unbecoming.”

Luca only seemed more pleased. “It’s been so long since we’ve pulled a trick. I’ll be silent as a wraith, swear to the gods.”

“They won’t be there to hear it,” I said.

Luca spoke of schemes and ploys we often pulled as little, but what would he think if I told him I could hardly recall anything beyond the bleeding masquerade?

“Hells, Kase.” He scrubbed his face nervously. “I’m practically begging for a bit of fun. Do it as a favor to me for saving you from Sabain.”

After a pause, I sighed. “Fine. I’m only observing this morning anyway. But you’re much too excited for this.”

“You’ve been off lately, it’s simply nice to see a bit of the old wretch I know and love bleeding through.” Luca clapped my shoulder. “Well, my friend, lead the way to the poor, unfortunate bastard in your sights.”

6

THE NIGHTRENDER

The mark wasn't hard to find. The fae had relocated from the Southern Kingdom to Hemlig turns ago. He was loud, tricky, and often boasted his talent of never losing at the game tables. The skydguard had kept the fae in their sights for turns. He slipped in and out of regions often, Klockglas being his favorite to frequent before slithering back to the Hemlish shores.

If the Lady Magnate wanted information on the location of her marks hidden away in Hemlig, doubtless Nidhug would know.

The trouble was the man was easy to spot out in the open, but when he wanted to disappear, he slipped into the shadows until he wished to be seen again.

Once I spotted him bowing to a mineral trader—who looked displeased with whatever deal they'd finished—I stuck with him all the way to a stone building folk used for worship.

Luca knew how to keep light and swift on his feet. He'd kept his head low to avoid being stopped by more townsfolk, but when I knew it wouldn't be enough, I paused at a bench along the path to the worship house. A drunken man slept off a night of revelry.

"Wait for a moment."

"Kase, no—" Luca protested as I nudged the man awake.

The drunk cracked his weary eyes slowly, groaning through disturbed sleep, but at the sight of my inky eyes he let out a cry of fear.

"How much for your coat and hat?" I asked, voice low.

"M-My what?"

I leaned forward and snatched all the fear oozing from his pours until my

gaze was so lost in pitch he was shaded gray to my sights. “Your hat and coat. We have need of them. How. Much.”

The man trembled, didn’t give me a price, and hurriedly stripped his sweaty coat and ratty hat. I took them, enjoying that they reeked of old ale and a bit of vomit. Served Luca right for being nosy. I flicked three copper pence at the man and shoved Luca into a grove of skinny aspen trees along the path.

“Hide yourself.”

“Kase, these smell like he wiped his—”

“I don’t care. You can’t be recognized. If you want to join me, you put them on.”

Luca frowned. “You’re rather annoying when no one is around to see.” He grumbled, but slid the pungent jacket over his shoulder, tousled his hair, and pulled the hat far over his brow.

I grabbed handfuls of dirt and smashed it over his face.

“Hells, what are you doing?” Luca spat out a clod of dirt.

“You can’t be recognized,” I repeated blithely.

“I hate you.”

A grin spread over my face as we drifted back to the path and finished the trek to the hidden worship house. Hidden only because it was coated in ivy vines and overgrown hedges in the middle of the aspen tree grove.

I paused at the door when Luca waved his hand. Almost like he was signaling someone to stay away.

“What?” I asked, glancing back to the trees. No one was there.

“Nothing, uh, one of those yellow stingers was flying around.”

I shrugged and stepped into the house. At once, my pulse quickened in my skull. A rush of adrenaline captivated me, like I was made for marking men until I knew their weaknesses.

Where altars and offering basins would be were now lined in narrow game tables. The runes on the mighty posts that once told the sagas of the gods were covered by hooks for satchels, coats, and caps.

Around the tables men and women smoked herb rolls and tossed wooden rune chips for bets and games. It was clever of them, hosting their illegal games in daylight. Less skydguard, and by all accounts, patrons strolling in and out would look like worshipers, not gamblers.

At a far table, Nidhug lit an old cork pipe, smoking his herbs, and grinning with smugness at his fellow players.

“Hundred penge,” a smoke-worn voice rasped behind us.

A woman dressed in a black gown hemmed in silver thread leaned over a countertop built into the wall. Her hair was speckled in gray, and her face had the lines of a life spent laboring in the sun. On her hip, the woman propped a wooden pallet with a small ewer and two flat-bottomed drinking horns on top. Her forehead bunched when we didn’t respond. “Hundred penge or get out.”

“Hundred penge for what?”

The furrow between her brows deepened. “To play.” With a tilt of her chin, she gestured to a few of the tables. “Comes with a fee.”

Luca shifted at my side. Doubtless he was thinking the same as me. These tables were illegal and laid out in plain sight. Gambling dens were common across Klockglas, but to charge playing fees was not authorized. Winnings were taxed before players could leave, then those taxes were sent to the Black Palace for Ivar’s use.

Play fees, however, those never made it to the Black Palace. That penge would land in the pocket of the host of the game.

With my back to the tables, I leaned into the woman, and lowered my voice. “Here’s how it goes, woman: we skip our fee, you set us at the far table to the left, and we don’t tell Ivar what you’re running here.”

“You’re . . . you’re the Malevolent. Heard . . . heard you were back.”

“You heard correctly.”

The door swung open before I answered, and a drunken couple stumbled in behind us. The man had dark hair stuffed beneath a cap. His woman clung to his waist, laughing so the two silver piercings in her dimples caught the gleam of sunlight from the windows.

The man lifted his dark eyes to mine and winked.

“YOU HAVE WITHHELD something that could change the lives of everyone, something that could change the very fate of this land. Don’t lie to me.”

“Niklas, I have killed men for knowing less. Leave this alone. Please.”

LIKE A VISE TO MY CHEST, I could not draw a deep breath. Words, a memory, something took hold as if the sight of this man spurred some recollection of a

conversation I did not understand. There and gone by the time the man had his mouth on his woman's lips, oblivious to Luca and me again.

I was losing my damn mind.

"Don't rat us out, Malevolent," the woman's rough voice shook me from my stun. She cupped her hands like a suppliant. "Couldn't feed ourselves with all the penge we lost to the Black Palace."

"Costs money to keep Klockglas running." I cared little if she paid a piece of her earnings to Ivar, but it would serve us well if she believed I did.

The woman's chin quivered. "Take the table, Malevolent. T'would be our honor to have you sit."

A better man would feel a bit of guilt for bringing tears to a woman's eyes. I never pretended to be a good man. Tender feelings I might crush along the way meant nothing to me when I needed information. No mistake, the woman wasn't innocent. She skimmed from the Black Palace coffers and made an illegal living doing it.

I clicked my tongue with a touch of arrogance and took up a seat at the Hemlish fae's table. Luca took the seat at my shoulder, his head still low.

The man leading the game tipped his chin at me and Luca once we were settled with game pieces in our hands.

"*Välkomna vänner.*" Welcome friends. "You chose the wrong table. We've got Nidhug today."

I flicked my eyes to the fae. Rare to see a full fae in the East. His eyes reminded me of a goat, golden with a blocky black slit down the center. Two nubbed horns rose out of his thick, red curls. The color reminded me of a young flame. Not the deep, rich burn of a sunset over the Howl like . . .

I shook my head. Bleeding hells. The damn thief slipped into my head at the worst times.

I trained my gaze back to Nidhug and watched as he laid out his pieces. Careful movements, careful pauses. He was skilled at his game. But everyone had demons in their wake. The skill came in pulling them out and using those dreary pieces of humanity to get what you wanted.

When I'd developed such a vile opinion of folk, I didn't know.

In the front of the game den the drunken man argued with the woman over the price of entry. He cursed and ranted but paid the price.

I almost turned back to the game when a flick of his hand caught my attention.

I scoffed. His woman asked the game hostess a question, and during the

distraction, the man deftly slipped his hand into the side apron pocket of the hostess and took back the coin purse he'd slipped in moments ago. To balance the weight, he managed to replace the purse with a pebble all in one sleight of hand.

As if he sensed my stare, the man looked across the game floor. He winked again, then pocketed his coin purse.

If I truly had any honor for my position at the palace, I'd report the thief. But I said nothing, and turned my watch back to Nidhug, choosing to actively ignore the man and his pretty companion. They unnerved me, and I wanted to be free of them swiftly.

For three hands Luca and I played. Luca never lifted his head enough for anyone at the table to catch a glimpse of his face.

If he were a typical Hypnotik, he might be able to create an illusion to hide his face and be rid of the smelly jacket. But Luca's mesmer would be of little use here. He bordered on an Anomali Kind of Hypnotik since his mesmer took illusions of others. Almost like he borrowed a memory folk had of themselves, then he could create the whole bleeding image even from lengths away.

Didn't matter now. I'd observed what I needed and could free him of sitting in a constant hunch. With my elbow I jabbed his ribs, then dropped my game chips onto the table. "I've had all I can take."

Nidhug laughed from a place deep in his belly, rolling a silver pence between his thumb and finger. "Lasted longer than most new faces. Come back when you've licked your wounds, my friends."

I rose and took a longer route from the game den to avoid another accidental glance at the unsettling thief and his woman.

Outside, Luca tossed the hat, jacket, and stretched his neck. "Well? See what you needed to see?"

There wasn't a point in lying. He knew I was searching for leverage I could use against the fae. "He cheats."

Luca lifted his brows. "Didn't notice. How can you be sure?"

"It's swift and hardly noticeable unless one is looking for it." I demonstrated what I'd seen the fae do at the table.

By the end, Luca barked a laugh. "Hells, Kase. If you wanted to, I think you could make a fine thief."

I was not like the lowest slime of the kingdom, like the woman or Hagen Strom. But there was a heady desire that wished I was.

“What now?” Luca asked.

“Nothing. I’ve done what I set out to do.”

It was not all I’d do, but the next step couldn’t be done with Luca. I anticipated him to question me, but he shrugged and went in the direction of the trade square.

“Come on then,” he said. “Let us look around a bit. For my absence I ought to buy my maj something pretty. Maybe then she won’t squawk at me like I’m still pissing in my pants.”

We maneuvered around the trade carts. I kept a step back, quietly watching for sight of the fae leaving the game den early. If I’d judged the stains on his fingertips from the ink on the rune pieces correctly, Nidhug was a frequenter of the hall until at least dusk.

Luca stopped at a woodcarver’s cart and praised his work on a new model of longship with a narrower keel. Through the haze in my head, I did recall Luca Grym had a mighty fascination with anything nautical.

While they spoke, my gaze drifted over the neighboring carts. Two carts down, a hawker rang a little silver bell, drawing my attention to his cart. Once I noticed him, he propped one foot on his stool, grinned, and lit an herb roll.

There was nothing particularly intriguing about his cart, but a strange desire to go to the man took hold. I left Luca with the woodcarver and drifted toward the cart.

On my approach, the hawker tossed his herb roll and smoothed his tunic. Another man stood beside his space, inspecting rows of charms on leather chains, or copper medallions on burnished metal bands. I avoided the other customer and studied the charms.

While I perused, the street hawker waved away the lingering smoke from his herb roll and adjusted his oversized canvas jacket.

“Good quality,” he said when I lifted a white necklace. “Beaded from the shells of Furen beaches.”

I doubted any of the ratty pieces of jewelry were imported from an oversea region.

The hawker kept peeling his pale eyes off his cart to me. A sharp tang of fear teased my tongue, but not fear of me. His fear grew on my behalf, as if he feared *for* me.

What in the hells?

Worse still, the more I studied the hawker, the more his face grated on my

brain. As if we'd interacted before, but I could not drag the memory from the haze.

"This is an interesting piece, *Herr* Hob," the first customer said as he turned around.

My heart jolted, and I tipped my chin in respect at once. "Lord Strom. I did not recognize you."

Jens Strom was a trusted nobleman. Runes marked his cheekbones, and a thick ridge of intricate braids carved down the center of his skull.

Many folk didn't understand why House Strom remained in such favored position with the Black Palace.

I did not think it fair to dismiss a strong force as House Strom merely because the eldest son was born rotten. Jens remained loyal, even if his son, Hagen, had been the cause of all the strife at the masquerade. In truth, Jens had been the one to give up his son's name, to admit his daughter had been slaughtered, and to demand his son be brought to justice.

His eyes brightened at the sight of me. "Kase, pleasant surprise finding you out here."

The hawker snorted, as if he knew something, but he went quiet when Jens flashed him a swift glare.

Strange for a nobleman like Jens to use the given names of any servant, Alver or not, but since the Masque av Aska I could not recall a time when Jens Strom called me anything different.

"There you are." Luca appeared at my side. "I'd been planning on showing you this cart, but you found it on your own."

"Yes. Was nearly going to *close* since I expected more to do a bit earlier than now," the Hawker said with a bite to his tone.

Luca chuckled. "Glad you were patient then, *Herr* Hob. Oh, Lord Strom —" Luca paused, eyes wide, as if the sight of Jens Strom had stunned him silent. Odd. They interacted enough through councils at the Black Palace.

Jens Strom held a high position, one most folk didn't know. He was the Master of Ceremonies for the Masque av Aska.

I only knew because . . . well, I didn't know how I knew, but I did.

"What brings you to the trade square?" Luca asked.

"Business," Jens said. "Perhaps a touch of curiosity. I was just telling Hob these pieces have intrigued me."

Jens held up two twine necklaces, each with a wooden charm on the end. One appeared to be a crude bird. A raven perhaps. The other, a weathered

rose bud. The edges were chipped on some ridges, and smooth on others. Hardly expert craftsmanship, and it made little sense why Jens would find either piece interesting, yet I could not look away either.

“Ah, yes. One of a kind.” Hob cleared his throat. His words sounded too rote. Almost rehearsed, and I did not trust him for it. “Only one of each made. Hand carved. A gods’ raven and a mountain rose.”

Jens released the rose charm and studied the raven.

My gaze followed the rose. The sight of it stirred a hot spark of desire deep in my chest. Hells. Never had I wanted something more. To merely touch it, study it.

“You seem taken with the rose, Kase,” Jens said.

“Yes,” Luca said, smirking. “You no longer look so dreary.”

I blinked through the stun and stepped away from the cursed rose. Such an ugly, poorly crafted thing.

I clasped my hands behind my back and lifted my chin. “No, My Lords. Merely inspecting the . . . unusual quality.”

I pierced the hawker in a glare as though my suffocating desire to claim the rose was his fault alone.

By the hells, my hands trembled in a fight not to reach for the damn thing. It was nothing but a chip of wood, carved by someone without skill, and tied to a rough piece of twine that looked like it’d been found in a waste pile.

My teeth ground together. “We ought to continue on.”

“Right. Perhaps we’ll return later, Hob,” Luca said as we walked away.

I’d be wise to keep walking. It was nothing but a horrid attempt at wood carving. It was not my place to—

“How much for it?” My voice came out sharp as jagged glass.

Hob startled and looked over his shoulder. I waited for the stun, the fear, the hate, but he—*hells*—he smiled.

“For the mountain rose?” Hob clicked his tongue. “Two copper pieces.”

“Two? For that?”

He lifted one shoulder and let it drop with a sigh. “If you don’t want it, let it go.”

I wanted it. Damn the hells, I wanted the wretched thing terribly, and it made little sense to me. Despite all rationale, I dipped my fingers into the drawstring pouch on my belt and removed two copper pence, tossing them onto the cart.

Jens grinned. “I think I’ll take the second piece. The raven. My grounds

master's son has a fascination with ravens."

A swift nod was my only acknowledgement.

My stomach had tangled in heavy knots. I gripped the rose charm tightly in my fist as sweat beaded my brow. This was not the first time my world began to spin. Most episodes began when a strange instinct took hold, like the draw to an ugly wooden rose, or when I first woke in the mornings after a sunset-haired thief overtook my dreams.

Here, in the trade square, surrounded by nobility, I would not give up the strange reaction to the rose.

Hob lifted the coppers and tapped them to his forehead. "A pleasure trading with you, My Lord." He bent a bit at the waist toward Jens, then looked to me. "And with you, Nightrender."

Like a hot barb, the word struck me in the center of the chest. My jaw tightened, so each word to follow came out dark and low. "That is not my title, you fool."

"My sincerest apologies. I must've been thinking of someone else."

Luca gripped my shoulder. "We should be going. I'm afraid I've been absent from the palace too long, and Kase has a long night ahead."

Dammit. Nidhug. The bleeding rose charm had distracted me from waiting for the fae to abandon his game. Sunset would be a few clock tolls away still, but I would be waiting.

I'd settled on the idea until it struck me that I'd never told Luca my plans. How did he know I would return later that night? I wanted to question him, but all my focus was spent on keeping my head straight.

"Pleasant morning, Lord Strom. Hob, until next time." Luca tipped his head and strode away from the cart.

I was lost in a fog, so I might have imagined the look the two men shared. The sort of look folk gave when they both knew something and did not wish anyone else to know.

"Do you know him?" I asked Luca. My skin prickled. Something was strange about the entire greeting in the square.

"Only in passing. We've spoken a few times about gems and jewelry."

I had no reason not to believe him, but part of me . . . didn't. The rose, the hawker, the name Nightrender—all of it pummeled against my skull like a beast trying to break free. Each day seemed to bring something new that set off the storm inside. My thumb dragged over the rough surface of the rose charm. The mere touch seemed to tug on the end of what little control I had

left.

I flicked my eyes to Luca. He was turned away, but it seemed intentional, like he didn't want to meet my gaze.

My fists clenched and unclenched more than once, and I forced the idea that Luca Grym might be lying to me far back in my head.

For now.

I could not go on living in such a way where every memory made little sense, where every day I despised the folk I was supposed to serve to the end.

I was unraveling; the hate inside grew potent, heady, almost dangerous.

And I was bleeding helpless to stop it.

THE MEMORY THIEF

“Gnawing off your own thumb will not make him arrive sooner.” Raum laughed and folded his arms over his chest. “Already told you we saw him. He’s with Luca, still bright and shiny.”

I lowered my eyes to the thumbnail between my teeth. True enough, I’d bitten off nearly half the nail, and was close to drawing blood.

“It’s well after midday,” I said, shielding my eyes as I glanced to the sky. Already evening shadows were covering a few of the carts and cottages at the base of the peaks.

“He said he would be back by now,” I said, pacing on the back stoop of Dryck’s alehouse.

“Have a little faith, lovey.” Raum inspected his fingernails as if bored. “You’re experiencing what we call action nerves. Happens whenever we finally put a plan in motion. It’ll pass, and soon you will realize all the fretting and gnawing off thumbs was for nothing.”

I hugged my middle, hardly as confident as Raum.

This was more than the first step. Somewhere deep inside I knew—today was a pivotal mark. The moment I’d learn if there was a chance to see his face again, to hear his guarded laugh, to feel his touch again, or if he’d slipped out of reach entirely.

My face scrunched into a tight grimace against the burn of tears. Dammit. I could not fall apart. I could not lose my head. Too much was at stake, and tears would not bring Kase Eriksson back to me.

Action. Cunning. Schemes. Those would give the Nightrender his only chance to be free of the Black Palace.

“You’ll tell me if you see him coming?”

Raum lifted his frosty eyes, a gentle twist of a grin in the corner of his mouth. "Mal, I will tell you."

He gave me a reassuring smile before he returned to his place to keep watch. I stepped back, ashamed for giving up the desperation I could not dampen. On the final step, I struck a broad chest.

Gunnar. The Kryv was younger by a handful of turns, and towered over me much like his father.

My brother's son had transformed since Kase's capture. He'd suffered in his young life, but being born into captivity in the Northern Kingdom had left a severe distaste for chains and manipulation in Gunnar Strom.

Out of the Kryv, it seemed Gunnar fought the hardest to find solutions in finding the Nightrender. He hardly rested. Read every piece of parchment alongside Niklas. Sparred until midnight, and practiced his growing mesmer on anyone who was willing to give up their free will for a time.

To know at a mere sixteen turns, he'd fought beside the Kryv and his Northern folk to gain freedom, well, Gunnar had become a constant ballast in my storm.

"Mal, you're trembling," he whispered.

"Gunnar," I said. His name was heavy on my tongue. The same as every breath, every blink, every bleeding movement was like dragging stones by my ankles and wrists. "How am I to do this? Each day gets worse, like I am drowning. I spoke big words the night of the masque, but how am I to lead us through this?"

"That's the thing, Mal. You're not alone here."

"You should lead. You know what it is to be a royal."

"Hardly."

"Your mother was raised a princess, true?"

He nodded with a pinched smile. "Yes, that's true."

"I am no royal, and I could use one I trust with my life. Will you stand with me, help me? You've seen folk rise against unmatched armies, you've fought beside them. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I've become weak. Thoughts of him consume me, to the point I cannot think straight. Let alone plot and take a kingdom."

Gunnar listened without a twitch to his face.

I pressed a hand to my heart, rubbing a new boiling ache, and closed my eyes when he rested his hands on the tops of my shoulders.

"I am with you," he said. "We are family, after all, *Queen*."

I snorted. “You should talk, *Prince*. I am certain you have more sway with your connections than the thief who unfortunately fits a glass ring.”

Gunnar surprised me by pulling me into his chest, holding me in an embrace. My face scrunched in the pain I refused to release, and I held him back.

His head dropped beside mine. “My favorite thing about you is that you are a queen of thieves. But should you need guidance, I am here. I will share with you what I know, help you plan from what I learned in the North.” He tightened his hold around my shoulders and lowered his voice to a whisper. “He would not allow you to give up, you know he wouldn’t. And if you need me to straighten your spine in his absence, I will do so.”

I nodded and pulled back, wiping my eyes.

“Good?” Gunnar asked.

“Good.”

“Your resolve comes with good timing,” Raum shouted over his shoulder. I didn’t realize he’d heard. He winked, the silver of his eyes catching the sunlight. “Our friend is returning.”

My heart flipped upside down in my chest.

I did not wait another breath before I darted into the street. I flicked dingy tunics and drying trousers hanging from rope between cottages and tenements. At the bend in the road, I stumbled over a raised cobblestone, and was caught by a pair of strong hands.

His tunic was curled tightly in my grip before the sweet air of his hickory herb rolls hit my nose. “Hob. What happened? Did you see him?”

Jakoby Hob snorted and shoved my hands off his body. “I’ve been walking all morning with this cart. May I have a moment before you start pawing at me?”

“Hob!” My voice went too shrill. “What happened?”

The bastard had the nerve to pause and light one of his herb rolls. In the weeks since the masque, Hob looked less like a crook, and more like a warrior. He’d braided the sides of his head in silver beads and inked runes on the tops of his hands and forehead.

A subtle nudge, whether he wanted me to notice or not, that he was taking up arms for a queen who did not have a crown.

Hells, the man infuriated me, but I could admit I loved Hob like I loved the Kryv. Well, I did until he decided to return and be a bleeding, tedious bastard.

Hob paused, flicking his storm cloud eyes in my direction as he drew in a long breath. My fists curled at my sides. Inge, his lover, would still love him with one eye. I was sure of it. She already carried his little in her belly. He didn't need two eyes to be a father and a lover.

When Hob glanced at my face he laughed. "Hells, Malin. You look ready to carve out my throat."

"I'm simply looking for the best spot."

A gentle hand came to my shoulder. With a start, I wheeled around. Hagen gave me a wink and pulled me back. To keep me from skinning the man, or to give us room to speak, I wasn't sure.

"She doesn't mean it," Hagen said.

My brother's face was fuller with improved health, and the russet color of his beard was glossy instead of dull and dead as it had been when he'd been imprisoned at the Masque av Aska. He was nearly all of himself again. But there remained a somber pain in his eyes.

I had no doubt he ached for his lover and daughter who remained across the Fate's Ocean, unaware of his freedom. A request made by Hagen to Gunnar and me.

I could understand his reasons to keep them in ignorance. Gunnar had made it clear if his mother learned of Hagen's freedom, she would rush to him. It was all Hagen could do to keep at least two more people he loved out of harm's way.

Gunnar did not agree, but thus far, he'd obeyed his father's request.

Hob grinned at my brother. "I'm sure Malin means every threat to kill me. But I think I'm safe since she is looking for my report."

My jaw clenched as Hagen and Hob began the walk up the back hill to the alehouse. They chatted about nothing important, and I was beginning to think these fools were sent to torment me through every day of my existence.

"I'm waiting to report to everyone, Mal," Hob said once we'd arrived near the hog pens and trees at the back of Dryck's place. "I can feel your venom in the back of my head, but I hate repeating myself."

Raum was still at the watchpoint, and Gunnar and Lynx stood at his back.

"Well, you're here now, with enough of us to hear," I said. "So, give the bleeding report."

A smile played at the corner of Hob's mouth. "As planned, I saw him. Although, Luca was terribly late. Didn't matter, I suppose, since the best part is he came to me without the princeling's guidance. I rang Inge's bell, and he

sauntered over. Almost like he recognized me.”

My chest tightened. “And?”

“And he purchased a particular piece from my cart. A wooden rose.”

To keep from crying out in relief, in hope, in something more than the thick dread I’d worn for weeks, I clamped my teeth until I thought my mouth might start to bleed.

“He chose it himself?” Hagen asked.

“He did.” Hob pinched the herb roll between his teeth and grinned.

“You played the part? Said what needed to be said?” Gunnar twirled one of his arrows between his fingers, eyes narrowed.

“Called him the Nightrender, as I was told,” Hob said. “Thought he was going to piss himself, that or strangle me. Seemed rather conflicted on which way to go.”

“So, what does this mean?” I asked, my voice too breathless, too wispy. “Is it working?”

“It means there is conflict in him.” Niklas stepped out of the alehouse, joining the gathering around the back stoop.

“Nik,” I said. “You’re back already?”

Niklas and Junius had gone to follow Luca if the plan to get Kase into the trade square was successful. They would be watchers, protectors, since we hadn’t known how Kase would react when his rose necklace was tossed back in his face.

The Falkyn pushed through the group. His thick, dark hair was tousled and on end. The top clasps on his shirt were open, and his playful eyes were a bit sunken. I doubted Niklas had slept more than four tolls each night since the masquerade.

“He did something I didn’t expect. Luca will likely be able to give more details when he returns tonight, but I had to tell you.” A devious grin pulled up one corner of Niklas’s mouth. “He’s working a scheme. I swear to the gods, it was as if the Nightrender had returned the way he studied his bleeding mark.”

Niklas dove into a rapid retelling of the hidden game hall. The calm, cruel demeanor of Kase the entire time. Niklas said Kase caught him picking a pocket and said nothing.

“The Nightrender was the only one attentive enough to catch my brilliant fingers at work,” Niklas said, laughing as he slumped against the back of the alehouse.

“What’s the scheme?” Gunnar asked.

“Don’t know. We’ll need to ask Luca.” Niklas turned back to me. “Malin, we need to keep this going. Keep pushing. He needs to see you.”

“This is what I’ve been saying!” I held my hands out, exasperated.

“A rose charm is lengths away from tossing Malin into his sights when we damn well know he has been twisted to hate her,” Hagen argued.

“There are ways to do it without putting her in harm’s way and you know it. Luca is willing, and Malin is practically gnashing her teeth. It’ll take time anyway.”

“I think it’s dangerous.”

“No time to have cold feet, big brother,” Niklas said. “We do this, or we don’t. Simple as that.”

“We’re doing this,” I said before Hagen could protest. “Whatever it takes.”

“His truth is at war with the manipulation in his head,” Niklas insisted. “Now is the time to keep adding pressure until the shield between truth and lies cracks.”

I gave a stiff nod. For the last two weeks, Niklas had poured over bound parchment books, vellum scrolls, all delivered by Luca from the impressive repository at the Black Palace.

Memory mesmer like Ivar’s was horridly strong, but if we could build on the natural conflict between Kase’s true memories and the manipulation, according to the writings, we might have a chance to pull him back enough for me to step in and steal the false memories from his mind.

I had to hope stealing the memories was possible. Niklas said it seemed as though pieces of that particular part were missing in the sagas and poems, but he kept searching and assuring me that he saw no reason it wouldn’t work.

“So, we keep creating the conflict by tossing bits of the past in his face?” Hagen asked.

“Yes,” said Niklas. “We’ve already waited too long if you ask me, but the bleeding Lord Magnate has been so damn protective of him. Now that Kase is allowed beyond the gates, we must work swiftly and fiercely. We make the moves that’ll cause the most upset to his emotions.”

I held Niklas’s stare. What hope I dared let into my heart wanted nothing more than to believe every word. But there was a heavy doubt creeping up the back of my neck about the entire scheme.

Perhaps I'd lived in this wretched place too long, but when relief came, I was quick to squash it back down with all the reasons Kase might've questioned Hob. As if my heart would not allow me to dare hope too much, not until he was returned to me, not until my hands were on him.

I started to pace. "It is all well and good, but is it enough?"

"It will be," Niklas said. "We need to prepare and be ready to be aggressive."

I hugged my middle, writhing in nerves and anticipation, as I stayed outside once the others filtered into the alehouse.

A tap to my shoulder startled me from the tension clouding my head. Hob held out a small, rolled bit of parchment.

"The response." He folded his arms as I took the parchment, eyes narrowed. "I didn't say this out loud, but in truth, it was your bleeding daj who finally convinced him to pick up the rose."

"Jens was there?"

"He wanted to stick around after he read your missive." Hob shuddered. "The man's bleeding intimidating."

I scoffed. "Yes, he is talented at alarming others."

An unsettling wash of affection for Jens Strom settled in my chest. For so long he'd been the antagonist in my story. Now that the truth was out, how he'd devoted his life to protecting the children of the lost bloodlines, a deep-rooted trust shaped for the man.

The same as he'd protected Hagen, Bard, and me, he was now protecting Kase.

"Thank you for fighting for him. I know I do not always show how much it matters, but it does." I rested a calmer hand on Hob's arm. "What a life we have found for ourselves."

He grinned. "What a life. Some days I almost miss stealing memories. Seems so simple now."

Yes, days when I searched for the ghost of a boy by stealing a few memories seemed rather bland now.

If all went right, we might walk out of this game with the Nightrender, and a kingdom.

8

THE NIGHTRENDER

The skydguard tower was packed with guards returning to drink and sleep off their duties, while the night watch yawned and moaned, taking their places at the towers until the dawn.

I used the crowd to my advantage and slipped through the front doors of the tower, head down, merely another body ready to begin a watch shift. Luca mocked Sabain for mentioning my freedom to move about freely, but in truth, Ivar had imposed strict regulations. For protection, he'd said. But I seemed to be the only Alver who had regulations at all.

I was not to leave the tower after sunset unless I was accompanied by no less than three skydguard or Sabain. Rules I had every intention of breaking tonight.

I needed to move swiftly and needed more bodies. To add more than me to the meet would mean more blades and intimidation. It would mean a better outcome. Beyond Luca there were only two I had an inkling of trust for, and who could wield a blade. The risk would come if I'd misjudged their affection for honor and compliance.

Fear was an emotion always simmering beneath the surface in even the bravest souls. Tonight, I was grateful. Night brought cool winds off the Howl and filled the air with a heavy hint of pine smoke from fires skydguard lit to keep warm. A group of eight guards huddled around one of the fires, and proffered an opportunity to take bits and pieces of their fears—death, failure, darkness—and turn those into shadows until I faded into the night.

Out of sight, I hurried down the curved path to the back gates. An undesirable position for skydguard, but one of low action. The only intruders to strike at the back gates of the palace were rodents and sometimes feral cats

from the township. The sharp drop off into a jagged ravine ten paces away helped secure the back courtyards greater than any blade.

A few torches lit the back lawns and stone pathways through rose gardens. I used the hedges and brambles to keep low until their voices broke the silence. For a moment I simply listened.

“Why do we need to stand here all bleeding night?”

A groan of irritation followed. “To be here in the bleeding morning. We do this every shift.”

“Doesn’t make sense. And Junie cooked up a whole damn pheasant for the others, while Ash was given the honor of packing our meal pouches. Go on, look and see what he sent with us.”

A pause, then a breathy laugh followed.

“Raw oats and fish, Val. Not fish jerky, not pickled herring, just a sliced fish.”

“Ah, give him grace. He’s desperate to be involved.”

The way they went on it was as if they lived in a compound of other people.

Skydguard Tower was not the main residence for most of the guards. Merely a place to refresh and give the skyds a place to rest during their watch duties. Most took up post for three nights, then returned to their homes beyond the gates for two.

I took a deliberate step over a twig to force the crack. Vali and Raum whipped around. The two guards held little fear. Truth be told, I suspected the bit of fear I took to shroud my eyes in black came from Raum’s aversion to the meal pouch in his hand, nothing more.

At the sight of me, their faces twisted into grins, nearly identical in their cunning.

“Pleasant night to lurk in the shadows, My Liege,” Raum said, bending at the waist in a mocking bow.

Sabain would demand I cut off his thumbs, but I rather liked the brevity. When my mesmer devoured fear and terror, at times it was all I felt. There were few who could behave like I breathed and bled the same as anyone else, and it mattered.

“I had the same thought,” I said. “Tell me, whose brän did you piss in to get the back gate post?”

Vali frowned. “Seems the Benevolent has some pull with the skydguard lord.”

“Ah, and since Lord Luca would not dismiss you—”

“Bastard—I mean, the Benevolent—had us placed here,” Raum said. “Not that we mind. So long as we’re here to keep watch on things.”

“And if you weren’t here to keep watch on things for, let’s say, a clock toll, how disappointed would you be?”

Raum and Vali shared a look with each other, then almost in synchronized motions stared at me.

“Is there, uh, is there a place you’d rather us be for said clock toll?” Raum flicked each finger one by one.

“It would depend.”

Vali arched a brow. “On what?”

“On your aversion to disobeying your guard orders.” I paused, gauging their expressions. When they revealed no aversions, I went on. “I have need of extra bodies and blades to stand with me during a . . . meet with a new acquaintance, I suppose you could say.”

“Great gods.” Raum’s eyes brightened. “Are you taking us on a *scheme*?”

For a moment I worried the man might fidget straight through his skin the way he trembled with anticipation.

“Everyone uses the word scheme,” I said. “No scheme, merely a conversation.”

“A controlled conversation though?” Vali winked. “One you lead to give you a desired outcome?”

I tilted my head to one side. “One way to put it. If you would rather not leave your post—”

“We’d rather,” Raum said, tossing the skin with antlers he wore on his head in a breath. “Hells, we’d rather. Come on, Val.”

In truth, it was simpler than I thought to convince the two skydguard. Even the most indolent guards held enough respect for Ivar’s word they would hesitate to abandon their duty.

I held up a hand. “Before you follow, know this: if you speak of this to anyone, I will kill you.”

Raum let out a blissful moan. “By the gods, I’ve missed the threats. Like a sweet melody to my bleeding ears.”

He grunted when Vali rammed his elbow into his ribs. I scrutinized both men for a long pause. They had to be a bit mad, a little lost in their heads. The way they spoke it was as if they didn’t realize they were actually skydguard.

No mistake, tonight a few lunatic guards were exactly what I needed.



ONLY ONE TALLOW candle brightened the entrance to the hidden gambling den. Behind a shrub, thick with thorny branches, I crouched with Raum and Vali.

In the short distance into the township, I'd discovered Vali moved like a summer breeze, soundlessly drifting from shadow to shadow.

With Raum, the man found any excuse to move. If we stopped to cover, he'd stretch his arms, rock on his toes, or crack his knuckles until we were on our way again. His long strides were deliberate, and even if he did not glide the same as Vali, his steps were silent, confident. Like they'd both been designed for darkness.

In such a confined place behind the shrub, he was still but for his tongue, and every few breaths he'd make a clicking noise behind his teeth.

"What's the move?" Vali asked as patrons filtered out of the gambling den. Folk had transformed from illegal game players to worshippers in dark cloaks and charms with symbols used to call upon the gods. Each man or woman would pause and kiss a post of runes as a sign of respect to the deities.

All a ruse, no doubt, to keep curious skydguard from taking a harder look inside.

"We wait," I said.

Raum crouched beside me. "But are we picking a pocket, bribing, threatening, possibly slitting a throat?"

I locked him in a narrowed stare. "What kind of skydguard are you? Hells, we're not damn thieves and cutthroats."

"Obviously. Thieves—they're wretches, the lot of them." Raum's lip twitched as he cleared his throat. "I'd like to cut the crooks at the knees, then hang them by the wrists over the walls of the Black Palace because I hate them so much."

"Raum," Vali snapped, voice rough and low. "Shut. Up."

"Right." He hit my shoulder with the back of his hand, like we were boon companions. "We'll follow your lead."

Bringing them might've been a poor decision. "Just stay back and let me

do the talking.”

Raum almost looked disappointed at the notion we might do nothing but talk. I had plans to do a lot more but made no effort to explain. Our meet was beginning.

The door of the gambling den opened once more and Nidhug staggered out. A throaty hiccup crawled from the back of his mouth as he offered the rune post a lazy salute, then laughed.

Hells, if any honorable skydguard were close, the fae would give away the entire illegal operation by his fumbling feet and the slurred tune rolling off his tongue.

I tossed a small stone, so it landed a pace in front of the fae. Nidhug paused, studied the pebble, then glanced at the trees and shrubs. His goat-eyes widened as he drank up the darkness, searching.

The quick jolt of adrenaline from the surprise was enough. Mesmer chilled in my veins as I reached for his slice of fear and took it for myself. After Nidhug had looked up at the trees the thick darkness of the forest trails had unnerved him. Soon his fear bled into a cloak of shadows over my shoulders, my palms; it drank up the whites of my eyes.

Raum squeaked in delight and shook Vali’s shoulders. Clearly, the sight of my mesmer thrilled him. His white grin broke through the night, but he managed to keep his mouth shut.

I stepped through the branches, intentionally snapping twigs and causing a stir. Nidhug’s fear deepened to the silky rush of terror.

When the skin prickled and hair lifted on the arms, when the pulse quickened to the point it deafened any other sound but the swift *thud, thud* in the skull, those moments were when mesmer flowed through me as naturally as blood in my veins.

I deepened the black over my eyes. The man was terrified of a knife to the chest. A slight tilt to my head and I urged the darkness to pierce his chest, simulating the bite of a blade.

Nidhug cried out and stumbled to his knees.

I chuckled darkly, pleased when Vali and Raum fell into step on either shoulder like we’d done this together a thousand times. The fae pressed a hand to his chest, wincing against the pain, and whimpered.

My fingers curled around his red hair. I wrenched his head back and took a great deal of pleasure at the bright shock in his gaze when he met the blackness of mine.

“Hello, Nidhug.”

“Wh-Who are you?”

“Who I am entirely depends on you,” I said. A simple flick of my finger and mesmer dug deeper into his chest.

Nidhug cried out and tried to shake free of my grip. I only tightened my fist around his greasy braids.

“I can be a friend.” I darkened my tone. “Or foe. The choice is yours.”

“What, what do you want?”

“Did you think your scam would go on with no one taking notice?”

“I don’t know what you’re—” Nidhug cried out again when I yanked on his hair.

I dug my fingernails into his scalp as I drew my lips close to his ear. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Skimming game chips with those clever fingers. I wonder what the master of the den would do if he knew you’d been cheating his coffers. We both know he does not abide the law. No doubt your debt would be paid in blood.”

With my free hand, I locked one of his fingers in a grip between my thumb and first finger. One swift tug to either side and the bone would snap.

“They might take your fingers.” I wrenched his finger until a distinct crack overpowered his whimpers. Nidhug sobbed and doubled over. I released the bent finger and withdrew a knife from my baldric strap. In slow strokes I dragged the point along the bridge of his cheek, up the sharp tapered point of his ear. “Then again, a fae without his ears would be a sight to see. Perhaps they’d take the tips, boil them down, and sell them to Elixists for their magical properties. Fae skin is magic, yes?”

“No!” he cried when the cool edge of the knife pressed against the tip of his ear. “No, please. I’ll stop skimming the chips, swear it. I’ll never show my bleeding face here again.”

Raum and Vali chuckled to each other. I couldn’t keep a grin from spreading over my lips when the two skydguard crowded Nidhug from behind, keeping him close to me, and breaking him down a little more.

I gripped Nidhug’s narrow chin, forcing him to look at me. “In truth, my friend, I care little if you’re skimming chips. I’m fascinated with how it’s done, though. Quite a trick the way you take two chips and manage to flick one up the cuff of your sleeve. Takes thinking like a thief to pull it off.”

“I swear it, I don’t steal anything else. Swear it.”

“We’ll pretend to believe that,” Raum said.

I grinned. “Skimming chips takes sly fingers, so I wonder what other uses you might find for such a skill.”

I closed my fist and ended the sharp jab of mesmer against his heart. Nidhug gasped in relief and slumped forward.

When he lifted his eyes again, they were red and wet. “What are . . . what are you saying?”

“I have need of a sly fae who knows the Hemlish hillsides.”

Nidhug blinked several times before he croaked out a single word. “You . . . you wish me to find something in Hemlig?”

“What do you know of protected children? They’d be hidden away, likely well-guarded, and have some importance to the Black Palace.”

From the corner of my eye, Raum and Vali shared another one of their looks. I was beginning to think they could speak with each other through their minds.

Nidhug dragged his slender fingers through the mess of hair I’d pulled free of the pleats. “Children?”

“Two to be precise.”

“I-I-I there are so many children in Hemlig, how could I begin to narrow down to two?”

“Disappointing,” I said with a sigh. “Not even an attempt to try. I did not take you for a man who gave up so easily.” I flicked my eyes to Vali. “You’ll inform the mistress of the worship house gambling den this fae is skimming —”

“Wait!” Nidhug dug his fingers into my forearm. “Give me a bleeding moment to think. Hidden littles, you say?”

I didn’t know anything about these targets I was to assassinate beyond what the Lady Magnate had said, which amounted to nothing. But I could make wise assumptions.

“With importance to the Black Palace. Naturally they would be protected.”

Nidhug licked his lips and nodded. “All right, all right.” He staggered to his feet and began to pace. “There . . . there is a skydguard camp in the high valleys. Say they’re protecting the mountain passes from smugglers, but no one really believes it. There are a few historic estates in the valleys with rumors of fae—my Southern folk—being locked up there.”

“Fae? Not children?” My stomach twisted.

“Never seen any, but last turn there . . . there was a star shower.”

“Why would a star shower matter to me?”

“Because it wasn’t an average star shower. Seemed very . . . faeish.”

“He’s talking nonsense,” said Raum.

“I’m not,” Nidhug insisted. “What d’you know about fae, skyd? In the Southern Kingdom we’re masters of sun and moon glamour.”

“That’s your mesmer?” Vali asked.

“Aye. The South is divided into courts based on glamour ability. The Court of Stars—they’re masters of divination and astrology. Some even say the royals of the courts can send signals through the night sky, like a magical star shower.”

By the hells. I schooled my expression into something flat. “You think one of your star fae is locked away in this valley?”

“Not saying that. Could be littles, could be both for all I know,” Nidhug grumbled. “But the Court of Stars lost a princess last turn. Niece to the High Queen. She was said to have taken a pilgrimage after reading a message from the Norns in the sky. She never returned. Lost to the Fate’s Ocean. Dead. Unless . . .”

The knot in my stomach added pressure against my ribs. “You think a region would take a foreign royal prisoner?”

Nidhug laughed with bitterness. “Of course. It has happened in the North, the South. The West is full of magicians and dark magic; they’d simply slaughter anyone who crossed their borders. Why not this bleeding kingdom?”

The idea seemed too outlandish to consider, but I did have an interest in the valley skydguard camp. An entire camp to guard backroad trade routes seemed excessive.

“You’ll find out what you can about this skydguard camp, and you will investigate if there are two littles and, if so, where they are located.”

“I can’t just stroll into a skydguard camp and start asking questions.”

“No imagination,” Raum pouted.

I took a handful of Nidhug’s tunic in my grip, pulling the fae against my chest. Nidhug let out a quivering breath when he stared into the deadened black of my eyes. “You were clever enough to skim from the gambling den, I have all the faith in the world that you will be clever enough to find out what I want to know. Meet back right here by the next full moon.”

“That’s in a fortnight!”

“Yes.”

“I’ll need to go to Hemlig. That takes time.”

“A day and a half with good wind. Plenty of time to sniff out information and return.” I released him with an added shove, so the fae fell backward onto the dirt pathway. Before he gathered himself and stood, I lowered to my haunches. “If you try to disappear, I swear to you, I will find you. One letter signed by Ivar will be sent in every direction, to every kingdom, and leave you without a home. A wanted fae across the Fate’s Ocean.”

“There he is,” Vali whispered.

I didn’t know what he meant, nor did I care, my next words came as naturally as the air in my lungs. “I have marked you now, Nidhug, and I never lose sight of my marks.”

Nidhug cradled his broken finger and shifted on his feet. “And if I bring you what you want?”

“Our deal will be done, and your skimming will go with me to the Otherworld.”

“How can I trust you to keep your bargain? You’re favored at the Black Palace, and you’re here with two skyds. You won’t think twice about tossing me into a cell.”

“Consider yourself a lucky man. We care more about this information than we do a few stolen game chips at an illegal den,” I said, taking a step back. “Until the full moon, Nidhug.”

I turned to leave. Raum and Vali made a move to follow, but both pointed at the fae, silently threatening him in their own way.

My mind reeled in questions. Was there a connection to the fae princess and the littles Britta Grym wanted dead? Did Ivar know her ploy? The back of my skull burned in a spreading ache by the time we made it to the back walls. As if they sensed my need for silence, Raum and Vali had said nothing the entire journey.

“I do not need to remind you both, should I hear of you speaking of this meet to anyone, I will kill you, and I doubt anyone would miss you much.”

“Hurtful,” Raum said, hand to his heart. “You would miss us greatly. I assure you.”

“We know how to keep quiet,” Vali said. “But I hope you’ll consider keeping us in your scheme should the fae have the balls to return.”

I smirked. “I’ll consider it.”

“Where in the hells have you two been?” A hoarse voice rang out behind the gates.

Once again, Raum and Vali promptly covered their chins with their half-masks, as if anyone taking note of their mouths was a shared fear.

As soon as the thought hit my skull, the icy trickle of their fear sank into my chest. I gave each guard a look to figure what had put them on edge.

By the gods. The sapphire blue had altered the brightness in Raum's eyes, and Vali's looked more like a glowing lavender than the dark warm brown.

I hardly made sense of my days, but this was too strange. There was something to the differences to their damn eyes. Something intentional. I wanted to press them, but held my tongue as a man wearing a gray wolf mantle over his broad shoulders stomped down the path from the back gates watch point. It was not until he closed a bit of distance that I recognized him. Eero, lord of the inner tower skydguard.

He boasted nobleman runes high on his cheeks, and his pale hair had been shorn on the sides, but it did not change the truth. The man was a former thief who now guided the Lord Magnate's guards in defenses against the unregistered mesmer users of underbelly guilds.

Eero was one bit of pleasure I found in dark days.

Not because I liked the man. No. I enjoyed his presence due to the heady, suffocating shock of fear radiating from him whenever I met his eye. Naturally, in moments as this I held his gaze, and allowed misty black to coat my eyes, saying nothing.

He fought desperately to keep those shoulders square, that spine straight, but in the end, Eero always bent. Always fled from me like I might cut out his tongue in front of everyone.

I stepped in front of Raum and Vali, unable to hide my grin when Eero skidded to a stop at the sight of me. "Ah, Lord Eero."

The two guards at my back shifted. Raum clenched and unclenched his fists. A vein popped in the side of Vali's head. Clearly, they despised their commanding lord.

"M-Malevolent," Eero said, a quiver in his voice just focused enough I could catch it. He drifted his attention to the two guards. "What are you doing out here?"

"I could ask the same for you."

"They were not at their post." He pointed at Raum and Vali without looking at them.

"Under direction from me."

"You?" Eero straightened his shoulders. "You do not command

skydguard.”

“No, but I serve the Lord Magnate, and he requested his favored Alver have the protection of his guard. Do you naysay Ivar?”

Eero fumbled with his words for a few breaths. “I did not realize the Lord Magnate had an order.”

“Why would you? He does not answer to you, nor do I. So, you will not punish either Raum or Vali for doing their duty.”

“Dammit.” Raum cursed under his breath.

I glanced at the two skydguard. Their attention was firmly locked on Eero. Truth be told, his demeanor had changed. Like cold stone, not a muscle twitched in his face.

“Raum and Vali?” He spoke their names in a cruel reverence. Hushed and frigid.

Bad blood between them perhaps? But if he knew them before, he would’ve recognized them. What was it about their names that brought Eero to pause?

I had no reason to harbor loyalty to the guards, yet deep in my gut I felt an unwavering protectiveness for both.

For the sheer enjoyment of tormenting the man, I butted my chest with Eero’s. A heady fear of my presence caused a swell of creative ways to torment him. Fear of my appearance helped blacken my eyes, added a sunken look to my face, and darkened my voice. “Leave them be. They have my protection tonight. Now, I’m sure there are duties you ought to tend to, and I fear if you do not step away from me, you may forget to breathe, *My Lord*.”

So simple.

The man was about to piss himself.

Eero cleared his throat and glared at the two guards. “See to your post, and I must say, I am so glad to know your names.”

The itch festered like an infection in the back of my head. A blackened memory, a thought on the tip of my tongue, and I could not bleeding reach it. There was a piece where each man—Vali, Raum, even Eero—fit within the shadow in my head.

As always, the bile and sick burned the longer I tried to break it apart.

“Your help was appreciated,” I muttered to the guards once Eero stormed away. “I’ll see to it that fool does not place you on stable duty.”

Raum tugged down his mask, and the light shifted in his gaze until his blue eyes looked closer to silver again. “Well, if we do not meet again

anytime soon, it was an honor to stand with you tonight.”

I offered him a bemused look. “Unless you plan to die in the next two nights before your next watch, I’ve no doubt we’ll meet again.”

Raum and Vali smiled, but it wasn’t filled with the same easiness as they had before, and I had the sinking feeling they were right—they would not be at their posts again.

9

THE MEMORY THIEF

The Ruse had grown dim. I preferred the silence and stoked the fire pit behind the house with a broken branch.

A slight hint of cooked onions still hung in the air from the stew Dryck had served. More laughter than before had filled the alehouse tonight, as if the Kryv and Falkyns had been freed of a burden. To know the Nightrender had taken the rose left the others singing folk songs, recalling memories from journeys in the Northern Kingdom, of schemes and ploys.

They'd bantered as though we did not have death and blood ahead of us.

I tried to get lost in the revelry, in hope, but until Kase Eriksson was brooding and scheming at my side, the hate inside me for those who took him would grow.

"Sleep would be wise. Encouraged, even." Luca Grym stepped into my solitude.

I narrowed my eyes as he drifted around the fire pit, aimed at the spot beside me on the log. Most folk would slink back into the shadows if they were met with the same venomous glare. Luca seemed to take a bit of pleasure in it.

The second son was pompous, too confident in each bit of this plan, and behaved as if stealing Kase was all a wonderful game for his entertainment. If he considered Kase a true friend, he would do well to show a little unease.

"You look at me like you dream of all the ways I might meet a bloody end." Luca paused two paces from the fallen log. "What is it that brings you to hate me? My name alone cannot be the only thing. If it is, well, you are a rather petty queen."

"Don't call me queen." I stabbed the embers, pointing my glare at the

flames.

“Is that not the end of all this? Should you bring this fight to my father’s gates, you’d better have reason to convince the folk that Ivar does not deserve his power.”

“Then I will reign long enough to get the Nightrender and abdicate the throne to you at the end. Take all the power, I want none of it.”

Luca’s arrogance shifted into something almost pained. His voice lowered as he took the liberty of sitting beside me on the log. This close, I could see the similarities between him and his wretched brother. Both had strong, sharp features, but Luca’s eyes held an intensity like pale fire blazing in the night.

“What?” I snapped when he would not speak, merely gawked like I’d muddled his thoughts.

“Is that why you think I’m here? For power? You think I want the Black Palace as mine?”

I threw my stick into the flames. “I can’t say why you’re truly here.”

“I am here for the same reason as you.”

“Oh, really?” I spun on the log and squared my body to Luca’s. “You expect me to believe you care for him the same as anyone else here? He was your pet as boys. Forced to serve you—”

“No, that—”

“I know,” I interrupted. “The Kryv have told me they were bought and sold to be the guardians of the second son, the forced playmates. You did nothing to help them; they freed themselves. Now, you return to play the hero while you watch him suffer every day, and—”

“Shut up!” Luca’s voice rang through the darkness. Hurt, rough, broken. His eyes simmered in a spark of heat. For a few breaths we allowed silence to surround us. Luca broke his glare and turned his rage to the flames, jaw tight. “With respect, you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Correct me then.”

Luca scoffed and closed his eyes for a few moments before meeting my bitterness with his own. “Yes, my friends were traded Alvers. You think I don’t know that? But the way we met does not change how I feel about them. You must realize that we all are prisoners of our own circumstances at times.”

“Now I suppose you’re going to tell me how you treated them kindly and did what you could to protect them.”

“No. I will never tell you I protected them. Look around, any effort I have made to keep them safe has failed. I’ve failed to protect many and must live with it. I was naïve, too trusting when I made an Alver vow with my father to keep them as mine.”

Luca shot to his feet, hands in his hair. I stared at him, confused. I’d distressed him, and he seemed to be teetering on the brink of control and mania.

“I know he was your friend first,” Luca went on, voice rough. “But he was mine too. He is my greatest, most terrifying friend, and I hope I was one for him much the same. When my father let his Rifiers hurt him, I was there day and night aiding the Mediskis. When my brother and his bastard playmates pummeled me, Kase was there to frighten them off. When . . . when dreams of his girl in the hayloft woke him, I’d be there to listen. I bleeding knew you before I met you because of all the times he spoke of you.”

I bit the inside of my cheek and turned back to the fire. I didn’t want to hear it, not any of it. But Luca Grym was bleeding relentless.

He stood in front of me, blocking my connection to the fire, and waited until I lifted my gaze to his. “I am not here because I want power, Malin Strom. I am here because my friend needs me. But I will do this under Niklas’s guidance. I will do all I can to bring Kase back to reality naturally, the way Nik told us to do. He is the one who has studied the most on this mesmer, and if he says we must move with care, that is how I will move.”

The snap of a branch stirred us from the thick, horribly tense silence between us.

Tree limbs parted as the night watch returned to the back of the alehouse. Morning watch would take their posts. Last night’s watch was made up of mostly Falkyns, but Ash was with them, looking rather proud of himself as he rattled on about the karambit knife given to him from the Nightrender.

He spoke to the only other face not in the Falkyn guild. Dagny. Once sold into the life of a cheer girl, Dagny had become one of the most devoted when it came to retrieving Kase from the Black Palace.

She’d been harmed there, brutalized, and left to suffer in a cheer brothel by the hands of the Heir Magnate. But she was still kind, and now listened to Ash ramble with a weary smile on her face.

Until she caught sight of Luca.

“What are you doing here?” Dagny’s voice was sharp as barbs.

Luca drew in a sharp breath. "I am always here, Dag."

"Dagny to you," she said. Her eyes narrowed, hard and hateful. "You were not due until later."

Luca shifted on his feet. One finger hooked over his thumb, cracking the bone. "Needed to work out a few things with Nik first. I'm just here for the next move."

"Surprised they trust you." Dagny snorted. "You're not one to keep promises, after all."

At her word, Luca's blue eyes snapped in a dangerous fury. His voice turned to ice and slipped out in a sharp, brisk tone. "If you think I've ever stopped looking, you're wrong."

"I stopped believing anything mentioned or said from the Black Palace long ago. Nothing from there has anything redeemable to think about." She looked to me and gave me a curt nod. "Malin. I'll be sleeping but wake me before the move is made."

Without another word, Dagny stomped into the alehouse.

Luca closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

"Care to tell me what animosity lives between you two? I've been watching it for weeks, and if Dagny doesn't trust you, why should I?"

"Because her disdain for me has nothing to do with retrieving Kase, and everything to do with my failure to protect those who mattered. A flaw we've already established, but we can keep bringing up my shortcomings if you would like."

I almost felt sorry for the bastard. He looked a little more broken with Dagny's quick dismissal, and I had an itch of curiosity about their relationship. Not enough to press, but an itch all the same.

Luca shook his head through a sigh. "He is in there, *dännisk* Strom. We will get him back."

I opened my mouth to respond, but stopped when the back door of the Ruse slammed against the wooden lath walls, nearly popping off the old hinges.

Fiske filled the doorway, chest heaving. "We have a problem."

My feet were moving before he finished the thought. Luca right behind me. We rushed into the back office of the alehouse. Gunnar and Lynx were there, along with Niklas and Junius. But it was the two gasping men, tipping back large horns of water that caught my attention.

"Raum, Vali." I dropped to my knees in front of them. Their faces were

coated in sweat and grime. “What is it? You’re supposed to be on watch.”

“We had to . . . get the hells . . . out of there,” Raum said through deep breaths and a few drinks of his horn.

“Eero.”

I turned around at Niklas’s voice. The Falkyn rubbed his chin. Junie held his free hand, looking at an oil stain on the floorboards with pure venom.

“What?” I whipped my eyes back to Raum and Vali. “What about Eero?”

“Our names were given up,” Raum said. “Eero might not have recognized our faces, but hells, he snapped to attention at our names. Val and I are blown.”

“Dammit,” Niklas muttered. “Took a great deal of effort to manipulate the bleeding guard rotation to get you both there in the first place.”

“Yes,” Gunnar said. “Had a bleeding headache for two days after that, you sods.”

“I know. Apologies, my friends, but until Niklas mixes us some miraculous face-changing mesmer, we’re in hiding.”

“Wait.” I held up a hand. “Who gave him your damn names?”

“Oh.” Raum lifted a finger to signal his pause and took a long drink from the horn. “That’d be Kase.”

Like a fist to the chest, I coughed on a rough breath. “Kase gave you up?”

Vali stretched his neck side to side. “Not intentionally. You know we’ve all been using our real names, and when we snuck back from his scheme, Eero was there pissing about our absence, and somewhere in the chatter Kase mentioned our given names.”

“Wait. What the hells are you talking about? He took you on a scheme?”

“He went without me?” Luca crossed his arms over his chest, a deep groove between his brows.

“Don’t be sour,” Niklas said. “He won’t risk you, and we need you here anyway.”

“It’s the bleeding thought of being included that matters.”

“Didn’t know you needed to be loved so much, Princeling.” Gunnar laughed and nudged Luca’s foot with his toe.

Luca snorted. “I require affection at least once a clock toll, *Princeling*.”

At the nickname Gunnar frowned. He could say it all he wanted, but he did not accept it back with the same grace.

“We’ll back up to the beginning of the night,” Raum said. “There we were, stationed at the back gates because of Sabain’s tender feelings, then the

next thing we know black eyes are there asking if we want to do some thieving.”

Vali rolled his eyes. “Kase had a meet with the fae he and Luca marked earlier. We stole nothing.”

“Broke a bone though.” Raum slouched and let out a satisfied sigh. “Gods, felt like old times watching our boy threaten and break someone. Ivar can change his damn memories, but he can’t take the Nightrender out of his soul.”

I winced against the sharp pang of longing burning my heart to ashes. What I would give to trade places with Raum and Vali, to merely stand beside Kase again.

“So, what was it?” Luca pressed. “What did Kase need from him?”

“Can’t tell you,” said Raum.

“Are you bleeding serious?”

“Quite. Mostly because we don’t really know. Something in Hemlig has his attention. He’s sent the fae on a quest to find information on missing littles or a skydguard camp of some kind.”

“Missing . . . littles?” One of Luca’s dark brows arched, while the other furrowed, as if he’d slipped deep into a treacherous thought.

“Like I said, we don’t know.” Raum stretched out his legs in front of him and clasped his fingers over his middle. “What we do know is Kase has not lost his touch. Had the poor fae running scared in a few moments.”

Vali and Raum laughed and lifted their horns in a salute of agreement.

“What he was after isn’t what matters right now,” Junie snapped. “What matters is now Eero knows we’re involved. He’ll be on guard, and surely Kase will be less accessible once Ivar is made aware.”

“Junie’s right,” Niklas said. “From what we’ve all seen, the real Kase is just beneath the surface, and we must keep drawing him out. He has connected naturally with Raum and Vali and Luca. We need to see what he does with the one who will upset his world the most.”

All eyes turned to me. Blood surged through my veins, spinning my head, but on the outside, I held steady and unruffled.

“I’m ready. Beyond ready. I’ve told you this.”

“Then I need to prepare you.” Luca blew out a long breath and came to my side. “My mesmer takes some getting used to, we’ll need to practice. Give me a few days—”

“A few days?”

“We do this right, or it is not worth the attempt to do it at all,” Luca said. “Trust me, when I use my mesmer on another it is disorienting. I am like you, in a way. I steal your memory, or your perception of yourself. I’ll project the illusion, but you must keep the connection in your head, using your own mind, like a dream you control. It takes practice to get accustomed to my mesmer, and if you want to hold the illusion long enough, you will need the practice.”

I ground my teeth, torn between impatience, and wanting to do this right at each step. “Fine, but we take few breaks.”

“I am yours for as long as it takes, *dännisk*.”

“How will you hide your involvement if he knows what you can do?”

Luca hesitated. “I won’t. Kase will know I helped you. All I can do is hope he keeps the truth from my father, or my connection to the Black Palace will be ended too soon. That, or I’ll be executed.”

It was a strike to the face. A notion I’d not taken proper time to consider. Luca Grym would be revealing his unique Hypnotik Talent. In all my anger, I’d not considered the risk he took the same as us.

“We’ll begin in the morning.”

“I’ll make sure Hanna is ready for her part,” Vali said. “She may need the time to wrap her head around what she must do.”

Luca held out his hand for mine. “If we’re doing this, I must demand you get some rest. Come on. Or did my wondrous declaration of self-sacrifice stun you too greatly?”

A rogue twitch grew at the corner of my mouth. A smile. The first in weeks. There was nothing impressive about it, and truth be told, it was more a grimace than anything.

“I assure you, Lord Grym, stun is not the word I’d use when I look at you.”

Luca chuckled and led me toward the front of the alehouse.

IO

THE NIGHTRENDER

For eight sunrises the Black Palace had been quiet. Oddly so. The only hushed whispers I'd caught were that Ivar had invited dignitaries from foreign kingdoms for a feast in the coming days.

The notion proved true when a strange energy thrummed through the Black Palace on the tenth dawn since the meet with the fae.

Mists coated the cobbled paths in the courtyards, and I watched from a lower floor window as folk filled the Black Palace courtyards. Serfs and stewards darted about the corridors preparing for a gathering no one, it seemed, but Ivar knew about.

I turned away and strode down the lower corridor while Sabain took the upper levels and Ivar's Rifiers took the outer gates. I'd hardly been given time to dream. As much as I despised the torment, the confusion, the desire she caused, I could not help but feel a bite of disappointment the fiery haired thief had spent such a short time in my head.

"Southern folk," a skinny serf woman whispered to her companion as they polished a wooden carving of Fenrir's wolfish head.

"Ack, it's Northern Folk. Saw the bleeding flag on the ship," mumbled the second serf.

The skinny woman shrugged. "Don't matter much. There are curious things afoot today. Mark me."

I quickened my step and hurried past the two serfs. I'd ask Luca if I knew where the bleeding man was. He disappeared each morning and did not return until long after sunset most days. I had the strange sense he was avoiding me.

With Ivar's demands to secure the palace, though, I'd had little time to press him on it. In truth, no one but me seemed to notice. Luca's lot in life, I

supposed. Not the heir apparent, so why fret over his presence too much?

Once I finished securing the lower palace, I'd look for him.

With so many powerful men gathered on the grounds, the risk of another attack had grown. No sign of the guild of thieves, nor Hagen Strom had been found since the Masque av Aska, and it was my duty to see to it we did not fail the Lord Magnate again.

At the smallest hint of strangeness, the Alvers of the Black Palace were to move in.

I stepped out of one of the herb closets in the kitchen, finding nothing, and took a quick drink of harsh brän from a horn on a cutting board. The burn lodged my senses free of fatigue.

With the back of my sleeve, I wiped my mouth as a kitchen woman shuffled in.

She squeaked at the sight of me, but quickly blinked away her stun. "Malevolent, thank gods. I coulda sworn someone was rustling down in the root storage."

Once she finished speaking, she backed away. Her fear was enough to shroud the entire room.

The serf snatched the horn and hurried it to the basin to be cleaned, her back turning away from me.

I kept a wide berth and entered one of the dry storage pantries at the far end of the kitchen. A few muddy roots were toppled out of a crate, but no sign of anything. Likely a rat.

No sooner had the thought entered my head than a crash came in the back side of the kitchens, followed by the rise of angry voices. The woman clung to the horn and her drying cloth like they were a lifeline. When I darted through the door, the same fearful squeak slipped out of her throat.

Two serfs gathered broken pieces of clay from a broken grain pot. The tallest, a redhead, smacked his partner's shoulder until the broad man turned around.

"Oh, Nigh—Malevolent," the second serf said. "A thief just tore through here. Isak here saw her, tried to catch her."

A thief. Shadows coated my eyes as I went to the man. "Where did she go?"

"Fiske saw her go in that d-d-direction." Isak pointed toward the gardens. "A b-bleeding little. She ran into the garden, that w-w-way."

He stammered. Interesting, and I didn't know why it was, why it

mattered. I shook the thought away and hurried toward the lush flowering walls of the courtyard.

“Down there!” Fiske shouted at my back.

Hells. The two serfs had bleeding followed me. I readied to tell them to get their asses back, but when I rounded the corner, I nearly tripped over a bony girl with a red shine over her pale hair.

As I found my footing, the girl scooted back at least ten paces.

The thief was a bleeding child with a burlap sack of whatever she’d stolen from the kitchens in her hand.

Bold little thing to steal from the Black Palace.

I drew my sword, anticipating the girl to bolt or shriek in fear, but she—gods—she dropped the sack and narrowed her pale eyes into slits.

There was not a drop of fear bleeding for me from her little heart. I could not even summon shadows to coat my eyes. Truth be told, even if fear was there, I wasn’t sure I could use mesmer. The idea of it was heavy in my mind. As if pulling magic would drain any energy I had to give.

“Girl, thieving from—”

Words suffocated when the child started moving her hands. Her hatred for me darkened on her face as she tangled her fingers in the air.

“A mute, that’s what she is,” Fiske said through a gasp as he leaned over his knees to catch his breath. “Won’t be the sort Ivar’d want.”

He spoke like he was trying to convince me not to take her into the palace. There was no need. Inner palace skydguard wouldn’t touch the girl. I could be flayed for the defiance, but it didn’t matter. This girl was not going to meet Ivar’s fury, that I knew. The desire to see her safely free of these grounds was potent enough to taste. A heady need, as if the child mattered.

“Girl, I do not wish to harm you, but—”

You lied.

My heart skipped in my chest. Did I . . . no, I didn’t understand finger speaking.

You lied. The girl wove her fingers.

Bleeding hells. I knew what she was saying.

The girl grew frantic. Her pale auburn braids shook as a single tear fell onto her cheek. Her fingers spun furiously.

You promised, and you lied.

“What . . .” I hesitated. “What did I lie about?”

Another tear fell from her lashes. Dammit. I hated tears.

You promised you'd never fight against us. The girl let out a soft hiccup. She sobbed in silent tears. *I miss you.*

I did not take to children. Most noble littles who entered the Black Palace were irritating, wretched weasels who tormented the serfs. But this girl left me with a fierce urge to draw her close and console her until the tears dried.

I wouldn't get the chance.

The thief spun around, abandoning her sack, and darted down the steps.

The moment she left, the sense of exhaustion coating my mesmer faded.

I shook out the tingle of fear from the serfs and followed her mad dash toward the town square. "Wait! Stop!"

"Go get her, Malevolent," the serfs shouted, as if it was some sort of game.

I chased after the child, not at a serf's command, in truth not even because she'd stolen from Ivar. The girl spoke to me—in a language I should not know—like she knew me.

Perhaps I was spinning into a dark madness, but I knew as sure as I knew to breathe, there was a piece of reality missing.

The wooden rose. By the hells, I'd stroked the rough-cut petals until sleep took me into wretched dreams of a naked woman I should want to slaughter, not take to my bed. Now a child who thieved like a seasoned criminal told me she missed me. Cried for me.

Fog gathered in my head. The way it always did when I questioned my standing here, my purpose. Like a flush of fever, I could not think too long on the strangeness of each day, or I broke into a sweat.

I rounded a corner, expecting to find the thief, but slammed into a wooden goat pen.

"Bleeding gods, watch it." A young man in a thick fur coat grunted inside the pen, shoveling feed for the animals. He sniffed, meeting my gaze. I squinted. Hells, he looked familiar.

My grip curled around one of the posts. "Did you see a girl come by here? A little?"

The goat keeper shrugged and kept his head down.

"Answer me."

"Answer the man, Gunnar."

A woman appeared with another feed sack slung over her shoulder. I paid her little notice at first but did a double take at the sight of her eyes. Like a cat in the night. Black slits carved through poisonous green.

Gunnar scoffed. "Mind your business, Tova."

"LET IT GO, TOVA."

"I ought to kick you in the bits."

I fought a laugh when her eyes narrowed. Green, cat eyes.

A SHARP BREATH ripped through my throat as the image faded from my head faster than it came. What the hells?

"You all right there?" The goat herder grunted again.

I blinked, forcing what little bit of fear was in the air to shade my eyes black. "A child. Did you see a bleeding child run by?"

"Aye," said Gunnar, his voice heavily accented. I was certain the woman rolled her eyes. Gunnar pointed at the shed behind us. "Saw a little burst in there not long ago."

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I tossed a few copper penne at the goat herders and unfastened the seax on my back, pressing a palm against the shed door. A child was no threat, but a child used as bait was a great deal more dangerous.

I toed the shed door open and eased into the space. Dust soaked the air along with a heavy scent of damp straw. Casks of corn and oats lined the walls. Old axes and spades hung on rusted hooks.

I rolled the seax in my grip, sniffing out any fear, searching for the child. There was nothing. As if she'd faded like morning mist, the shed was empty.

The blade dropped to my side. What sort of formidable Alver was I to be duped by a bleeding little? I took a step to the door, but paused, eyes locked on a cask against the far wall. A burlap stuffed horse sat on the top.

My grip tightened on the hilt of the blade. I glanced side to side, then went to the cask.

The horse was battered, perhaps well-loved by a child. One button eye was missing, and it was frayed on the seam of one leg, as if it had been resewn more than once.

I'd not noticed anything in the girl's hands, but who would leave such a thing behind but a child?

A cinch tightened in my chest the moment my fingertips curled around

the scratchy twine of its mane. Shadows played in my mind. Childish laughter echoed in a memory. Unclear, as if I was underwater.

The pad of my thumb rubbed the lone eye of the horse. Heat twisted in my stomach, and—

“I knew you always loved Asger.”

The horse dropped out of my hands when I wheeled around, blade out.

Laughter—a woman’s—rolled around the shed like it rode on swift wings.

My eyes peeled to the rafters. A hooded figure leaned forward, her legs dangling off the edge of one beam.

“Show yourself,” I snapped and pointed the seax toward the beam.

She laughed again. “Put your little sword away and maybe I will.”

Her voice grated down my spine, and like every bleeding person this morning, the tang of fear was absent.

I sheathed the sword and took a step back. The woman hooked an arm around the beam she’d been using as a perch and swung her legs off the edge. For a few breaths she dangled there before dropping into a crouch.

My fingers twitched at my sides. Anticipation to draw my blade grew heady as she rose and took a few cautious steps toward me.

“Gods,” she said, breathless. “I’ve both prayed and feared for this moment.”

“Speak your name,” I demanded. “Did you send the child thief?”

The woman took a step to the right, I stepped left. We began a slow prowling around each other, but she did not show her face.

“I did. Hanna was anxious to catch a glimpse of you.”

Hanna. A hot, sharp ache pierced the place between my eyes. There and gone in a breath, but it was as if the mention of the child’s name rammed through my skull. The weight of it added a burn of sick to the back of my throat. Had I been alone, I might’ve curled over my knees until I retched.

“You look unwell,” the woman whispered. “It’s beginning, isn’t it? It’s hurting you.”

“Woman, you will return with me to the Black Palace and face a tribunal for your part in the theft—”

“I could take the pain.” Her voice stopped me from taking another step while she came a pace nearer to me. Then two, three, the woman paused one stride away, the fullness of her lips visible from beneath her cowl. “I’d take this pain for you. I’d pull you through this.”

“Get on your knees,” I demanded, a prickle of unease on the back of my neck. “You will be bound and returned to the Black Palace.”

“No,” she said softly. “I won’t.”

With her long fingers, the woman pulled back her woolen hood.

My body froze. Stone still with hatred. Or desire. Both? I couldn’t be certain.

Tight opposition gathered in the pit of my stomach when her eyes lifted to mine. Like wet grass after a rain. Her hair was like a blood red sunset, all fire and vibrance. That hair had draped around my face as she rocked over my body in bleeding dreams not more than a few tolls ago.

All the pleasure knitted into pain and hate as her face sank deeper into my mind.

In the next breath, I drew the seax, and made a wild cut at her. She dodged and leapt behind a thick beam. Too swift to be natural. I cursed under my breath and spun the blade in my hand.

“Thief.”

She tilted her head out from behind the beam. “Nightrender.”

“That is not my name.” My blade chopped against the wood, shooting slivers across the straw on the floor.

She snickered at my back.

I wheeled around. The woman must’ve been from the hells to drift like a shadow.

“You hesitated,” she said, a taunt in her voice. “When you first saw me, you hesitated. Use your head and think. Why did you not strike straightaway?”

Red heat filled my face. A longing to spill her blood if only to spare me from another odious thought of her pinned in my bed. I was a traitor, a weakling, and shamed the position I held.

“I do not hesitate now,” I said through a grunt and swiped the blade at her middle.

The woman scurried out of reach, a pained expression on her face. “You hesitate because the world around you makes little sense. Admit it. You’re conflicted and don’t know why.”

My heart quickened. How did . . . how did she know? “You murder without thought, thief. I will take you for judgment or end you here. It does not matter to me, but either way you will be finished.”

Where I thought she might try to run, the woman faced me instead. Her

shoulders heaved in deep breaths. There was pain in her eyes, a flush to her freckled cheeks.

“You’re right. I would murder any man, steal any item, burn any city to set you free.” Her voice cracked.

She made little sense. I was no prisoner, but her words burrowed into my bones, digging out the disquiet I tried to ignore. Why did she face me here? Why speak to me at all? Ivar told me horrid things about the woman. Insisted she was a wicked sort of fae creature with the power to seduce men to do her bidding.

Perhaps Hagen Strom had fallen under a spell to destroy his family. She was dangerous, wicked, and captivating.

I despised her.

Even with my blade threatening her, the thief crossed the space between us in three strides. She knocked the sword to the side, and I did little to stop her until her body was a hairsbreadth from mine.

How simple it would be to dig the steel point into her chest.

How simple it would be to reach out and touch her, to see if the warmth of her body was the same in reality as it was in my head.

“I’ve stolen nothing today,” she whispered. “I merely wish to return what is yours.”

She gestured at the stuffed horse, then turned those pleading eyes back to me.

Kill her. End her.

I didn’t move.

The thief studied my face, her body arched to mine, lips parted. I shamed myself by sparing a glance at that mouth, imagining the taste of her on my tongue. Passion danced along a thin line between want and hate, and the whole of it clouded all reason. All purpose.

“You feel it, don’t you?” Her voice was soft. The thief lifted one hand; her fingertips hovered over the line of my jaw as if she fought the urge to touch me as much as I fought her.

“Feel what?”

“The draw to me.”

“You disgust me.”

A twitch came to the corner of her mouth. The start of a grin. “That is not disgust in your eyes. Let me take the pain. I could help you see clearly, you need only let me.”

My grip twisted around the hilt of my sword. I held her stare, ashamed I could not keep my mouth shut. “And how would you do that?”

“I will help you see clearly,” she repeated. Her mouth inched nearer; the heat of her breath teased my skin.

Damn the hells, I wanted her and hated myself for it.

I closed my eyes against what I planned to do, what needed to be done.

“No.” The word gritted out through my teeth, and before I thought longer on it, I thrust the seax blade through the center of the thief’s stomach.

She let out a small whimper. My heart twisted in my chest. Heady, piercing regret shattered through all the hatred and pain.

My hand trembled around the hilt; our gazes locked once more.

A furrow gathered between her brows, not from the pain of the blade, more that she was pained I’d betrayed her in such a way.

“Kase.”

All gods, she knew my name. The softness of it on her tongue was the last sound before her flesh and bone faded into nothing but mist and shadow.

In a single heartbeat, the sword was lodged through nothing but air. No blood on the steel, no flesh on the tip.

The thief had disappeared into nothing as if she were never there at all. My pulse raced as I spun around, looking at all angles. She was gone.

Stun burned into fury.

An illusion. She’d been a damn illusion the entire time.

Jaw tight, I seethed in the lonely shed. Hypnotik mesmer. And there was only one Hypnotik I knew who had the power to project a lifelike version of another breathing soul.

Luca Grym.

THE MEMORY THIEF

A sharp gasp wrapped around the empty thicket. I did not realize it came from my throat until my eyes snapped open, and my knees fumbled under my own weight.

Strong arms caught me when I stumbled.

“It’ll pass.” The deep rumble of Luca’s voice filled my senses. “It can take a moment to right yourself after you leave the illusion.”

I clung to him, my fingers digging into his biceps, my forehead pressed against his chest until the ground stopped spinning. Hells, his mesmer was a frightening sensation. As if being tossed around in a furious wind until the ground fades into the sky and there is no telling which way is up.

Two long breaths and I dared open my eyes to reorient to my true surroundings.

Damp from the dawn coated my tongue. A hint of ale burned the back of my throat. Not the musk of old wood and straw any longer. Scents and sights so real I almost believed I’d been traipsing the old shed the entire time.

Deep in my middle a phantom burn from the point of his blade bloomed across my skin.

“He . . . killed me.” My palm flattened over the race of my heart. “He actually killed me.”

“Don’t take it so personally,” Luca said, holding tightly to my elbows until he was convinced I wouldn’t tip over. “I thought he’d get one look at your face and start fighting. He allowed you to speak and get close to him. This is good news.”

Good news? Kase Eriksson, the man who owned all sides of my heart, had murdered me. At least in his mind. Had I been in that shed in earnest, I

would be cold in the straw.

“In the illusion you said it yourself, Malin.” Junius’s voice broke through my thoughts. “You told him he was drawn to you. What did you see? What made you think it?”

I blinked my stare over my shoulder where she sat beside Dagny on a fallen log.

“Mal,” Hagen said, crossing his arms over his chest. “What did he say? We could only hear your replies.”

I rubbed the side of my head. “Uh, he . . . he hesitated when he saw me. Didn’t raise a blade at first, so I . . . I tried to get him to see there was likely a reason. He might’ve just been taken by surprise.”

“But you touched him. We saw you lift your hand like he was in front of you. That must mean something,” Lynx said. His eyes were glassy, almost hopeful. I didn’t miss the desperation in his voice.

Dagny drifted to the large Kryv and took hold of his hand. Lynx furrowed his brow and looked at the ground. It was the same pained expression each of us wore at least once a day. Patience was a skill of the Kryv. They poked and prodded, used and squeezed each mark when it suited them. But patience was a wretched thing now that we were after the Nightrender.

No doubt each person here wanted to burn the gates as much as me, then force Kase to remain with us until he returned to himself.

To see it now on each face cracked down the center of my heart.

“Yes,” I said, clearing a scratch from my throat. I crossed the space between Lynx and me and took his other hand. “Yes, it meant something. Luca’s right—”

“You all heard that, didn’t you?” Luca interrupted. “You heard what she just said.”

Dagny made a grunt of irritation, but Luca shot her with a wink as if he enjoyed catching her attention, negative or otherwise.

I rolled my eyes. “He’s right. If Kase was gone entirely I never would’ve gotten close. In his eyes, I could see *him*.”

“And if he is lost entirely, I doubt he would’ve been so taken by our clever little bait.” Tova stepped into the thicket, followed by Gunnar, Fiske, Isak, Ash and a teary Hanna. Tova brushed a bit of Hanna’s hair behind her ear.

Relief flooded through my chest. I lowered to a crouch and opened my arms. “Hanna.”

The girl didn't take a breath before she darted into my arms, squeezing my neck. She shuddered as more tears fell down her cheeks. The girl had been terrified to face Kase, knowing he would not recognize her. But she'd gone, she'd slipped into the Black Palace. Love of the Nightrender drove every movement, every brave step. A risk I'd hated taking, placing Hanna so close to the Lord Magnate, but so many Kryv had been nearby to keep watch.

Ash had hidden in the shrubs at the palace and reluctantly promised he would've snapped a few of Kase's fingers if he would've made a strike at Hanna.

"Kase, he . . . he understood her," Ash muttered, smiling at his sister. "She got him to go, to run. That's good, right?"

"I think it's a very good thing." I smiled and rubbed a hand over Hanna's skinny back. "You were a marvel, Hanna."

The girl pulled back and swatted at her cheeks. She quickly shaped her fingers in frantic words, too fast for me to keep up.

Hagen rested a hand on my shoulder. "She's saying he looked at her like he was sad. She wants to go get him."

"His heart recognized you. We're going to get him, Hanna." I gave the girl a quivering smile.

She nodded, but too much worry still etched lines in her young face.

Before more tears could fall, Junius clapped her hands together. "Come on, then, my little friends. Let's see what Dryck has cooked up for you."

"He promised us some of his cloudberry cakes," Ash said, hurrying toward the brush cutting us off from the Ruse.

Junius grinned and paused by Niklas, kissing him briefly before she faded into the brush with a few straggling Falkyns at her back. No one went anywhere alone since the Masque av Aska. But the Falkyns took particular care since their guild brother, Eero, had been the one to betray us at the masquerade.

If anyone was to blame for the entrapment of the Nightrender, it was him.

I had grand plans to make him suffer before I gave the honor of gutting him to Niklas.

Once the children were gone, we returned to stoic silence. The tension and emptiness of the thicket was like a sticky heat, growing and thickening until drawing a deep breath became a challenge.

"Well, let's talk of the next step," Raum said, breaking the quiet.

"Agreed," Niklas said. "Today has been successful. We know Kase is in

battle with his own thoughts. He understood Hanna's finger speak. He bought the rose from Hob. And he allowed Malin to get close."

"Before he cut her." Tova gnawed on the end of a birch twig and lifted one brow at Niklas. "Don't forget, if she'd not been part of an illusion, we'd be building her funeral pyre."

"Expected," Luca said. "We knew he would view her as an enemy to the palace which is why the first meet was to be done through mesmer. However, he is entirely conflicted around her. Would it be safe to say he desired you, Malin?"

My face flushed. I did not wish to discuss the intimate details of my moments with Kase Eriksson, but I'd felt the pulse of heat and desire and want.

Even if the moment had been fleeting and ended with his blade plunged through my insides.

"Desire was there," I admitted and tugged on the ends of my hair. "I need to meet him again. To show him something real would be powerful."

"And d-d-dangerous," Isak said.

"Every step is dangerous," Raum retorted. "I'm with Malin. He needs something real to cling to. What would be better than his lover?"

Hagen grunted.

I faced my brother, brow raised. "What?"

"Nothing," Hagen said. A bit of color bloomed over his cheeks. "I simply find it interesting that once you found Kase again, amidst all his scheming he managed to take you to bed."

"Gods, Hagen." I scrubbed my face as heat burned behind my eyes. "We're not talking about this."

My brother lifted his hands in surrender. "I'm just saying, as the eldest, I have words for the man."

"It would seem my brother has forgotten the Nightrender and I grew up." A few tame chuckles followed as I shoved Hagen's shoulder, a broken bit of laughter spilled from my throat. We barely dared to laugh since the masquerade, but there were moments when hope lifted our spirits, when we could be a twisted, pieced together family, and lean on each other through the dreary days.

Luca came to my side. "I don't think your idea is bad, but let me face him first."

I tried, but after discovering the risk Luca Grym took today, I could not

hate the man. "You would be safer if you remained here with us."

"True, but I must show my face or suspicions will be raised. My father announces something today."

"What something?"

"Ah, I am not the favored son, so I find out with the rest of the common folk, *dännisk*." Luca returned a knife he'd removed during the illusion to his belt. "Although, be aware, foreign dignitaries come to our shores. Perhaps foreign royals, I can't be sure. Whatever Ivar is planning, he is reaching beyond Eastern borders."

"Foreign royals." Gunnar glanced at Hagen. "From the North?"

My brother flicked his fingers, a bit of red tinted his ears. We'd spoken little on his connection to the Northern Kingdom, but I had few doubts his lover and daughter were never far from his thoughts.

"I'm not certain," Luca said. "As soon as I know what Ivar is up to, I will report back."

Luca turned to leave, but I touched his arm, voice low. "What if Kase takes that blade and points it at you?"

A twitch in the corner of his mouth hinted he wanted to smile but couldn't find the strength. "Then I'll be counting on the Kryv to rescue my wealthy ass, or at least sing my favorite folksongs at my funeral pyre."

Luca went around the small group, clasping forearms, and bidding farewell. Dagny watched from the stoop, and when the Lord Magnate's son looked in her direction, she folded her arms over her body, frowning.

"See you soon, Dag," he said with a bit of arrogance.

She huffed. "If you don't get your throat slit."

"Ah, would you weep for me if I did?"

Dagny's frown deepened. She said nothing, simply turned around and cut through the hedgerow the same direction Junie had taken the children.

"Luca, you'll show him only what we discussed, yes?" Niklas asked.

"Not a thing more."

"It's a good idea."

"All my ideas are good, Nik." Luca scoffed, shaking his head before he glanced over his shoulder once more. "Wish me luck, my friends."

"You make the signal should you need help," Fiske said. "Isak and I will be close."

Luca gave him a stiff nod, then left in the opposite direction as the Ruse.

The Kryv turned for the hedgerow. Once more they'd be left to wait. My

fingertips prickled in anticipation. I would not be waiting long. If the Nightrender realized Luca's involvement today, I would grant a bit of time for the second son to soften Kase's heart. But after seeing him, hearing him, after being so near I could almost smell the fresh forest scent of his skin, I would not be biding my time.

Secrets were dangerous. Deadly, even.

But at times, necessary.

Hagen paused at the brush and looked back at me. "Coming?"

"In a moment. I'd like some time to . . . think."

My brother hesitated, but soon dipped his chin and followed Gunnar and the other Kryv. Only once I was certain I was alone did I remove the charcoal pen and roll of parchment.

In hurried strokes I penned the message: *We must speak. I shall be where the moon hangs highest.*

I curled my fist around the parchment and snuck around the back of the alehouse to the small shack shared by Hob and Inge. When Kase and I had threatened Inge to fit me a gown for the Masque av Aska, we found the two lovers in a salacious position. Now, when I visited, I pressed an ear to the door first.

No moans or sighs. I knocked rapidly until the latch snapped and Hob stood shirtless, rubbing a hand over his weary eyes, in the doorway.

"You're finished?" He blinked against the sunlight. "And? How'd it go?"

"Jakoby?" Inge's sleep laden voice came from the dark.

"Mal's here, love. Luca's finished."

The scuffle of feet came at once, and Inge pushed beside Hob, hair a mess, and in a terribly thin nightdress. "Malin. What happened?"

Phantom pain spread over my middle once again at the mere thought of it. "Well, we spoke a few words, then he killed me."

Hob's eyes widened. "Gods. So, unsuccessful?"

"Feels rather like a failure to me. Everyone else seemed thrilled we spoke at all."

Hob scratched his chin, lips puckered. "Well, listen to them, I suppose. All Niklas does is read about this bleeding curse."

"Yes," I agreed, then held up the crumpled parchment. "I have a missive. Are you able to make the drop?"

Inge looked at the parchment like it might reach up and bite, but Hob took it and tapped the scroll to his forehead, smirking. "I'll see it's delivered."

“Thank you.” I turned to leave, but stopped at Hob’s voice.

“You up to schemes, Mal?”

I glanced at the couple over my shoulder, one corner of my mouth curled in a cruel grin. “Always, Hob. Always.”

THE NIGHTRENDER

I wrung the stuffed horse around the neck. My steps pounded along the upper corridor. With each stride, anger thickened in my chest.

I was nearly there, and the bastard had better be in his chamber preparing for the evening.

The scratchy material of the horse burned my palm. Hells, it almost smelled like the clean rainstorm scent of the thief's skin. I rounded the final corner, only to slam into the back of a set of broad shoulders and a stupidly ornate fur cloak.

Niall Grym pierced me in his glare as he stepped out of his bed chamber. "Malevolent, what are you doing up here?"

I tucked the horse behind my back and lifted my chin. "I've come for your brother, My Lord."

Niall scoffed. "Leave little Luca to his books. He has no interest in matters of council."

"True enough, Heir Magnate, but I have come to fetch him all the same." How I despised Niall. For no other reason than the sight of him scraped like a dull knife down my spine. He feared me, and I took great pleasure in coating my eyes the inkiest black in his presence. To see the blood leave his face, even the slightest bit, was a thrill. The gruesome darkness inside of me loved to imagine what it might be like to carve Niall into a hundred pieces while he screamed for me to stop.

More than anyone—this man—I despised, and truly did not know why.

Niall took a step back and adjusted the thick pelt over his shoulders, so the wiry fur hid his neck. "Find him if you must but be quick about it. I'll not have my little brother embarrassing me in front of my future subjects."

He was not the bleeding king yet, but the bastard thought he ruled every corner of the regions. He would be a spineless sort of king.

Niall clicked his tongue at me before he abandoned me near Luca's doorway.

Hate grew like a thorned vine deep in my chest. A crack down the center of my soul, I could not find peace here. No matter how I tried to serve the Lord Magnate and his household, pieces of me never settled. The constant tug to be anywhere but here left me standing on fragile ground.

Exactly like the thief said.

Perhaps I was going mad.

Turmoil left me without an appetite. I walked the halls in a constant state of agitation, like a cornered beast with one last bite to give before the end.

I gave Luca the courtesy of knocking once before I shoved into the bed chamber and locked the door behind me. A few tallow candles topped a red oak table. Flames danced shadows over the opened books and parchment scrolls scattered on the surface.

Fox fur pelts covered the wooden floors, and an inglenook was empty but for a few dying embers and ash of an old flame.

"I wondered when you'd come hunt me down."

From the back of the room, Luca pushed back a curtain made of beads and twine. He dried his hands with a linen, tossing the cloth into the washbasin at his back. He'd dressed properly for an official gathering of lords. The black tunic and gambeson were threaded in gold, and he'd replaced the black stones in his ears with two small, silver hoops.

Never had I had such a burning desire to crack a fist over his damn jaw. "So, I do not even need to ask. You are working with the thief—with the bleeding guild who tried to slaughter your household."

Luca crossed his arms over his chest and scoffed. "I assure you, they did not come to slaughter my household that night. They came for Lord Strom."

The man was a friend, or so I thought, but I wanted to kill him.

With more force than needed, I threw the stuffed horse at his feet and butted my chest against his. "Explain what you are doing, or I swear to the gods—"

"Don't threaten me with the gods, Kase," Luca said. "You never believed in them anyway."

I clenched my fists, voice rough. "What game are you playing?"

"There is no game." Luca's expression sobered. "Look at me and tell me

if there has ever been a time, in our entire acquaintance, that I have ever acted with the intent to harm you.”

“So, I am to believe involving yourself with an enemy of the Black Palace is for my benefit?”

“Yes.” He didn’t hesitate, and spoke the word with such a deep conviction I almost believed him.

Every limb grew tight, each thud of my pulse ran hot blood through my veins. I let out a grunt of frustration and dragged my fingers through my hair, turning away. “By the hells, Luca. What am I supposed to do now? I serve the Lord Magnate. My sole purpose is to drag traitors bleeding and weeping to his feet.”

“I will never weep.”

The bastard. I clamped my jaw to keep from grinning. “You’re committing treason against your own folk.”

Luca tilted his head to one side. “Am I? What if you don’t recall the events of that night the same way as me?”

I said nothing, unwilling to admit how little I recalled of anything.

With a heavy sigh, Luca gestured me to follow him to a tall wooden chest near his bed. I kept a distance, standing on the opposite side of the bed as he dug through a wooden box on the top shelf.

He removed a stack of old folded parchment pieces and turned to me. “Do you remember how we planned to save this broken kingdom as boys? We vowed to use our twisted mesmer and become the heroes of the land, saving its folk from the tyranny of my father.”

Luca scoffed and grinned at the pieces of parchment.

My skin prickled in unease. How would I explain that only glimpses of the past lived in my head? An incomplete story.

“I know,” Luca said softly. “You probably remember very little.”

“How do you know?” My voice took a sharp edge, like barbs and thorns in my throat. “Have you allowed the thief to do something to me, Luca? A mesmer curse of some kind?”

“I would like nothing more than to tell you everything.”

“Do so.”

“With time, I hope I will.” His eyes carried a heavy burden. Luca lifted some of the parchment. “Do you trust me, Kase? Even a little.”

“Before this morning, yes.”

Luca didn’t seem surprised by the response and nodded, slapping the

parchment against his open palm. “Again, with time, perhaps you will. Permit me to give you something to think about as you decide whether to do your duty and turn me over to my father, or perhaps trust a little longer until the days become clearer.”

“You’re making little sense.”

“I know.” He chuckled and handed me the stack of parchment. “Look at them. I kept them for all these turns.”

There was a part of me that wanted to deny Luca the satisfaction. He’d betrayed his father today, and in a way, me. But I took the parchment, unfolding the top piece. A childish drawing of a figure in a dark cloak was in the center of the sheet. Hooded, with smudged charcoal billowing around his shoulders.

Scratchy writing below had been crossed out and rewritten more than once, as if the writer could not agree on the term. Feverish heat flooded my face in embarrassment as I squinted at the marks.

No one, not even Luca, knew how cruel the written word was to my eyes. Already difficult to make out by the messy style of writing, I fought to organize each symbol until it could make sense in my head.

No mistake, I took longer than needed before the final term became clear. But Luca remained still, steady, as if he expected me to keep quiet.

Blood pounded in my skull as I dragged my finger beneath the final word, sounding out each fragment in my head.

Night-ren-der.

Bleeding hells.

I flipped to the next page. More childish drawings, but now the shadowy figure was joined with another. The name of the second figure clearly hadn’t been decided upon, for in the corner there were several titles that took much too long for me to spell out: *Mirror, Trickster, Illusion Render, Mind Rifter.*

Luca shifted on his feet, a half grin playing at his mouth. “We never could settle on a name for my Talent. Dagny always told me I should go with Mare for the dream demons since I played with the head.”

“Dagny?” Like the child Hanna, this name struck me as if it were something I ought to know.

“The serf who drew these.” A muscle twitched in his cheek. “She was a friend until—” Luca cleared his throat and shook his head. “Anyway, she drew them before she left the Black Palace. Always liked to help us dream up our zealous moments of ego.”

I recognized his attempt to keep his tone light, but I was too focused on the drawings. Heat scorched my face, my neck; it enrobed me in a fever as I dragged my thumb over the fading ink lettering.

“What do these mean, Luca?” My voice grew coarse, like the grit of dirt underfoot. “The hawker from the other day, he . . . he called me Nightrender. The same as . . . the same as the thief.”

Any brevity abandoned Luca’s expression. He folded his arms over his chest and squared to me, jaw tight. “I know, Kase.”

“What is going on?” Hells, I despised the desperation buried beneath my tone. Desperation gave away weakness, it gave the one you pleaded with power over you.

“You must find a desire to know more, Kase. I cannot force answers upon you.”

“Yet you thrust this upon me and give nothing else.” I held up the parchment and paced alongside his bed. Frenzy knotted in my chest, and my body stiffened as if I were careening over a ledge with certain pain at the bottom.

“I know, but—”

A heavy-handed knock came to Luca’s door. “Young Lord, your father summons you. The gathering is beginning.”

Bleeding Sabain. I was certain he knew when his presence would be most unwanted, and he picked those moments to arrive.

Luca tightened his grip on my shoulder. “I would urge you to think long and hard on why you might be addressed as Nightrender.”

“Luca tell me—”

“Young Lord.” Another knock.

I’d kill the Benevolent should he knock again.

But it spurred Luca into motion. He took hold of a dagger he carried on his belt and strode for the door. “I must go.”

“Tell me what is going on, Luca. Just tell me plainly.”

“If only I could, but alas, life with mesmer is never so simple. I believe when we get knocked off our path, the Norns enjoy watching us claw our way back in the cruelest ways. If there is even the slightest crack in what you know to be true, I urge you to dig deeper. Learn more of that name—*Nightrender*.”

“Luca.” My fists curled around the parchment until it crumpled.

He cursed under his breath, hand on the doorhandle. “Gods, Kase, trust

me. That is all I can say. Bleeding trust that I am not your enemy here.”

“Trust you with *what*?”

“That the memories in your mind do not add up—by the hells, Niklas will kill me.” Luca’s face pulled into a grimace. He swallowed hard before he looked at me again, voice low, a warning beneath it. “There are dangerous days ahead, my friend. And I’m afraid we are all in the balance of becoming the kings or pawns.”

Without another word, Luca left me alone in his chamber.

He was speaking nonsensical, surely, but . . . how did he know my thoughts, my memories, were scattered about my head like dust in the wind?

I knew of no mesmer that could cause such turmoil. Hypnotiks could trick the mind, but no Alver could truly alter thoughts and memories.

A storm built in my head once again. The collision of what my mind told me was true and the warning my heart gave me not to believe it. My gaze dropped to the stuffed horse on the floor. A pang of agony clenched in my chest. Such a simple thing meant a great deal to me, and I could not make any sense of it.

To live had become an exhaustive game of truth and lies. All I desired was peace. To wake without the turmoil in my heart and mind that something was not quite right.

Heat flooded my veins. Hatred, fear, anger, all of it created a heavy cloak of shadows around my shoulders as I pulled a dagger from a sheath on my shin. A guttural cry of frustration peeled from the back of my throat as I rammed the blade through the stomach of the stuffed toy.

Breaths came sharp, heavy. I kneeled on the ground for too long. Clenched and more lost than before.

What was happening to me? I was becoming half a man, half a soul.

I was nothing but a shadow.



THE GREAT HALL WAS FILLED, wall to wall, with nobility, Alver Folk, and foreign travelers. Tables had been lined with goat cheese and rounded loaves of warm bread. Noble folk gathered around the horns of brän and tore into the bread loaves like they were the starving ones of Klockglas.

I recognized some oversea dignitaries. A few councilmen from Skítkast.

The lawmaker of Furen, and several Hemlish high lords who ran the sea prisons were in attendance. All looked around the great hall with envy and a bit of disdain for the others.

They feared Ivar, the bitter taste of it was on my tongue, but they wanted his affection in the same breath.

Seated behind a polished table were faces I didn't recognize, with features unusual for the East.

"Fae." A young skydguard materialized behind me, nodding at the table of strangers. "From the Southern Kingdom. Keep watch on them, Malevolent." He pointed to a smaller table directly next to the fae. Three men, all with tapered ears like the fae of the South leaned in, muttering amongst themselves. The skydguard scoffed. "They're from the North to speak for their rebel king. Lawless."

I said nothing.

Nidhug was an exception, but fae rarely stepped foot onto our shores. They kept to their kingdoms, fought their own battles, no doubt.

Yet there they were. A handful of fae folk who seemed nearly too mystical to exist. More so with those fae from the Southern Kingdom. Folk there prided their appearances on being closer to creatures of legend and myth than the Night Folk fae in the North.

The fae in the high seat on the Southern side had sharp, tapered ears, his skin was dusted in silvery powder, a shimmer of starlight on the sharp lines of his cheek bones. The man was broad, clearly capable of holding a heavy sword or axe. His hair was a glossy, midnight blue, shorn on one side of his head, and he'd inked his scalp in rune symbols. His eyes glowed like a silver frost, nearly indistinguishable to see where the whites ended and the color began.

Those who sat around the newcomers were proof of it. Some folk had blue skin like the sky. Others were tanned, but had curled ram's horns atop their head. Some appeared much like us but for the fae ears.

Two female guards stood on either side of the high seat. All fierce looking. Lovely, though, too. One woman had red braids coiled around her head, black eyes like ink had spilled through any color, and a bark brown hint to her skin. A nymph of some kind, perhaps.

The second woman hardly had a point to her ear. Her hair was straight and dark, and her long fingers had not abandoned the hilt of a short blade tethered to her waist. She took in the great hall with a stern glare, but buried

beneath it she was unsettled. The burn of fear, of her unease soaked through me like a new layer of skin.

She seemed to trust the East as much as I trusted the South.

I let my gaze fall to the small Northern table. My heart stuttered. All three men stared at me with bemused expressions. The man in the center leaned back in his seat, a curious smirk on his lips. Different from the fae of the South, his skin was sun kissed, his hair was like autumn, golden and dark all at once, and his eyes were deep brown, a little warmth to keep them from turning entirely black.

He held my stare for a few more breaths, then winked.

He bleeding *winked*.

My jaw tightened, and I shifted away from the guest table toward the Lord Magnate.

On the dais Ivar muttered over a roll of weathered parchment with one of his skydguard captains. The Lady Magnate sat on a wicker bench, threading her fingers through a fur pelt draped over the back as a man whispered something in her ear that drew her to smile.

Sabain huddled in the corner with several Rifiers who looked miserable with their scowls and sunken eyes, as if they had skipped too many meals.

I took a place behind the dais where I could keep watch on the room, yet remain unseen. To serve the Lord Magnate meant becoming a presence folk sensed, but rarely observed straight on.

Except the bleeding Night Folk fae who still followed me with his eyes.

I curled wisps of shadows around my face, taking fear from anyone I could, all to hide myself from his scrutiny.

Ivar rose from his high-backed chair and lifted his hands to silence the hall.

“Today marks a new dawn.” Ivar’s voice was even and slow. A rough tone to intimidate those beneath him. “The events of the Masque av Aska have proven we must have more to defend our regions, our folk, from enemies.”

A rumble of agreement rose in the hall.

“Alliances must be forged to strengthen protections for our lands.” Ivar made a gesture to the visiting fae. “We bid welcome to our new friends from two of the gods’-blessed kingdoms across the Fate’s Ocean. We marvel at your strengths and success in your varying kingdoms.”

Ivar held out a trembling hand toward the Southern table. It was the first

time I'd taken note that the Lord Magnate seemed weaker. "The South has mastered peace, even among their many courts and crowns. We are pleased to welcome Prince Bracken Komik from the High Court."

The white-eyed fae lifted one hand, offering a lazy wave to the room.

"And from the Northern Kingdom we welcome the ambassador for your rebel king." Ivar said dismissively to the three Night Folk.

The man on the left snorted. "King Valen Ferus, thank you very much. Nothing rebel about him."

Ivar sneered. "Yes, the Ferus bloodline is most impressive."

The Night Folk stared at Ivar with murderous glares. I took a step nearer to the dais, ready to act should they make a nefarious move.

"The time has come to forge an alliance through bloodlines," Ivar went on. "We hope to negotiate a vow contract with one of your great kingdoms."

The Lord Magnate gestured at Niall with a bit of pride. Luca sat beside his brother, wholly invested in a leather-bound book. Britta tapped his shoulder, trying to get her youngest son to engage, even the slightest.

Luca merely sank lower in his seat and nudged his book higher over his face.

"I present my heir and eldest son, the Heir Magnate Niall, as the suitor for one of the selected princesses."

Murmurs rose from the hall. Niall lifted his chin and stood, chest lifted, as the local noblemen began shouting their protests.

"What does this mean?" one of the Skítkast councilmen shouted. "You're making the Heir Magnate a royal? A king?"

"I am unifying two strong bloodlines of two kingdoms beneath one crown." He glanced at the foreign visitors. "If we can agree on terms, that is."

Prince Bracken seemed utterly bored, but the Northern fae chuckled and whispered to themselves again.

"You give the honor to your heir, not yourself?" Patrik, the lawmaker in Furen shouted, as if the idea of not assuming power was ridiculous.

To the greedy folk of the East, no mistake, it was.

"There is no alliance to be made with me." He glanced to Britta who ignored his scrutiny and kept her gaze locked on the crowd. "This new alliance will forge new heirs to a true kingdom with the powers of others to back our armies, our borders."

"It will serve you well to hold familial ties to the High Court," Prince Bracken said with a lifted horn. "But, as the head of my household, I will not

yet agree to any alliance with Princess Signe. My younger sister is dear to me, you see. And there is still the open matter with my missing cousin.”

Ivar’s eyes narrowed. “Ah, but the East had nothing to do with such a tragedy.”

Bracken smiled. There was nothing friendly about it. “I suppose time will tell. And I hope my Northern friends will permit me to speak freely—we have grown closer these last two turns, what with their rebel king’s forward thinking by sending his ambassador to our shores—but I have no doubt the Princess Herja will be as guarded as I guard Signe.”

The men at the Northern table chuckled as the tall, center fae stood. “I’m unconvinced your son will be able to meet the spirit of Princess Herja with the same strength she possesses.”

“You insult us, fae?” Niall grumbled.

The man laughed again. “No. I speak true. She is a warrior and a mother. Are you willing to take on her equally strong-willed children? If a man is not up to the challenge she brings, then, I assure you, her brother would never agree to any terms of alliance.”

At that, the fae looked at me again and winked.

Good hells, the spinning fog in my head threatened to devour me every time he glanced my way.

“We know a great deal about the Northern princess,” Ivar said through his teeth. “And I assure *you*, her ability to have children is of great interest, naturally.”

The fae scoffed. “Naturally. What else are our womenfolk good for?”

He was blatantly mocking Ivar. I did not know whether to throw my knife in his throat or applaud him.

“All the better for both our lands,” Ivar growled. “No doubt your young kingdom could use the forces of our highly trained guard.”

“I suppose.” The fae seemed to resign to cease his taunts and leaned back in his seat again.

“Why should the Grym line wear the crown? For centuries we’ve awaited an heir,” a voice from the back carried over the crowd, followed by a few grunts of agreement.

Ivar did not flinch, merely grinned with a new brutality. “And the gods have never sent one, but it cannot be denied House Grym is favored by the highest gods. Now, the Norns have led us here.”

“What of the ring?”

Ivar's mouth tightened into a sharp line. "It is time we leave prophecies to rot into myths, and strengthen our kingdom. An alliance is the surest way to strengthen our borders, or more untamed folk like those we met at the masque will feel the need to wreak havoc in our land. Do you wish to see our traditions destroyed like the Masque av Aska?"

Mutters of distaste for the bloody festival, for their lost penge, and lost revelry hastened naysayers to comply to Ivar's whims in a matter of breaths.

Furious discussion on what an alliance with another kingdom could mean rattled the bubbled glass of the windows. The tables of ale and bread were abandoned, and the dais was surrounded by noblemen as they plotted on what prestige a true kingdom would grant their estates and purses.

"We invite the representatives for each kingdom to meet with us to discuss our terms," Ivar bellowed over the noise. "There, a new future will be forged. One of peace, and of strength. Until then, eat, drink, and give thanks for the gods' blessings!"

Roars and cheers echoed in return. Given the chance to celebrate and drink themselves into a stupor, the noblefolk of the East would take it. How easily they gave up the turns of traditions of a queen's ring simply because Ivar Grym said so and provided them with endless ewers of foamy brän.

I ought to celebrate. With the rise of the Grym line, it would only elevate my status, yet I felt nothing but the sour burn of sick in my gut.

I scanned the room, searching for Luca. His book remained on the seat, but its reader had gone missing.

He was a bastard for the game he'd played, but we needed to speak of Ivar's announcement. There would be new roles for the second son of the Black Palace to play. And if he were not loyal . . . dammit, I didn't want to think of what I might be forced to do.

Of the four kingdoms, this would form the first foreign alliance through vows.

It could bleeding change our entire world.

"Admittedly, it is disheartening my king is still viewed as a rebel, but I suppose the power hungry would not be pleased Night Folk rose in the North and put an end to cruel trade practices."

I wheeled around. My heart stuttered in my chest when the tall, dark-eyed fae stood two paces away. He had his arms folded over his chest, staring at the crowd with a touch of mischief.

By his sides were the two other Night Folk fae. One kept watch on the

room with a pinched expression. The second tapped a knife back and forth on his hand, grinning at me like he knew a secret I did not.

When I said nothing the fae tried again. “I find it laughable to be sent here for this ruse at all. As if Herja would vow herself off to the folk who took her *hjärta*. Hells, as if Valen would dare demand her to do anything. Still, we took it as a mighty convenient opportunity to check in on the search. I, of course, was in the South when Bracken received his missive. Since his cousin was lost near these shores, well, we all took the opportunity. I’m pleasantly surprised to see you, and am entirely curious what reports you have to give.”

Hells he talked a lot. And his words were nonsense to me. The fae came to the East to check in? On what?

Silence continued to gather between us, and a furrow gathered between his brows.

He tilted his head as if confused. “Well? Are new games afoot? What do you know about this move to align kingdoms? This could very well change your land, or perhaps make it all worse. Thoughts?”

“I serve the Lord Magnate, fae.” My voice took a sharp edge. “And if you have schemes against him in that skull of yours, I assure you, I shall crack it open until they spill out.”

The fae tilted his head. “By the gods, you’re unpleasant. And after all we’ve been through.”

“We have been through nothing.”

His dark eyes narrowed. “Nothing? Are you well, Nightrender?”

My blood went cold in my veins. No. The spinning haze took hold of my head all over again. Like a thick blanket of night sealed over my head. Bile burned my throat. I swayed, unsteady.

“Do *not* call me that.”

Where the fae had sounded playful at first, now his tone took on a touch of danger. “Do not toy with me. Where is the young prince? What have you done with him? If you have harmed him, his mother, his uncles, all my folk will rise and bring war to your shores. We fiercely despise traitors.”

I took an angry step until my chest slammed into his. “I do not know what prince you speak of. I do not know you. But if you come here with malice, fae, I will tear out your spine and use it as a pike for your head.”

For the first time he looked stunned. “What has happened to you?”

“Speak your name.” I planned to mark this fae. To remember him, to kill

him if he took the slightest misstep.

“Gladly. I do enjoy speaking my name, for it is a name all should know. Ari Sekundär,” he said, voice rough. “Ambassador of the North. Cease your game of ignorance and remember me. If you have betrayed us, be warned I shall come at you with worse than you have threatened. Stieg, Frey—” He looked at his companions. “We’re leaving. Seems we have need to search out our prince. Possibly spill blood.”

The three fae left me with seething glares before they stormed back toward the Southern royals. Where I should embrace the thrill of slaughtering a traitor, a foe, I hesitated. He spoke without fear. His threats were genuine.

His bleeding name. The sound of it, the hint of an accent as he spoke it, all rattled around in my head like a distant dream I had forgotten.

The madness I suffered shifted into something worse.

Fear.

THE MEMORY THIEF

“I don’t like it.” Hob twirled an unlit herb roll between his fingers, eyes schooled on the crowds of the lower trade square.

“Don’t like what?” Tova asked. She finished adding one of her bone knives to her belt, the narrow black slit of her cat eyes pulsed as she searched the faces of the trade square for a sign of trouble. “Nothing has changed since the moment we decided standing in one place for several clock tolls was productive. Trade folk are still trading, buyers are still buying.”

“Exactly.” Hob said in a sort of hiss.

At his side, Inge dragged her slender fingers down his neck until he shivered and turned a smile to his lover.

“Jakoby is saying it’s too quiet,” she translated. “The Black Palace is filled with the noblest of folk. There should be gossip in the trade square.”

Hob kissed her knuckles and pulled her against his side. “Hells Malin, you know as well as I that the underbelly is notorious for spreading the word.”

He spoke true. In the days I ran with Hob, trading and selling memories, days that seemed so long ago now, if one needed a bit of information, they could find it in the slums. It seemed somewhere, someone, should have the latest gossip on any subject.

I crossed my arms over my middle and followed Hob’s unyielding gaze around the bustle of the trade square. “The Lord Magnate took great care to keep whatever the hells is going on in that palace from slipping into the streets.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Hob said. “If there is such great secrecy, you can take it to the gods it will not bode well in our favor.”

“We would’ve heard if Luca found trouble,” I said with confidence I didn’t have. “And Fiske and Isak are keeping watch on the palace, so—”

“No, they are not!”

Fiske’s voice carried over the square. He sprinted through the crowd, Isak close behind. Their hurried steps sent my pulse racing in my head.

“Isak.” I caught his arm when he stumbled up the slope toward the Ruse. “What’s happened? Is it Kase? Luca?”

The redhead leaned over his knees, drawing in a long breath. The rush of his sprint brightened his silver eyes like starlight. “No s-s-sign of Luca.”

“There were serfs talking of him, though. He was in the meet,” Fiske said, wiping sweat from his brow. His skin was coated in dust and dirt, no doubt from ducking in the hedges outside the palace gates. “He was alive not long ago, and before you ask—” Fiske paused and drew in a long breath, cursing the cinch in his side. “No. I didn’t catch sight of Kase. Isak thought he might’ve heard him, but there was so much chatter we can’t be certain.”

“Then why the hells are you running, you bleeding fools?” Tova glared at her Kryv brothers. She was the only sharp tongue besides Kase who could get away with snapping her teeth at the two men.

“Because we need to get to Nik and Junie,” Fiske said, his voice as sharp and dangerous. “Someone is after them.”

Tova’s face paled.

Isak dragged in a breath through his nose. “No doubt Eero finally gave up their b-b-bleeding names, now a whole d-d-d—” Isak closed his eyes and clenched his fists when his words wouldn’t come.

Fiske rested a hand on his shoulder and picked up where he left off. “There is a caravan in the square looking for the Falkyn Niklas or his wife. They’re offering penge for information.”

My heart stuck in the back of my throat. I whipped my gaze toward the Ruse. The alehouse sat back thirty paces. Niklas and Junie—if they’d listened to reason—would be finally getting some sleep in the loft.

There wasn’t a need to say more before we all turned and ran up the cobbled path to the Ruse.

Fiske was the first to shove through the door. The Ruse always had a hint of onion and dust. But the counters were wiped clean, and Dryck had overstuffed mattresses in his loft. Truth be told, I thought the gruff man enjoyed dipping his foot in the life of the two guilds, and took pleasure overseeing their schemes and tricks.

The wood door slammed against the wall, and old Dryck snorted himself awake from his place on a heavy oak bench in the corner.

“Damn the hells, what’re you doing?” The aleman rubbed sleep from his eyes as the rest of us spilled into the drinking hall.

At a smaller table, Ash and Hanna dropped game cards and rune wood chips from a game of Crowns. They fumbled out of their chairs, hurrying to meet their fellow Kryv.

“Nik!” Fiske called out. “Niklas!”

At the commotion, a back door swung open, and Vali emerged, hair on end, tugging a tunic over his bare chest. “What’s wrong?”

Raum rose from behind the counter, rubbing his eyes through a yawn. He’d forgone his top entirely, baring several black ink runes across his heart for the room to see.

“Where’s Nik and Junie?” Fiske asked, not really looking at his fellow Kryv. His eyes squinted as if he could see through the walls.

“Sleeping, last I saw,” Vali said. He drew a knife from his boot, twirled it once in his hand, and any remaining fatigue abandoned his eyes.

As if on cue, the back door of the alehouse burst open. Gunnar rushed inside; the meaty shoulders of Lynx followed. The Kryv were anything but unprepared. Within five heartbeats, Lynx had two blades in hand, and Gunnar had his quiver shouldered.

By the time a few scattered members of the Falkyn guild showed up, the alehouse was filled with the Kryv, Hagen, and Hob. All armed and ready to step into a fight, even if they had no clue what was happening.

Hob shoved past me, gripping Inge’s elbow. “Get to the root cellar.”

“I can play an unsuspecting role, Jakoby, and I’m not leaving you.”

“They could recognize you, love,” he said, a touch of desperation in his voice. “Your brothers are still looking—”

Hob didn’t get the chance to finish before Fiske stepped to the center of the room, barking demands at the room.

“Take cover. A caravan from the Black Palace is looking for Falkyns. Niklas specifically.” Fiske turned his dark eyes on Dryck. “You give up nothing, and they’ll leave you be. You never saw us.”

“Get on out of here, boy,” Dryck said. “I know how to handle the bleeding skydguard.”

From the loft the door finally creaked. I breathed out in relief when Niklas poked his head over the wooden rail. “Skydguard are coming for

Falkyns? Did I hear that right?"

Isak lifted his chin. "Your n-n-name is known, Nik. Stay b-back."

The Falkyn lead chuckled and laced his fingers in thick gold rings. "Oh, Isak, Isak, Isak. When have I ever sat back when a fight came knocking?"

"Well, today might be the day," Fiske interjected. "We need to stay low until we finish our job here."

Fiske ignored Niklas's eye roll and signaled Ash and Hanna to climb the ladder to the loft.

"Cellar, Mal." Hagen stepped through the open door in the back of the alehouse.

I drew out a shiv knife from my boot, glaring at my brother. "I did not rescue you to be treated as some precious thing."

"By the gods, we're all going to the bleeding cellar," Hagen said. "Gunnar. Now."

Gunnar shot me a bemused look. "Don't worry, Mal. Daj treats me like I'm still five turns, too."

Hagen shoved his son's shoulder toward the ladder. "Be grateful you both have someone who gives a damn about whether you keep breathing. Now, everyone get down there." Hagen jabbed his finger at Lynx and the other Kryv. "*Dännisk* Inge, you next."

Tova followed Inge, and one by one we filled Dryck's cellar.

Damp sod and mold coated the back of my throat with each breath. My fingers twitched at my sides as the aleman started to close the hatch.

"Wait, where's Dag?"

"Taking cover outside with some of the Falkyns," Dryck said. "Now, I mean this with respect, everyone shut up."

He said nothing more before slamming the thick hatch door over our heads. When darkness came, so did the silence. No one seemed to draw in a deep breath. Vali kept his ear pressed to the closed door. His mesmer would hear any skydguard before they stepped foot in the Ruse.

Gunnar took a place by his side. No mistake, as much as Hagen would hate it, Gunnar had strengthened his ability to take control over the minds of others. He might be our chance to slip out if anything went wrong, giving us a moment to escape by forcing any guards to avert their gaze elsewhere.

Time blurred through the tension. A few heartbeats felt more like ten clock tolls. But a collective draw of breath came when the front door hinges groaned.

Footsteps followed. Heavy. Thick. Booted.

Tova gripped my arm. I wasn't sure she even noticed, but she stood frozen at my side, fingernails digging into my flesh as we all held our breaths and listened.

The floors were thin, so Vali's mesmer wasn't entirely needed. Voices traveled through the floorboards as though someone held a cloth over their mouths, but it was clear enough.

"You look weary, *mina vänner*." My friends. Dryck's voice was rough, but cheerful. "Got a new sweet ale in just yesterday."

"Gods, I could use a horn." A deep voice answered, followed by the scrape of a chair over the floor.

"And for your *dännisks*?"

There were women with the guard?

"We're not here for respite." A new deep voice was haggard, almost achingly desperate. "I have need to find the Falkyn called Niklas Tjuv. Or Junius, his wife. Or anyone in a guild called the Kryv."

"I don't know—"

"Yes," the man interrupted. "I know what you're going to say. You've never heard of them. Seems they are ghosts, and frankly, I don't believe you. I mean them no harm, but I must find them. It is a matter of urgency."

"Most urgent," the first man said.

"Seems the ambassador cares little for your safety, Prince Bracken, and seeks to entertain his own selfish desires." A harsh female voice spat out, each word like bits of fire on her tongue.

"By the gods, woman. Do not speak of things you do not understand. Now, shut the hells up and let the man answer."

I was losing track of who was speaking, but I guessed the retort was from the man who'd known Niklas's full name. Desperation. I heard the burn of it in the air, the pain in his voice. The sort of desperation Kase would revel in if he were here. He'd squeeze and bend and twist the traveler until he caved to the bidding of the Nightrender.

A pause followed. No more than a few breaths, but it thickened until my pulse pounded in my ears.

"You lot are fae." Dryck spoke slowly, cautiously.

A rumble of laughter. "What gave us up? Tell me it was the way we dress, not the ears."

I shared a glance with Hagen, then Tova.

“Fae?” Gunnar let out a long breath. “Wait, Raum move aside. I need to hear that voice again.”

Raum made room for Gunnar to settle beside Vali at the hatch. Vali glanced at Gunnar. “He sounded familiar to me. You too?”

Gunnar nodded and pressed his ear to the hatch.

“Listen to me, aleman,” the second, more threatening man came again. “My folk have an alliance with the Kryv and Falkyns. I seek them to check on the wellbeing of one of our own who stands with them. That is all. We are not a foe to them.”

“By the gods,” Gunnar said, a smile tugging on his face. He rammed his shoulder against the hatch.

“Gunnar, stop,” Hagen demanded, rushing toward his son.

My heart stuttered, and I choked on a protest watching Gunnar slip through the hole back to the surface.

“Ari!” Gunnar’s voice floated down into the hatch.

A pause returned, then a breathless, “Thank the gods.”

Raum laughed and hurried up the ladder after Gunnar. Then Tova. Her eyes brightened.

“Tova.” I pulled back on her arm. “Who are they?”

“Allies.”

Hagen and I were the last to leave the cellar. I did not know who had arrived, but the alehouse was no longer silent above us. Laughter, curses, the slap of hands on backs rattled me to the bone.

Hagen went first, waiting for me at the top of the hatch, blade in hand.

Niklas had emerged from the loft, and had his hand locked around a towering man’s forearm.

A fae. I’d never seen a fae, only read of their sharply pointed ears, strange eyes, and tricky mesmer.

The Ruse now hosted several.

Behind the first man, another fae sat at a table, sipping from a horn. His eyes were like the frosted peaks during winter. Behind him were two armed women. One remained by the front door. Her skin like roasted hazelnuts, hair braided, and one hand securely on a bronze seax blade.

The other woman glared at the entire aleroom. Her narrowed eyes shined in a brilliant blue that stood out against her raven’s wing hair. Her lips thinned until I could hardly make them out, and all her ire was pointed at the tall fae as he greeted the Kryv and Falkyns.

I'd expected fae to look more like mystical forest creatures. Slender, maybe with glittering skin. But the man greeting Niklas was warrior strong, his golden hair like wet straw, braided off his face, and his eyes were golden brown, like sunset on the Howl Sea.

Behind him two more fae, swords on their waists were locked in greetings with the Kryv and Falkyns.

"I was anticipating war if I did not find you, Young Prince," the fae next to Gunnar said.

Gunnar beamed. "It is good to see you, but what brings you here? Is all well with Maj? Laila?"

Hells, they were from Gunnar's Northern folk.

The fae nodded. "We are here for your mother, actually. The bastards at that palace are trying to marry the eldest son to a foreign princess. Since there is only one foreign princess of age in the North, it was your mother's name put forward."

"What?" Hagen's voice bellowed out. "What did you say about Herja?"

The fae startled and had a hand on the hilt of the short blade tied to his belt in half a breath. "Who are you?"

"Gods, Ari, I forget you don't know." Gunnar stepped in front of Hagen. "Daj, meet Ari Sekundär. Ambassador for the Kingdom of Etta."

"You found him." Ari said under his breath. A thrilled gleam brightened his dark eyes as he held out his arm. Hagen clasped his forearm, a bit reserved. Ari smiled at my brother and dipped his chin. "At long last, I lay eyes on the *hjärta* of my princess."

Hagen's brow furrowed. "Herja called me that."

Ari's smile widened. "Yes. I imagine she did."

"What did you mean she's taking vows with that spineless weakling, Niall?" Hagen's eyes looked more like black pools as anger rose.

"Be calm," Ari said. "It is a ruse. Your family has heard no news as of late, so the king and queen sent me here under the guise of being willing to offer Herja as a price for an alliance. Bracken comes under a similar guise."

He gestured at the pale-eyed fae.

"My sister, Princess Signe of the Court of Hearts, is also up for vow negotiations. But in truth these shores have devoured Southern royals before."

He spoke strangely, almost like a song, and I had no idea what he meant.

As if Ari could sense the confusion, he stepped in. "Last turn Bracken's

cousin, Eryka, sailed toward the East and disappeared. There is reason to believe she never left these regions.”

Niklas chuckled darkly. “Forgive me, it isn’t amusing to hear your cousin went missing, fae prince, but it is amusing that two kingdoms came to greet Ivar with deception. And he likely has no idea. I think that is the best thing I’ve heard all day.”

Ari smirked, then faced Hagen and Gunnar. “You have not sent word to the princess. Why?”

Gunnar looked at the ground sheepishly. “We . . . we wanted to send word straightaway but ran into trouble here.”

“I have a debt to repay,” Hagen said. “A dangerous debt, and I will not bring Herja or Laila into harm. When it is paid, I will send word. I will go to them. The gods could not stop me.”

“You were betrayed.” Ari’s jaw pulsed. He folded his arms over his chest.

“How did you know?” Junie touched his arm.

“Saw the bastard myself. Looked like a strutting cock with too much bleeding power. I must say, I have impeccable judgment when it comes to character—”

The dark-haired woman snorted in disgust.

Ari paused long enough to sneer at her before pinning a new smug grin on his face for the Kryv. “As I was saying, I am an *impressive* judge of character, but I did not see the Nightrender as a traitor.”

My body moved before my mind finished accepting his name had been mentioned. I shoved between Gunnar and Ari.

“You saw him?” Hells, I shared the same damn desperation as Ari had not moments ago. “Where? Did he look well?”

Ari arched one brow. Over my head he found Gunnar. “Another who shouts at me before introducing themselves.”

“Malin Strom,” Gunnar said. “My aunt, Kase’s lover, oh, and the true queen of the East.”

Ari blinked several times before turning his dark gaze back to me. “Well, then. That lends more than a few questions. I was unaware the Eastern regions had a queen.”

“They didn’t,” said Niklas lazily. “Until Kase was taken from us after we broke Hagen out. We discovered more than one secret that night.”

“Wait.” Ari held up a hand. “He was taken from you? I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I do not think the Nightrender is your ally any longer. I

always knew him to be rather . . . surly, but this was different.”

Lynx snorted, the sound of it spurring a chuckle from more than one Kryv.

“Ah. I’m guessing you tried to interact with him.” Niklas grinned and used a knife to clean out his fingernails. “Didn’t go well?”

“Mostly deconstructed into the bastard threatening to spike my head, then me promising war.”

Hells, I needed to feel Kase beneath my fingertips. Needed to take even a piece of the anger growing inside him. The pain in his eyes haunted me since the moment I’d seen him.

Gunnar shook his head and clapped a hand on Ari’s shoulder. “Productive work of spreading peace, Ambassador.”

“Turns out I’m rather protective of you,” Ari said, grinning. “Thought he might’ve sold you off and duped us all this time. He has wounded me. I thought I was more memorable.”

“Gods.” The woman guard rolled her eyes.

“Ignore her,” Ari said. “Saga puts ambition above thought and fear for others.”

“I am here on behalf of my queen to see that her son is safe, and peace between another kingdom can be reached.”

“And to search out Eryka,” Bracken said.

The woman tipped her head. “There is always that hope.”

She didn’t sound hopeful at all. No mistake, the way the two guards looked at each other, I suspected most believed this lost princess to be dead, and the prince was the one not letting her go.

“But,” the guard’s face hardened again when she looked back to Ari, “we did not come to meddle in the Ambassador’s feckless games of breaking timeless traditions in whatever kingdom you visit.”

“Timeless traditions.” Ari’s lip twitched, but he painted a false, wide grin on his mouth when he looked back at Gunnar. “She means tyranny and oppression.”

The woman gripped the hilt of her sword tighter, and I feared any moment a battle might break out between the two.

“With respect, Prince Bracken, we should return to the palace.” She peeled her gaze off Ari and gave a nod of respect to the fae drinking at the table. “They are the folk we came to see, not—”

“We stay,” he said. “There is mischief among us, dear Saga, and I for one

could use a day of mischief.”

She clenched her fists, clearly uneasy, but pinched her lips into a tight line at the man’s word.

Ari barred her out and stepped into the huddle of Kryv. His eyes dropped to mine. “I would like to know what happened to our most fearsome ally. I was given direct instructions to make the man smile no less than five times should I see him. Failure is not in my capacity to accept.”

I think I liked this fae. Odd, since lately I did not like much of anything.

A bit of warmth, almost like peace, settled in my chest. As if the fates were granting us a bit of light in the endless darkness. How an ambassador of the North would help, I didn’t know. But we had roles to play, and somehow, he would be part of it.

“Sit, my friend,” Niklas said, opening a hand to the empty tables. “We will tell you a story of an empty throne and the magic of memories.”

THE MEMORY THIEF

The fae visitors sat in a bit of stun by the time the Guild of Kryv and Falkyns finished our tale of the Masque av Aska and losing the Nightrender to vicious memory spells.

We drank ale in the quiet lavender twilight, staring at a small fire behind the Ruse. Dagny and the hidden Falkyns had joined us once we made it clear no threat existed. She sat beside the nymph woman and asked her a thousand questions about the magic and fae of the South.

In the Southern Kingdom fae folk lived as if they emerged from fables and fanciful sagas. Water nyks, sprites, huldrefolk—the guard was part huldre—underground kin who bore the thick skin of trolld folk. Horns, wings, tails. It could all be found in the South.

But the strangest of their tales was the folk of the South lived without fear of their magic. Skirmishes amongst the courts abounded, but according to Bracken, whose High Court of Hearts oversaw all the lesser courts, it was nothing worthy of war for a crown.

Ari had said little for a man who enjoyed speaking. The story of Kase's fate had unsettled him, and his distress, oddly, caused me to trust him more. He reclined in his seat, long legs outstretched, and tapped a knife back and forth over his knee.

"Fury dagger," Ash whispered to no one in particular. "It's what they call their strong blades in the North when they fill it with their tricky earth magic."

Ari grinned at the sound of the boy. "I'd forgotten the children of the Kryv were the wisest. You know your weapons, boy."

"The boy, Ellis, told me about your blades."

“Ah, yes. He does know a lot about weapons. Probably why he is now beginning to train as a warrior.”

Ash huffed and shot a narrowed look at Lynx. “In the North boys of thirteen train to be warriors. In the East boys of thirteen are hidden and not allowed to *rift*.”

Lynx chuckled and shoved the young Kryv’s shoulder. “They must like boys of thirteen less in the North if they put them into battle.”

“I wish I was liked less,” Ash muttered under his breath, but it was what the room needed to breathe again.

The fae, the Kryv, the Falkyns, even I let out a soft chuckle until the mood sobered.

“So, if what you tell us is true, Niall Grym will not be Fate’s chosen king.” Prince Bracken scanned the room, his pale eyes flicking to each face.

“Fate has little thought for the Eastern Kingdom,” Raum said. “But we speak true. Malin brought the queen’s ring to life by merely standing near it.”

“This could be what Eryka meant,” Bracken said to the half-huldre guard. “She spoke of the three kingdoms united.”

“Brack,” the woman whispered, then seemed to recall the rest of us watching. She cleared her throat. “My Prince, Eryka also said she would be the one tasked with the duty to unite them. How? She is not even be the heir to be the high queen in the Court of Hearts.”

“She could see the desires of the Norns, Sofia. They led her here.”

The guard gave her prince a soft look. “But how do you explain her ranting about the point of the arrow? The face in the darkness? I say these things to help, not to hurt. She was not well; her visions had grown too strong. I think they led her down a dangerous path and . . . she did not return from it.”

I did not know this princess, but the way the prince’s face contorted in pain, he must’ve cared for his cousin greatly.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said. “But I could not . . . I had to come here to see for myself.” Bracken looked at Ari, then to me. “We have no intention to steal your crown.”

“A crown, I assure you, I don’t want. I fight for the Nightrender, not the throne.”

“Even still, there is a battle coming. My cousin, the one we lost, she was a unique fae called a star seer. A visionary who could read destiny through the sky, but she could see things too. Future things.” Bracken paused, gathering

his words. “As she grew, her sights turned to the East. She insisted there was a path of fate here that she needed to follow.

“A path that would lead to three kingdoms being united in peace. She believed it would be done through her and another, but all she saw of the second was darkness and the glint of silver. An arrow, or blade, or something. It made little sense, but one night she stole away from our shores and disappeared.”

“No disrespect to your cousin, but are you certain she could see clearly?” Gunnar asked. “Aligning with the East would not unite three kingdoms.”

The guard beside Bracken turned her soft face toward Gunnar. “You do not trust such magic, Young Prince?”

“I wish everyone would stop calling me prince,” Gunnar grumbled.

“Embrace it,” said Bracken with a wink. “Folk begin to do what you tell them.”

Ari smiled and went to stand beside Gunnar. “I was skeptical of Eryka’s gifts at first, too. Soon after I arrived in the South, I witnessed her talent for predictions and prophecy more than once. It was impressive.”

Saga glared at Ari. The guard was in a constant state of suspicion with the North’s ambassador, and I was curious. Not enough to press, but it was interesting that she suspected him, yet I trusted the fae more than I trusted her reluctance to stray from the course of vowing with Niall.

More than once Saga had muttered how vows were needed to seal peace between kingdoms, to strengthen the South.

“This does not need to be fought alone,” Ari said to Gunnar. “You know there are folk who would very much wish to hear the news of the Nightrender’s predicament.”

Gunnar nodded. “I know—”

“But as we said,” Hagen interrupted, “we are not going to place more than necessary at risk. That includes you from the South. We are going to retrieve the Nightrender, and it will be a stand against those you’ve come to unite with.”

“Only if the High Queen overrules my voice,” Bracken said. “I have no plans to unite my sister with the heir of the Black Palace. Although, the High Queen does, and, alas, she has more power to wield than I.”

Hagen gave a nod of understanding. “Still, if you wish to return to the Black Palace, then do so with the knowledge we are enemies. As for the North.” My brother looked at Ari. “Let them have peace until . . . until I can

bring more peace.”

“And if it does not go as you wish?” Ari said. “If you get your throat slit before you get the chance to hold your daughter or the princess?”

Hagen winced. “Then I will save their seats in the great hall of the gods.”

Ari shook his head but didn’t argue. No doubt, he wanted to.

Bracken cleared his throat, clearly unsettled. “We will inform the Black Palace we have plans to return home. I will see to it no treaties are signed until . . . until we perhaps see a little more clearly.”

“The queen will oppose the delay,” Saga said.

“Then she will oppose it,” Bracken snapped with more coldness in his voice than he’d let on since coming.

Ari seemed more than pleased with the reprimand before he came to my side. “I did not think it would come so soon. A new battle for a queen.” He took my hand. “Battles should not be fought alone.”

Then he left me with no time to respond before he took a moment longer with Gunnar. The two stood close, muttering to each other in low voices.

I made plans to ask Gunnar what they discussed. What a man as Ari Sekundär, who’d fought in a war before, thought of our troubles here. But when Dryck’s old clock chimed the hour, my blood rushed to my head. All gods, I needed to leave, or I would not make it to the meet in time for the high moon.

“Dag.” I tapped her arm and lowered my voice to a whisper. “I need to go wash. Will you let Hagen know I’ve not been snatched by the skydguard? You know how incessantly he worries.”

Dagny held the heaviness of a hard life in her eyes. Doubtless she ached to begin the promised search for her stolen son, but she still managed to grin. Still managed to be loyal and kind. “I will see to it no stupid men find you for a time. It’s for their sakes really. Should Kase hear anyone saw you naked in his absence, I think he might slaughter even the Kryv.”

She laughed, and I forced a stilted chuckle. But the thought burned a new hole in my scabrous, rotting heart.

I would sell my soul to the hells, I would take his place in the Black Palace prisons, if only I could see the Nightrender look at me like he had before the Masque av Aska.

Like he would burn the entire world for me alone.



SOUNDS of night creatures scurrying around in the shadows of the trees lifted the hair on my arms.

I hugged my middle and tugged the hood further over my forehead, staring at the glow of the pale moon above me. Had he not read the missive in time? Tardiness when so much was on the line should we be caught turned my stomach sour.

I cracked my thumb knuckles. Shook out my hands. I closed my eyes, breathing in through my nose, desperate to still the race of my pulse. The snap of twigs brought me to pause. With slow movements, I dropped my hand to the hilt of the dagger on my waist and waited as the cracks and rustling drew nearer.

When the branches parted and icy light brightened his face, I allowed my shoulders to slump in relief.

“This is dangerous to keep meeting this way,” he said.

I was still unaccustomed to seeing the spark of worry in my stepfather’s gaze when he looked at me. For so many turns Jens Strom had ignored me. Placed me in the stables, forgotten me. Now to see the sacrifice and wickedness he’d lived to keep me nothing more than an uninteresting woman, to keep my identity secret, left me in a collision of affection and more questions than our lifetimes would allow.

“I know.” I looked once over my shoulder at the crunch of dried leaves. Assured we were still alone, I faced Jens. “Any luck on the ring?”

My stepfather sighed. “Ivar has hidden it well, no doubt he is trying to destroy it entirely. I have been unable to find it.”

A disappointing report, but understandable. Jens lost track of the queen’s ring after I’d left it abandoned on the ground at the Masque av Aska. We didn’t know what would happen should I finally slip the ring on my finger, what it might do for my mesmer.

On the chance it was needed, I always asked for reports. They always returned the same.

“What news from you, Malin?” Jens kept his hood over his head, but I could make out his full lips beneath his thick beard and the runes marking his cheeks.

“I faced him today,” I said. “Through mesmer.”

Jens's mouth twitched. "And? How did he receive you?"

"He ended up killing me, but Daj, he desired me. He was so conflicted. I saw it in his eyes. I must see him face to face and it cannot wait for a new plan. It must be now. I feel it like I know the bleeding sun rises. To touch him, to be *real*, it could be the exact step needed."

"He killed you, and you wish to see him in the flesh?"

"Yes."

"No." Jens snorted. "If your guild of thieves agreed with you, then you would have no need to reach out to me. I will not put you at risk in this—"

"I will go with or without your help." My voice quivered, and I did not even try to hide it. I blinked through the sting of frustrated tears and stepped closer. "I know he needs me. I *know* it. If you think death is enough to frighten me from going to him and easing his burdens, his pain, then you do not understand the depth of my devotion to Kase Eriksson. Now, tell me where he is."

Jens ground his teeth and let out a slight growl in the back of his throat. "I was there when he chose that old wooden rose."

"I know." My tongue swiped out to wet my lips. "I have the reports from Hob and Luca, but . . . what did you think when you saw him?"

"He's fading. Light is leaving his eyes, and not from his mesmer."

It took all my strength to remain planted in the small clearing and not dart through the trees straight to the Black Palace.

"Then help me help him." Dammit. My voice cracked. I could not stop the bubble of emotion. "You believe I am the true heir of this kingdom, so trust that the Norns are guiding me. My fate is tangled with the Nightrender. I-I believe even my mother knew it."

"Your mother never knew Kase."

"No, I know. But I saw her memory."

Jens's gave me a widened look of surprise. "You did? Then you know the sacrifices of those before you to keep you safe."

"I do, but don't you recall what she named me, what she nearly demanded I become? She said I would be a queen of sh—"

"Shadows," Jens said in a soft breathy whisper. "Hells. I'd forgotten until you dragged it back out."

"When I heard that," I went on, "it was as if a voice spoke to my heart and told me my path has always been destined to walk alongside his. I cannot let him fade, not another day, Daj. As he fades, so do I. These weeks, I

cannot explain it, but it is as if my soul is seeping out of me, little by little.”

Jens kept quiet for a long pause. At long last, he let out a long sigh. “I will help you. Give me time. Meet me one toll before the dawn, and I will have your way into him, and hopefully a way out.”

A vicious sort of smile curved over my mouth. Jens danced a fine line with his duty as Master of Ceremonies for Ivar, but also the first and most loyal subject of the unclaimed crown. I knew he would try to help Kase as best he could without bringing harm to me or Hagen.

And it was a breathless relief knowing he was doing it.

“Thank you.”

“You cannot be seen or recognized, yet you are known. You must wait for me, so I might help conceal the truth of your visit should we need it. Promise me you will meet me.”

“I promise.”

Jens closed his eyes with a sigh. “This cannot fall back to Bard, Malin. Allow me to keep at least one child in my stewardship safe.”

Bard was no child, but I understood Jens’s concern. Ivar would be holding House Strom under scrutiny, and Bard would be of particular interest.

Bard had never been kind to me, but there were parts of me that did not blame him for it the same as I once did. He’d been taught to see me as nothing, but he had shown a great deal of pain when I’d joined the Kryv, when Hagen had been taken.

Truth be told, I was beginning to believe Bard Strom felt a great deal more than he let on.

I nodded. “I will do all I can to keep him separated from the whole of this.”

“Good. I must tell you I disagree with this move. If Kase kills you, then somehow finds his way through this, he will never forgive himself.”

I bit the tip of my tongue and nodded. I knew the risk, but it was one I also knew was needed.

“If you’re sure then.” Jens stepped closer with a bit of reluctance and muttered the directions on where and when to meet him. He hooded his head again as he prepared to leave. “I will do all I can to prepare him to receive you better than your last meet. Give me until tomorrow night, Mal.”

I sighed in frustration.

“Malin,” Jens said sternly. “These moves are delicate. I have to prepare

for risks to our household, to the folk under my employ. I need to make arrangements to keep not only you, but Hagen, and your guild safe.”

“I did not ask you to—”

“I know you did not ask, but it is my duty.” He shook his head. “I will always protect you, Malin. I will always protect your brothers. Give me time to make arrangements, and to soften Kase, if it is possible.”

One night. I could give him one night. “Thank you, Daj.”

Jens nodded. “Now, I suggest you get some rest. Tomorrow you must devise a way to slip out of Hagen’s watch. No small feat.”

I scoffed and bid him farewell, watching him disappear back through the wooded path. Once I was alone, I closed my eyes. If I were wiser, I might hold a touch of fear, caution, maybe hesitation. All I felt was the heady rush of excitement. Of a surety this step was right and would alter the course.

How, I didn’t know, but the Nightrender had been left to suffer long enough.

THE NIGHTRENDER

C old water soaked into every pore, but had little effect on the unease blooming like a disease in my chest.

I dipped my hands in the steady stream of clean water in the skydguard wash stalls and tried to scrub away the sweat and grime, and every thought of the bleeding day. The pitch of night blanketed the world outside, but I could not sleep.

My mind would not go still.

Not long after yesterday's announcement, the fae disappeared. The Lord Magnate received word they were abandoning the East. Ivar had been sour since, ranting that they were to discuss the alliances at the Black Palace, not through missives.

I did not know if they would return, but after the crossing with the strange fae man, it would be too soon if I saw them again. For all I cared they could scurry back to their knolls and rot.

To unite with a court of any kingdom was a foolish move on Ivar's part, but I couldn't quite place the heart of my unease. True, I did not trust the fae, but it went deeper. A wrongness choked me about the entire idea of Niall rising as a king.

I leaned my forehead against the damp wood of the wash stall, water spilling over my scarred shoulders, my chest. The fae who'd spoken with me, he'd known me. I felt it to the bleeding center of my bones.

The list of those who knew things I didn't continued to grow. Luca. He spoke with aggravating vagueness about life and the past. The bleeding hawker in the square. The child thief.

Her.

I clenched my eyes at the memory of her brilliant spring grass eyes growing wet with betrayal when I plunged my blade through her insides. The way she'd looked at me before, the way she seemed to know of the torture inside me. How she'd wanted to take the pain from me.

The way she knew how fiercely my desire for her had grown.

I swallowed through a knot in the back of my throat. Blood heated and pooled low in my gut as I allowed traitorous thoughts of her face to take control. She had to be a cruel Alver of sorts, must've cast a wicked spell over me to create this ugly obsession in my head.

An obsession I wanted to keep more than I yearned to be rid of it.

When I'd rammed my blade through her, it was as if my limbs moved outside of my control. Wildly my mind urged me forward, but my heart fought to stay the blade. I would never shake the sinking dread in my chest at the sight of my sword through her middle.

A voice, not my own, had screamed in my skull that I'd done my duty. But a deeper sense, an unsettling feeling had prickled up my arms with the wrongness of the move.

I slammed a fist against the wall, muscles tight. No denying I wanted the thief, to a place where longing for her caused pain. There was a heady bit of treasonous relief knowing she still lived somewhere in the world.

The need for her skin against mine grew with each wandering daydream. Her lips would be warm, her taste intoxicating.

How would she move against me?

How would it feel to taste every piece of her body? To drag my tongue over her neck, her breasts, her stomach, as if I could claim her as mine. How would it feel to slip my hand between her legs, destroying her the way she was destroying me?

Gods, I was a damn fool, a bleeding traitor.

She was not welcome in my world of duty and honor. Yet my head swam in thoughts of heated breaths, in slow, gentle kisses. So close I could practically smell the sweet hint of her hair. Like a memory my mind had plucked out of nowhere as if we'd touched in such a way before.

With hurried movements I let the cold water chase away thoughts of the thief. I plugged the stream, dressed, and slipped out of the wash stalls.

The moment I closed the door behind me, a hand gripped my shoulder. Shadows coated my body at the rush of adrenaline, but faded as hate overtook fear when I looked at his face.

“Sabain? Why are you awake?” My heart dropped. “What’s happened?”

The Benevolent had let his pale hair fall into his face, his tunic was untucked as if he’d quickly dressed.

“I was sent to find you.” His voice was rough and angry. “Apparently, the Master of Ceremonies wishes to have an audience with you in the council room and I was the blessed soul sent to fetch you.”

My brows tugged at the center. The Master of Ceremonies? At this hour?

The man kept to himself and rarely interacted with others while under the mask of his official title. It was no wonder why Sabain looked at me like he might split in two from envy.

I gave him no response, simply turned on my heel and strode back into the palace.

Two skydguard stood outside the council chamber, and at the sight of me, they promptly moved aside. But before I could enter the chamber, a man slipped out into the hallway

Bard Strom.

Luca said he always found the man pompous, ambitious, and desperate to find a place among Heir Magnate Niall’s inner circle.

Since the Masque av Aska Bard had grown stoic and distant. I did not suspect Bard Strom had anything to do with his brother’s betrayal, but believed he’d taken it wholly personal his family had been shredded apart.

The new heir of House Strom seemed content never to speak with others again.

“My Lord,” I said, tipping my head in a greeting.

As always when we crossed paths, Bard Strom pinched his lips like he was seeing a ghost, but one that disgusted him.

“Gods, I just can’t.” He shook his head and stormed away from me.

I watched his back until a throat cleared behind me. The Master of Ceremonies removed a traveling cloak. A few twigs were tangled in the threads as if he’d come through the brush recently. He wore the full mask. A polished, porcelain face with sturdy velvet fabric printed in the richest blue. Each pointed end had a gold bell, so every step caused a whimsical jingle to follow him.

“Do not take his dismissal personally,” he said, his voice too deep to be true. Laced in the threads of the fabric of his mask were elixirs to alter every word. He was to be a ghost, an unknown. A formidable symbol of the masquerade. With a flick of his fingers, he signaled for me to follow him

inside the chamber. “Bard has a great deal on his mind.”

Only once the doors were closed and sealed behind us did he remove the mask. Jens Strom rubbed a hand down his face, wiping away lingering flecks of gold dust from the mask.

“No doubt you’re wondering why I’ve brought you here, Kase.”

I clasped my hands behind my back. “I admit it was a surprise. You summon me under your official title.”

“Yes, well, I find it keeps folk away when they believe I am engaged in official business for the Black Palace.” Jens pointed at a chair at the long council table. “Sit.”

I complied, adjusting the sword on my belt as I eased into a high-backed chair. “Are we not speaking about official business, My Lord?”

“No.” Jens leaned against his chair and steepled his fingers in front of his mouth, studying me until my pulse quickened. “I have a personal request, and I must urge you to consider my words. Do not doubt them straightaway. I believe we have enough respect for each other to do that, right?”

I did have respect for House Strom. Along with rancid guilt. Jens Strom treated me fair, and I repaid him by allowing constant thoughts of the woman who aided in the death of his daughter to flood my brain.

“I hold you in the highest regard, My Lord.”

“Good.” Jens glanced to the side of the room where a few embers still glowed in the inglenook. “Do you believe in fate, Kase?”

“I do not hold much stock in it. I believe our choices are our own.”

He smiled and let out a soft ‘hmm’, then turned back to the embers. “I once felt the same. But I have come to believe there are moments in life when paths cross so intricately it leads me to believe the Norns truly exist. You have lived at the Black Palace for many turns, yes?”

“Most of my life, Lord Strom.”

“Ah, most of your life. Tell me, before you came to be here, what was life like? Your mother? Father?”

Below the table, I clenched a fist over my knees. I did not know how to put into words the way my memories swirled into nothing but smoke should I try to look back too far.

“It is all right if you don’t recall,” Jens said. “You were rather small when they died.”

Breath caught in my chest. “You know my . . . my folk?”

“I did. May I tell you a tale, Kase?” He waited, granting me time to give

permission. I nodded, disquieted by the odd conversation, and engulfed in it all at once. Jens leaned over the table onto his elbows. "I am not so proud to admit that I am rarely found at worship meet. But one day, nearly nineteen turns ago, I took my three children with me to worship meet. Hagen had returned with good news from one of his journeys to the Northern Kingdom, and I felt it prudent we give thanks to the gods."

I ruffled at the mention of Hagen Strom, but Jens spoke his name with a tenderness, I supposed, only a father could give a murderous son.

"It was upon leaving where my path changed in ways I could not comprehend." Jens paused, jaw clenched. "My little daughter had barely reached two turns. I'd turned my back not more than two breaths, and when I looked back, the girl was gone. Toddled right into the bustle of the trade square.

"You are not a father, but you can understand the frenzy that comes with losing such a tiny thing. I still don't know how she managed to get so far, but we found her at the edge of the river. Hells, I'll never forget the panic of watching her little hand reach for the current. I wasn't going to reach her before she toppled in. I knew it. I cried for the girl to stop, but it was too late. She fell over the bank."

Jens dragged a hand through his hair. I didn't move, uncertain where this tale was going.

"My shouts must've caught her ear, for not a moment after my girl fell in, a woman in rags dove in straight after. She caught the girl before the current could tear her downriver and hooked her arm on a fallen log long enough for me and my two sons to reach them.

"The woman was nothing but bones. Starving, ill. She took us to her tiny bower hut to search for a quilt to keep my girl from freezing. When she pulled back the flap, I saw a boy. Dirty, hair a mess, but with the brightest, most curious eyes I'd ever seen."

My chest tightened.

He seemed pleased with my stoic silence and barreled on. "Your mother, Kase, saved my girl. When she had little strength because of an illness with her blood, she still dove in, risking her life to save my daughter. She was a young widow, and after your father—a fisherman—was killed during a sea storm, she had little penge to buy her herbs to care for her illness. It spread and weakened her, but she did all she could to keep her son's mouth fed. You ought to have pride in that."

My knee bounced beneath the table. “I . . . I didn’t realize you knew me as a child, My Lord. I do not recall it.”

For a moment a shadow of sadness, perhaps regret passed over his features. “I know you don’t. Your mother had to be selective on the work she took. Your mesmer had begun to show and it frightened too many folk. It drew too much attention. I cared little what sort of mesmer you had, so you and your mother came to stay at House Strom. You got on with my girl, being close to the same age, and your mother worked for pay until the day her illness took her to the Otherworld.”

Not once in my life had I been told I’d stayed at House Strom. Truth be told, it made a bit of sense, the reasons Jens Strom addressed me informally, why he always treated me with respect. The way he spoke of a mother I did not remember was dripping in it.

A bit of pride swelled in my chest. Hells, I wished I could remember her.

“And me,” I said. “What became of me after?”

“I’ll leave those memories up to you to recall. I tell you this because our paths crossed that day, and I cannot believe it was some coincidence. House Strom and House Eriksson were meant to cross, meant to unite, meant to trust each other. So, I ask you to trust me now. I only wish to bring you peace and clarity.”

“Lord Strom, I’m not sure I understand.”

“And you won’t,” he said. “But I am about to tell you something, and I need you to give my words thought. In the coming nights, if there is a time when you are torn between where your loyalties should lie, I hope you will consider taking the path that seems harder, perhaps even wrong. Take that path, and I swear to you it will bring you the peace you cannot find here.”

Did he know the conflict living in my head? “I have a good life here, My Lord. I assure you.”

“Yes, you live in a palace. You have meals, a bed, yet you are not at peace. I see it in your eyes. So, when the time comes where you are conflicted on which choice to make, do not listen to the voice in your head that forces your devotion to the Black Palace.”

“Lord Strom,” I said, voice rough. “Are you telling me . . . to stand against the Black Palace?”

“I’m telling you to doubt what you believe goes on here, Kase. Doubt what you think happened at the masquerade.”

“The masquerade? You know what happened.” I hesitated. “Your own

heir attacked.”

“Yes, Hagen was involved. So was a guild of thieves.” He rose from his chair and gathered a leather-bound stack of parchment off the floor. In four strides Jens stood next to my chair. “I am needed elsewhere, so I must go, but I’m asking you to trust your heart over your head in the coming days. Life is changing in the Eastern Kingdom. We all will need to trust what this says—” he pointed to my heart, “rather than what others tell us to believe.”

With a heavy slap he dropped the parchment stack in front of me.

“I know this has made little sense,” he admitted. “It may lead you in the direction that can bring you peace.”

“Lord Strom, I don’t see the purpose of this request. Is there something going on I should know?”

His smile was burdened. With one hand he drummed his fingers over the leather. “Yes, Kase. There are things you do not know. Take this as guidance, as a bit of respect for your mother. I promised her I’d keep watch over you, and I intend to keep my promise.” He picked up the bound parchment and placed it directly in front of me. “Read this, I hope it brings you the insight that leads to the peace you want.”

I fingered the parchment, refusing to give any hint to this man that I could hardly read, and his gift would be more strenuous than helpful.

“What is in it?” I asked.

Jens grinned as he reached for his gaudy mask. “An old child’s myth. A tale of two royal families and their power over memories.”

THE MEMORY THIEF

Niklas would rant and throw knives if he knew I'd slipped out to speak to Kase.

Tova would insist on coming, then shout at Kase for being dense until he turned his blade on her.

Raum and Vali would insist on keeping watch, but would surely talk too much to each other until Kase tried to murder us all.

Gunnar would join me for the thrill of it, but Hagen would certainly chain me to a wall and insist I'd slipped into a madness. My brother was one to speak of the desperate need to find the one you loved most. Perhaps he spoke boldly to the fae on his valiant attempt to keep Gunnar's mother safely ignorant, but I saw the truth. The longing glances at the horizon, the moments when my brother was lost in his own pain, his own thoughts.

His lover was in a faraway kingdom, mine was trapped a few lengths away.

I'd convinced the guilds that my stomach had grown unsettled and excused myself to retire early. I'd not even glanced at the shanties around Dryck's alehouse before I'd slipped through the wood to the waiting place.

No mistake, Hagen, or Tova, or Dagny would come to check on me, and they'd lose their bleeding minds once they found me missing. I had to hope by then, I might have good news to bring them on the Nightrender.

Behind a waist-high stone wall, I crouched and tugged a woolen cowl over my braided hair. One by one, I curled my fingers along the edge of the wall, glancing over, so only the top half of my head was visible to the opposite side.

Far enough away I would appear as nothing more than a shadow.

The skydguard tower was on the west side of the Black Palace. Windows were strategically placed, so the guards and Alvers within could keep watch on the Black Palace through the night. At the base of the tower two guards manned the only entrance, then on the uppermost platform two more paced beneath a wood and wattle rooftop.

“Malin.”

Blood rushed through my head at my name. Jens stepped out of a tall hedge, dressed in black, his head shrouded much like mine. I sank behind the wall again and hurried to the hedge.

Once I was tucked into the prickly shrub, Jens handed me a tattered smock and a covered basket.

“Remove the cowl and put this on.”

“You’re certain they’ll allow me to pass?”

Jens frowned at me, then pulled a gilded mask from a satchel over his shoulder. Chips of gold and silver sparkled like starlight over the white porcelain face. Out the top black satin curled like a sunburst. On each end of fabric was a twinkling gold bell.

The sight of the face shot an icy chill down my spine, but I buried the disquiet behind pinched lips.

Jens slipped the mask over his face. “I will get you through the door, but if it goes wrong and your identity is revealed, I’ll need to play ignorant, Malin. I’ll tie the tongues of the front guards, but I would not be able to tie every skydguard in the tower. I do have a few general Elixist poisons on hand. Still, do this with great care. To poison them all would take time and you could very well be on the executioner’s block before they all stopped breathing.”

I would not doubt Jens would slaughter every man in the tower. It would not be the worst he had done to keep his wards safe. We all had the call to wickedness inside us. Gods forgive me, but by now I would rather be a villain if it meant those I loved were safe.

“The more I think on it, perhaps I should join you in the room,” Jens said.

“No.” I rested a hand on his arm. “You promised. You cannot be connected to me as you just said. The *förvirring* is delicate, and it might be too much if he realizes we’re connected. I intend to draw him closer to me, not push him back to Ivar. You must get clear of the tower. Please.”

From behind the Master of Ceremonies mask, Jens freed a long breath. “Fine. Let’s go before I change my mind and inform your thieves what you

are doing. After this, I want you to bring the guilds to House Strom for a time.”

“You’re leaving the township?”

“I told you I would make arrangements for such things. It is long overdue for House Strom to serve as a stronghold in this battle. I’ve arranged to have word delivered to Hagen in the morning that I’ll expect throngs of thieves to overtake our land straightaway.”

An unexpected well of emotion scorched through the ice over my heart. My brow furrowed, and before I could think better of it, I curled my arms around Jens’s neck.

The man must’ve been as stunned as me at the sudden show of affection, but after no more than three heartbeats, he wrapped his thick arms around my waist.

“Thank you,” I said. “For all you have sacrificed, and your loyalty.”

Jens cleared his throat and patted my cheek before he released his hold on me. “I will always serve my queen.”

He pulled the mask up and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. How life had changed in so short a time. Mere months ago, I held fear for this man, I was certain he despised me. Now, *hells*, he was a saving gift from the gods.

“You remember how to get out?” he asked, returning the mask over his face.

“Yes.” I pulled back the rabbit fur covering on the basket. Inside was a loaf of seed bread and slices of blood pears. Beneath them, under a swath of linen, was the glint of steel. With shaky fingers I covered the knife.

Jens tipped his chin and took the lead into the night.

I kept a steady pace in his wake, head lowered, hugging the basket to my chest. It took a great deal of control to keep my gaze locked on the gritty pathway and not mark each skydguard as Kase had taught me. This was a risk, going in without knowing faces or exits, or if my face would be recognized at all.

I almost smiled imagining a clear-headed Nightrender scowling at me for taking such a sloppy risk during a scheme.

“Gods,” a breathy gasp shattered the silence. “My Lord, this is an unexpected honor.”

I dared take a peek after boots scuffled like skittering mice over the dirt. The two guards at the door had straight backs and lifted chins. They looked over Jens’s masked face, a sign of respect not to meet the Master of

Ceremonies in the eye.

Even if the Masque av Aska had ended, the Master of Ceremonies often traipsed the grounds of the Black Palace donned in his fool's mask.

Few knew his identity, after all.

"Yes." Jens's voice was low, gritty, hardly the true tone of my stepfather. "The Lord Magnate sent food for the Malevolent."

"Will you be dropping it, My Lord?"

Jens clicked his tongue. "If I had time to be a damn delivery serf, I wouldn't have brought one."

He made a dismissive gesture at me, and I dropped my chin lower.

"Of course, My Lord. We'll take it to him."

"If you abandon your post, who will be guarding the doors? You'll let the girl go in," Jens said. "And you will never speak the truth of my presence here nor the woman. Speak only lies."

A chill soaked the night. My skin pebbled against the cold. For half a breath, the guards' eyes glazed as though in a fog.

After a moment, they studied Jens, then nodded. "Only we stand here, My Lord."

One guard narrowed his gaze at my stepfather. Clearly he knew something had been done to them but would never be allowed to speak it.

Strange to see Jens's mesmer at work. A delightfully wicked Talent I was pleased to have on our side.

"You know what to do, and you've promised."

It took me a few breaths to realize Jens spoke to me. I squeezed his forearm. "I'll see you at House Strom soon."

I took a step for the door, but halted when a man strode through at the same moment. My heart sank into my gut, and his name slipped off my tongue before I could stop it. "Eero."

The traitorous Falkyn studied me for half a breath, then his face contorted into a cruel sneer. "I knew you'd show your bleeding face someday. Take her! She is the thief who tried t-to . . . dammit . . . she tried to assassinate the Heir Magnate."

The words stammered off his tongue as if it took a great amount of thought to shape them.

"It is only us here, Lord Eero," said the skydguard, still glaring at Jens.

"What? You fool. Take her."

"It is only us here, Lord Eero," the second guard repeated.

Eero reached for his sword, but stopped at Jens's deep rumble. "I told you this once before, you bastard. You cannot speak of her. Not as the thief, nor as the heir. You cannot speak, nor write that the woman was here for she is not here."

Eero let out a roar of frustration. "No. No, bleeding hells."

"Oh, poor Eero. Your tongue is tied." I did not fully understand my stepfather's mesmer, but it seemed if they could not speak of the existence of me, they could not touch me either. Even standing in front of them. What a maddening trap to be in.

Eero gripped the sword on his waist, but did not release it. His glare was nothing but hate and murder when he looked at me again.

I traced my fingers down the side of his jaw, grinning. "I have dreams of carving every name you betrayed into your skin, then taking each finger, each eye, your tongue, until you sob for death."

His hard glare cut through me, but he said nothing.

I leaned in, drawing my lips against his ear. "But Niklas deserves the honor. When the day comes, and it will, I will be there, watching."

Eero spat at my feet and clenched his jaw.

"Time to move. Remind him to follow a harder path," Jens said. His voice was haggard, weakened. No mistake, his mesmer was draining him. "I need you to get out of sight or I cannot complete the tied tongues if their mind is still convinced you are here."

"Thank you."

I gave Jens a small smile, squeezed his hand, then hurried past the wretched Falkyn and into the skydguard tower.

THE MEMORY THIEF

I didn't knock, and palmed the iron door latch until it clicked, then eased the door open with a nudge from my shoulder.

Every movement grew tedious. I held my breath until my lungs burned.

He'd sense fear, so I imagined better days. Laughter. Taunting. Swimming in the deep reeds of the pond all to impress the waif boys and girls. I held tightly to the memory of how a villainous crook touched gently, kissed passionately, and how he held me close to his body as if releasing me would be the end of him.

The room was dimly lit by a single tallow candle on a sconce. A simple space. One cot against a wall. Wooden shelves and crates to hold belongings. I breathed a little relief at the sight of a sheath and baldric on the floor, still holding his dagger and seax. A narrow desk made of oak was placed off to the side of the window. There my gaze came to a halt.

A flutter rolled through me, beginning in my chest, and ending in the lower part of my belly.

Kase's bare, scarred back faced me as he hunched over a stack of parchment. His skin was paler than before, a little pallid, and the broad muscle across his body was growing leaner, weaker.

I pressed a palm to my chest, rubbing out the ache for him, the *relief* he was alive, the pain of not being able to rush into his arms.

Kase—unaware he was no longer alone—lifted a hand and covered his left eye. I waited three breaths, before he switched hands and covered the right side of his face.

Slowly, I closed the door at my back and choked out a pathetically shaky

opening. “You look as if you could use something hearty to eat.”

Kase whipped around, standing so abruptly the chair knocked over. “Get out, girl.”

“I must deliver this food.”

“Then leave it and go.”

I snorted. “A bit of gratitude does a great deal of good, you know?”

Shadows slithered from the corners as mesmer flared in emotion. “I could have them take your tongue for your disrespect, girl.”

The next moments would be fast, critical, possibly deadly. I slipped a hand inside the basket and curled my fingers around the hilt of the knife. Eyes down, I softened my tone. “You’ve threatened the same once before, *Nightrender*.”

The basket fell from my hands as I drew the knife. My eyes locked on his for half a breath. In his stun, shadows flickered, giving up some of the beautiful gold. There and gone, before Kase made a lunge for his weapons.

I was closer.

Before he could catch hold of his sword or dagger, I kicked them behind me and had the knife aimed at the swell of his throat.

Shadows thickened around my neck, chest, around my limbs, but did nothing more than add a layer of ice over my skin. Kase’s inky eyes flashed in hot anger, his breaths were sharp and heavy.

“You must have a great desire to meet the Otherworld, thief.”

“Not particularly. I’ve come to speak with you, nothing more.”

“Says the woman with a knife to my neck.”

“Says the man with his mesmer ready to snap *my* neck.” I tilted my head. “Except you can’t, can you? Because I do not fear you.”

A wicked sort of grin pulled at his lips. “Foolish of you.”

A sharp gasp slid from my throat when his grip tightened on my hand holding the knife. In a few tricky motions he had the knife on the ground, my back pressed to his chest, and a hand around my throat.

Kase drew his lips against my ear, voice rough. “For you, thief, I would not use mesmer to snap the bones in your body. I’d use my hands.”

“At least—” I swallowed against his tightening grip. “At least your hands would be on me.”

Kase shoved me hard enough I stumbled to the ground. I hurried and flipped onto my back, scooting away, but kept my eyes on him.

Without breaking his dark stare, Kase leaned over and picked up the seax

blade in the sheath.

He pointed the sword at my heart. "It is good to know you aren't an illusion this time. I can finish what I attempted at our last meet."

"It should hurt how much you want to kill me," I said. "But it angers me more than anything. You're too damn stubborn to admit—even a little—you're intrigued by me."

"I hold nothing but—"

"Disdain, disgust, yes, I know. That is what you say, but you have not killed me." I took a risk and leveraged to my knees with his sword still aimed at my chest. My voice quivered, but I didn't care. I would not look away. "Aren't you the slightest bit curious why I would risk coming here after you so rudely stabbed me last time? I do not have a death wish, yet I am here."

Kase's jaw pulsed. I took it as a small victory when more of the sunrise gold in his eyes bled through the black.

"I could take this pain for you," I whispered, seizing any opportunity to reach the lost pieces of his heart.

Kase ground his teeth, his grip pulled tighter on the sword. When he spoke, the words slid through his teeth like he battled each one. "Why are you here?"

Another risk, another move. I lifted my hand to the point of his sword and softly nudged the tip away from my heart. "I promised I would always find you. Not even the gods could stop me."

"Find me for what?"

Tread carefully. Too much, too soon, and Ivar's mesmer could pull him back in. My eyes caught the parchment on the desk. He was trying to read what Jens had left for him, but Jens did not know the Nightrender as I did.

Ignoring his previous question, I used my chin to point at the desk. "I could help you with that."

Kase flicked his eyes at the parchment, then leveled his sword back at my throat. "Help with what?"

"With the words. Or do they not leap across the pages as they once did?"

Kase's shadows died at once, and the sword dropped from his hand. When he went to reach for the weapon, I rested a hand on the steel, drawing his eyes to lock with mine.

"How?" His voice was low, dark. Broken. "How do you know?"

"What if, even just for tonight, you pretended I was not your enemy." With a nod at the parchment again, I almost smiled. "If you'd like me to help,

I'd like to stay."

The way he studied me was as if the flicker of the memory of the night in Felstad when I discovered his trouble with words was trying to break through. I almost believed he would stand aside as he'd done in the ruins.

Foolish, wishful thinking. I jolted when Kase had the sword wrapped in his hand in a single breath, and back to the soft skin of my neck.

"Luca told you."

"Oh? Is Luca Grym aware the written word is a challenge?"

"I've known him many turns."

"Yes, but you would prefer to take this secret to the grave. Luca is unaware."

His eyes narrowed. "Yet, you know."

"Exactly."

Kase chuckled darkly, his shoulders tensed as he stared at me down the edge of his sword. "And I am supposed to believe I would hide such a thing from a man I've known since childhood but confess it to a murderess and a thief? With no recollection of confessing it, I might add."

"You are following along brilliantly." With care, I pinched the edge of the sword, winked, then tested whether Kase would allow me to point the blade away from my throat once more. He scowled like I'd burned his favorite tunic, but little by little the point lowered.

"You are a liar," he growled as I rose to my feet. "You've placed some illusion around me, so I am docile."

"No. I am no Hypnotik."

"We have never interacted but for your bloody attack at the masquerade. I certainly was too occupied trying to slaughter your guild to confess a struggle with words."

"Oh, how all those things you just said are so wrong." I clasped my hands behind my back, testing how far he'd let me go, and took a step toward the desk. "You are correct in one thing—I did not discover your aversion to reading at the Masque av Aska. I stumbled upon the discovery in the middle of the night days before, and that discovery led to a great many other delightful things."

Kase clenched his fists, looking rather intent on taking out my tongue like he always promised. "We. *Did not*. Meet before that night."

"You seem angry. I thought we were pretending I was not your enemy."

"You are pretending, I'm deciding how I would like to dispose of you."

Through Ivar's court? Or by my own hand?"

"I do love your hands."

Hells, it was almost like the first days after we reunited. Him, the sullen, sharp-tongued Nightrender. Me, the girl from the past, clawing her way to the soft side of his heart. When this was all over, I was certain we'd look back at this night and laugh. He'd call himself a fool. He'd kiss me. He'd do all the things I imagined night after night.

We stood one pace from each other, faces locked in stony frustration. The way he pierced me with his gaze, the way his eyes dropped to my mouth for half a breath, I could not tell if Kase wanted to strangle me or kiss me.

I shook my head, letting my shoulders slump, and pointed to the table. "Before you turn me over to the Lord Magnate or slaughter me, at least allow me to help you with these."

"I don't need your damn help. I can read them."

"Ah." I rocked back on my heels, scanning the first few symbols. "Glad to hear it, for it is a fascinating tale. What do you make of it?"

In my mind he could make three potential moves: toss me out of his chamber, admit there was something odd going on, or he could crack open my chest with his blade.

I should've known even without his memories this was still the Nightrender—he'd make a deal.

"You've found me out," he said in a tone that sent a shudder trickling down my spine. I froze, curious, a little frightened, as a wry smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "In the time I've had those notes, I've grasped only a few familiar terms. You, thief, will summarize it for me, so I can make sense of why it was sent to me. Then tomorrow I will ask the same of another to see if the summaries align."

"And if they do?"

Kase tilted his head, a poisonous flash of hate darkened his gaze. "I will offer you one more night of clemency and permit you to tell me whatever it is you think I must know."

All gods. If he honored his deal, this could be a step closer to him doubting his reality. A step back to me.

"And if they don't?"

"Meet me tomorrow night where the river splits and find out."

I swallowed the thick knot lodged in my throat. I'd meet him, no mistake, but in the trees, Gunnar would be perched beside Tova, arrows notched and

ready to strike fear into the heart of the man who fed from it.

“Agreed,” I said and shuffled through the parchment. I would need to be wise on how I spoke.

To my stepfather’s credit, this was a brilliant move. Kase already realized there were inconsistencies in his existence. He knew people knew things he could not recall. Perhaps this would help him consider some sort of memory mesmer was at play here.

Perhaps at long last he’d turn to us instead of Ivar.

But if I gave too much, the fear of entangling him deeper into the fetters of mesmer was palatable and bitter.

“This—” My voice cracked. “This is a saga about the two royal Alver lines that once ruled here in the East. Two princes, one with daughters, the other with sons, battled to claim the throne.”

Kase narrowed his eyes, but said nothing as I barreled on.

“As the story goes, both families were blessed with unique Talents. Perhaps you’ve read of the fabled memory workers.” My voice softened. “Anomali Alvers who had the power to truly alter the mind.”

When Kase remained silent, I let the suffocating quiet swallow me whole. Had I given too much? Not enough?

I startled through a jolt of hot blood through my chest when he drew close enough I could touch his face. I would’ve if I thought he wouldn’t break my fingers should I try.

“A fable?” Kase ruffled through the parchment, clearly discomposed.

“There is more detail, but you asked for a summary.” I took out one of the back sheets. “This is all about the different Talents within memory mesmer. The Alvers who can steal the past straight from your mind and share those thoughts with others.”

“How?”

“Through breath. Both living and the final breath of the dead. Come close enough—” I took a cautious step, so he had to drop his chin to meet my eyes. “Draw the lips near, like a kiss, then breathe deeply. The memories will slip away, forgotten.”

Kase’s voice went rough and gritty. “And what other Talents were there for these memory workers?”

This would be a chance to get him to question. I prayed to the gods it would open even a sliver of doubt for the Black Palace. “The other Talent belonged to Alvers with the power to . . . *alter* memories.”

I gave him a knowing look. Out of all the reactions I expected, to hear him laugh was not one of them.

Kase broke into a mocking sort of chuckle. One filled with condescension.

I folded my arms over my chest. "What's funny?"

A squeak scraped off my tongue when his strong hand gripped my throat. Firm enough that with a little more pressure it would make drawing breath difficult. He pinned my back to the wall, his body holding me captive.

"You're lying. And not a good lie." His eyes were black pools as he pressed his brow to mine. "How stupid do you think I am? I hear it in your voice, the hope I'll think all your manipulations are some sort of mesmer trick. As if I would ever believe mesmer could change real, tangible thoughts. I do not know if you are some witch sent from the hells to torment me, but you are playing a dangerous game, thief."

His breath heated my lips. I was a stupid woman. Instead of trying to be free of his aggression, the nearness made my knees weak, made my pulse bleed for more. For all of him.

"I am not playing a game," I whispered back. "Perhaps it would be wise for you to doubt what you believe goes on here and trust a harder path."

His eyes narrowed. "You're not the first to tell me this."

"It is good advice." Unable to stop, I rested one palm over the rapid thud of his heart.

"Leave," he said. "Now. Before I decide not to be merciful."

He demanded it of me, but he hadn't released my throat; he still caged me against the wall.

My hand traveled up his chest until I touched the throbbing pulse in his neck. By the gods, how I'd longed to touch him. I lifted my eyes. "I can take this pain from you. I see how not knowing what is real tortures you. Let me take it."

He blinked a few times, then slowly the pad of his thumb tugged on my bottom lip. "I want nothing from you."

"Liar." My fingertips grazed the rough stubble of his jaw as I lifted to my toes to whisper in his ear. "You desire me, but can't explain why. And you hate it. What if there was no reason to feel shame for such a desire?"

I grazed the curve of his ear with my mouth. Kase stiffened but didn't pull away.

"What if," I whispered, "the same desire you feel rages through me?"

He opened his eyes; the burn of want and passion was like molten gold behind the dark center. I pressed my hips against the hardness of his body. Kase groaned and dug his fingernails into the flesh of my shoulder.

“One night, remember?” I said. “For one night, let us not be enemies. Let us be something more.”

Kase’s breaths were harsh and jagged. The conflict of what he thought was true collided with the past fighting to break free, but after a few heartbeats his arm snaked around my waist; his frown deepened. “This is treasonous.”

By the gods, he was giving in.

If I had been given the gift of this one night, this one moment, I would not waste it.

I took his hand off my waist. My fingers trembled as I lifted the tattered hem of my skirt, then guided his palm to my leg. His breath caught, but soon enough Kase took hold of the hem for himself and slipped his callused fingertips to my bare skin. I kept my hand over the top of his as it traveled along the surface of my thigh.

“It’s only treason if you are caught. One night. Do not deny you want this as much as me.”

He swallowed and leaned closer. “Only to satisfy a need. Keep your mouth to yourself.”

I chuckled. “Afraid I might steal your memories like the story?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

Breath ripped from my lungs when the Nightrender gripped my underclothes, pulling them away, and curled his fingers into the heat between my legs. I snapped into a helpless arch against his touch. My hands grappled for his shoulders, seeking purchase to hold onto him.

Then it stopped.

He released my body as if I’d scorched him and took three steps back. “No.”

I pressed a hand to my heart, afraid the pressure of its beat would snap a rib. The agony of being abandoned by his clever fingers was too much. “What . . . what’s wrong?”

“You’re a trap. A ruse.” He clutched the sides of his head.

He stood still, allowing me to cross the gap between us. I took a risk with a gentle touch. Something safe. The way it always was when we were young. My palm touched the side of his face, drawing his bright, furious eyes to

mine.

I dared smile and shook my head. "I am not here to torment you. I'm here to be with you. Just you, not the Malevolent Ivar wants you to be. *You*. There is more to you than shadows, so is it possible there is more to me?"

He studied me. Every muscle in his weary body seemed to tighten and pulse with the agonizing tension ruining his beautiful mind. How many breaths we stood there, staring, hoping, mistrusting, I didn't know. Two, twenty, it didn't matter. I would stand still in his storm until it came to a calm.

"I am unarmed. I have no mesmer I can use against you." With slow, steady movements, I tugged at the shoulders of my dress and slipped one arm free.

Kase froze, but his eyes tracked my movements. I followed the rough swallow down his throat when I slid both arms out of my dress.

"See for yourself." My dress crumbled around my feet. His eyes drifted to the empty sheath on my thigh, to my naked skin where no elixir pouches could possibly be tucked away. I hugged my middle and met his eyes. "For one night, let me be yours, the way you want to be mine. No matter how you deny it, I see it in your eyes."

I fought the furious desire to shout at him that we were lovers, friends, that he was my every heartbeat.

In the next breath Kase's infuriating resolve snapped, and he charged. His hands claimed my hips, pressing my bare back against the cold wall; his body caged me there. "Do you see in my head? Is that your trick? You see the things I desire?"

A bit of a smile carved over my lips. He desired me, and the damn *förvirring* kept him questioning it. I had to believe the truth of an unyielding love was stronger than the magic of lies.

"I cannot read your thoughts. I simply hope the things I feel are returned."

He let out a rough growl, cursed to the gods, then slipped his hand between my thighs again. I shuddered and widened my stance, desperate to take all he could give. Hesitant to kiss, but Kase licked and nipped at my neck, claiming what he wanted.

He was cruel. He tortured me. Those wicked fingers stroked, teased, and slid deeper until I could hardly catch a breath.

Until all at once, he pulled away before I could pitch off the ledge. The gilded intensity in his gaze sent a shudder of fear through my veins. Not the

wretched sort of fear, but in a way that tangled the insides in nervous anticipation.

“K-Kase.” My entire body trembled as I blinked back to his gaze. His eyes were black, but not from mesmer.

With his free hand, Kase gripped my braid, tugging so my head arched back. “Am I to do this by myself? You say you feel so much.” He released my hair and took hold of my wrist, pressing my open hand to his tightening trousers. “Do your part, thief.”

My hands shook over the buckle of his belt. He matched my stance, legs wide, open. Wanting.

On instinct I leaned in, desperate to kiss him through all of it.

“No.” His rough voice drew me back. “I warned you.”

He’d pay for it. With added pressure to my grip, I stroked his length until he leaned into me with a groan. I dropped my forehead to the heated skin of his shoulder, desperate to be closer, to show him what was in my heart since I could not truly tell him.

We drove each other to a burning pinnacle, and for a moment I could almost catch a glimpse of the true emotions pulsing through us. Beneath the shroud of hate and lies, there was fierce devotion; there was love.

I’d give my life to set it free.

The short gasps of our breaths lulled me into a beautiful haze. My head fell back against the wall. Kase must’ve taken my pleasure as a challenge to make my lax body writhe in knots. He grabbed my leg and wrapped it around his waist, giving room for his fingers to curl and move in a new way, transforming me into nothing but malleable skin and bones.

“Gods,” I said as my body shook. I matched his pace, rocking my hips against his hand. “Say it. Say you want this. You think of me, you dream of me, just as I dream of you.”

“You bleeding haunt me.” He burrowed his face in the soft space of my neck. “Why?”

“Sometimes there are things only our hearts remember.”

Whimpers of pleasure grew louder. Kase covered my mouth with his hand and chuckled with a touch of satisfaction when I bit his palm to keep from crying out.

“Kase, I . . .” I couldn’t finish the words before my body shuddered and trembled through a wave of heat and pleasure. I cried out, and this time he made no effort to muffle it. No mistake, the sound only deepened his groans

and desperate movements.

My body wanted to go limp, but I held him close. He gritted out a curse against my throat as I worked him through his release.

But for the tangle of our heavy breaths, the world was silent as we waited for strength to return. As if this moment was shielded from the wickedness of reality, and for now we could embrace a fleeting bit of passion and peace.

“What is this?” Kase whispered, lifting his head from my shoulder. He thumbed the wooden raven charm around my neck.

Niklas’s warnings blared in my skull. Already I’d given too much, crossed too many lines. I could not risk telling him the whole truth. “The second half of a pair. A raven and a rose.”

“A raven and a rose,” he repeated under his breath. “Just like the . . . hawker’s cart.”

His fingers had started to stroke the twine, then moved to the ridges of my shoulders. I wasn’t sure he noticed until the wretched flicker of disgust returned to his eyes.

Kase turned away, tossed me a damp cloth, and fastened his trousers again. “Only to satisfy a need.”

“It was more, and I will be waiting until you dare admit it,” I whispered. I knew he felt a great deal more, but mesmer, or perhaps his own fears kept him from drawing too near to a new truth. If this night had proven anything, it was that he was still reachable.

After using the cloth, I tugged my dress back into place, and went to the window. Jens assured me there would be a trellis on the side I could use to scale down instead of risking passing the guards alone.

“Until tomorrow then,” I said.

Kase looked at me with a frenzied collision of desire and hate once again. “Tomorrow?”

“A deal is a deal. See if I spoke true.” I opened the shutters and sat on the ledge. “Goodnight, Kase.”

“Wait.”

I paused halfway out the window, heart in my throat. Kase shifted on his feet.

“You always speak my given name, and after . . .” He glanced at the wall. “What is your name, thief?”

Malin Strom was dead in his mind, but . . .

“Mallie. You may call me Mallie.”

I slid out of sight, catching the first slat of the trellis. My body craved to spend the night curled against him, to hold him until the wickedly clever gleam of all that was Kase returned.

But I took a bit of pleasure at the horrified shock on his face at the mention of his nickname for me.

A look that gave up one thing: somewhere inside the darkness he certainly knew his Mallie.

THE MEMORY THIEF

Beyond the peaks, a glimmer of sullen dawn broke through the glaze of darkness. Fire still rippled over the surface of my skin, an imprint of the possessive touch of the Nightrender I never wanted to shake.

I'd survived. A part of the warped version of the man I loved wanted to cut out my heart and put it on a pedestal in the great hall of the palace. But the stronger part still battled. No mesmer had the power to mask what his touch gave up. The truth that somewhere, deep inside, the Kase who'd always defended, always cherished his hayloft girl was breaking apart the lies.

I'd need to confess the truth of my little adventure and endure the fallout when the guilds ranted and threatened and, knowing Raum and Tova, pouted that I didn't include them.

There wasn't a chance to stew too long over how to break the news of my risky night to them before the snap of branches drew my gaze to the edge of the hedgerow around the alehouse.

My stomach clenched.

Hagen stood, broad and tall, arms crossed over his chest, and the frown on his face was a look I'd not seen since childhood. A look that informed me my older brother was severely put out with something I'd done, and he was going to let me know it.

"Where *the hells* have you been?" His voice was like rusted tin slicing over my skin.

I recanted. This was not the same reprimand from childhood. This was different. A new sort of panicked anger that only came when a man had survived losing everything, only to get much of it back, but the fear of losing his heart all over again now drove his actions.

I licked my lips and gave him the respect of meeting his eyes straight on. “I think you know, or you would not be so angry.”

More rustling sent a blanch of heat down the back of my neck. The Guild of Kryv stepped from the shadows. The only face who seemed happy to see me was Hanna. Then again, the girl looked like she’d just awakened for the day, and, to her, everyone must be gathering for a morning meal, not preparing to bury me alive.

Raum huffed and strode past my brother, stomping over to my side. “I saw you coming straight from the tower.”

My theory seemed to be right. Raum’s silvery eyes weren’t narrowed in a way that said he was bitter I’d kept a secret, more because I didn’t include him.

“You look guilty, Mal,” Gunnar said. He’d perched on a branch of an aspen tree, one leg dangling off the side, a smug grin on his face. Like this was wholly entertaining.

“She does,” Fiske added, leaning his elbow on Isak’s shoulder.

Niklas broke through the brush, his hand tangled in Junie’s, and the playful gleam of his eyes had gone to something poisonous.

At his back stood Tova with Dagny. Junius leaned back and whispered something to Dag, who grinned, nodded, then whispered to Tova. The Kryv snorted and popped a handful of cloudberry into her mouth.

“Thought the same thing,” Tova said through the mouthful, her eyes trained on me.

Hells, every eye of scrutiny left me wishing the ground would split open and swallow me whole.

“Where were you, Malin?” Hagen snapped again.

I glared at my brother. “The way you’re all snarling at me, I’d guess you already know.”

“True,” said Gunnar with a wink. “But we all want to hear you say it. For different reasons, obviously. Daj wants to wring your neck, but I think I’m more interested in how high you raised his temper.”

“You went to the skydguard tower,” Niklas grumbled. “Went to Kase without telling a bleeding soul.”

“That isn’t true,” I started, but stopped when Hagen chuckled bitterly.

“Oh, that’s right. You told Daj.”

I fiddled with my fingernails, avoiding his gaze. “So, you received Daj’s missive about moving to House Strom?”

“And then some.” Hagen gestured to the edge of the trees. Standing beside Vali and Lynx, Hob wiggled his fingers in a pompous wave.

“Lord Strom sent another m-message with Hob, since he w-was worried this time around,” Isak said. “Could’ve t-t-told us you w-w-were using him.”

Jens ratted me out? He said he would send word that the guilds could move to the estate, not about my plan to visit the tower.

“Don’t look so upset with the man,” Vali said, voice rough. “The missive wasn’t specifically about you scheming on your own, but I’m not sure if you’ve noticed—we’re all fairly clever and have the means to figure it out.”

“Daj did offer us refuge at House Strom,” Hagen said, stomping across the space until he stood two paces away. “But he left me a note at the end. He asked me to let him know how your meet with the Nightrender went.”

Jens *did* rat me out. Indirectly or not. Bleeding hells, the men in my life would be my torturous end.

“Stop with the look, Hagen,” I said when my brother’s gaze sharpened. “If I were in any real danger Jens wouldn’t have allowed me to go alone.”

“I know you, Malin, and I know how insane you get when it comes to Kase Eriksson,” Hagen retorted. “I have no doubt you gave Daj no choice but to help, or you’d do it on your own. *Gods*. You can’t lose your head because you care about—”

“Don’t.” I jabbed my finger against his chest. “Don’t you dare tell me how to act or feel. Not when you have spent nearly my entire life fighting and risking it all for someone you love.”

“This is not about Herja and my children.”

“It is the same!” My voice was shrill enough a few sparrows bolted from the branches. “Do not stand there—any of you—and tell me if your heart was locked away in constant agony, that you would not sacrifice everything to get to them. Niklas, tell me you did not fight for Junie when she was lost in the North. Or Isak, what if it was Fiske in the Black Palace? You would burn the walls to the ground to get to him.”

The redhead’s jaw clenched, but he tangled his fingers with Fiske’s, and nodded.

I did not stop. A cruel desperation flooded my veins in heat as I went on. “Dagny, speak true, there has not been a day that you’ve not thought of your son. Tell me you would not leap beneath a blade if it meant he was found safe.”

Dagny’s eyes turned glassy. “You know I would.”

“By the gods, we’ve sent Hanna to Kase, but I step into his sights, and you all lose your bleeding minds.”

“This is different,” Niklas said. “One, Junie did not want to slit my throat when she was taken prisoner. Two, Kase would not have harmed Hanna.”

“And he did not harm me!” I straightened my spine and stalked into the center of the crowd. “To reach him, to catch sight of the fierce way he fights was worth it. He is lost, suffering, and I will gladly lay down my own bleeding life to take it from him.” I spun around, catching each eye. “So go on. Try to tell me to stay away, try to tell me not to take a risk for his sake.”

From the sheath on my leg, I yanked the knife free as pain and desperation unlocked a frenzy I couldn’t tame.

“Try,” I said, voice low and dark, “to tell me the fight for the kingdom and claiming a throne is more valuable than the fight for the Nightrender. Go ahead. I’m waiting.”

A tremble of emotion pulsed between us. Everyone studied me in a different way. Lynx frowned. Not a surprise. Raum, though, winked and nudged a stoic Vali in the ribs. Isak seemed lost in my brazen attempt to create an image he might understand, and gripped Fiske’s hand so tightly, Fiske’s fingertips were discolored. Tova, Junius, and Dagny were back to whispering. Niklas stared at me, but, no mistake, the way his brow furrowed his scholarly mind was already blasting through ways we could use this to our advantage.

Hagen was the only one who still looked ready to chain me to a tree.

Gunnar snorted after the pressure of silence grew suffocating.

“Hells, Mal,” my nephew said, reclining against the trunk of the tree, “you’re bleeding insane. I love it.”

Hagen turned his glare to his son, but it only widened Gunnar’s smile.

Niklas let out a long sigh and dragged a hand through his hair. “At least tell us what happened.”

My face heated as I recalled the passion against the wall, but that was a piece the guilds had no business hearing. I dove into the beginning of our encounter. By the time I’d finished retelling the way Kase took to the saga of the two royal families the sun had chased away the morning mists.

“Dammit,” Lynx grumbled. “I’d hoped he allowed you to get close. If he had, the next time you might be able to steal the memories as planned.”

I kept my voice even and flat. “I don’t know, he let me speak. There’s, well, there’s a chance he might . . . allow me to come close, maybe touch him

next we meet.”

A snicker drew my eyes to the edge of the trees. Tova stiffened and dropped her smile the instant she caught me looking at her. I narrowed my eyes, her cheeks flushed in pink, but she bit her bottom lip as if she knew something.

Niklas wasn't scowling any longer. The cunning way he schemed had returned to his gaze. “If he realizes Malin did not lie about the saga, he'll meet her. He'll meet us all.”

“Now you agree the risk was worth it.”

Niklas rolled his eyes. “Don't be smug. You should've told us, but he allowed you the chance to plant the seed that there could be a reason behind the holes in his memory. I won't complain about that.”

There was another piece of the night I needed to admit. With a firm hand, I took hold of Niklas's forearm. “You should know, I saw Eero.”

Light fled from Niklas's eyes, and they turned black with hate. “Eero. Did he see you?”

“Yes, but Jens has tied his tongue. He cannot speak the truth of me. It if helps at all, it is driving him mad.” I tried to smile, but all I received from Niklas was a twitch on his cheek.

“Is he reachable?”

“It would be incredibly dangerous. As lord over the inner skydguard, he'll always be guarded, and I don't know where the Lord Magnate keeps his chambers.”

Niklas clenched his fists.

The Falkyns who bordered the trees grimaced, they murmured to each other, plotted their revenge on their fallen brother. Truth be told, we all plotted against Eero, but the way I saw it, whenever the sniveling, spineless rat was caught, Niklas deserved to land the killing blow.

Junius replaced my hand on her husband's arm. She alone had the ability to soothe the man. He faced her, jaw tight.

“We will find him,” she whispered, rubbing the lobe of Niklas's ear. “I swear to you. He is a marked man, my love.”

Niklas nodded tightly and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

“The river splits halfway between the Black Palace and Mörplatts,” Hagen said with heady reluctance. Doubtless it would take time for him to forgive me. “I say we go to House Strom, rest, have more comfortable beds, then meet the Nightrender together.”

A rumble of agreement rippled through the group.

“Will we snatch him back?” Ash asked, trying to twirl Kase’s hooked knife around his fingers.

Vali crouched in front of the boy and placed a hand on Ash’s skinny shoulder. “We will need to wait and see, Ash. Remember, he is still not him.”

The boy nodded, but muttered, “Still think we should snatch him. I’ll show him his knife if it’ll help him remember me. Good for slicing, and he loved it.”

My heart splintered watching Ash take Hanna’s hand and walk off, slouched as if he’d taken a blow to the gut.

Gods, I wished I could give them more hope.

The way Kase had touched me was almost as if he’d returned, but after watching the battle so closely, I had to admit the *förvirring* mesmer was horridly strong. Hooks had dug into Kase and held him just below the surface of freedom.

“Then it’s settled,” Hagen said. “We go to House Strom.”

“Lynx,” Niklas said. “You have one last mark to meet. We’ll wait for you at the back gates before we leave the township.”

The burly Kryv nodded and turned back toward the alehouse to attend to his ruse and placement in the watch of the Nightrender.

With a nod at Hob, my brother sent the hawker on his way with a return missive for Jens that we would join him at his estate, then Hagen disappeared toward the alehouse before I could speak to him.

Gunnar dropped from his branch and came to my side.

“He’ll forgive you,” he said, watching the place where his father disappeared. “He’s desperate to have some control, I think. To have a say on if you’re free or not because he had no say if we were free for so long.”

No doubt, Gunnar’s insight was true. Still, guilt tightened in my belly. “I should not have mentioned your mother. Not when I know how being separated from her is wearing on him.”

“But it is true what you said, and he knows it. I have seen my father take every risk, with no thought for his life, all to have a chance at freeing his family. Don’t give up, Mal.”

Gunnar winked, and left to follow Fiske and Isak to a nearby creek. With Gunnar’s accuracy with his bow, and Fiske and Isak’s natural talent at fishing, they were often the ones tasked with feeding the guilds.

I sheathed the knife in my hand, the thrill of the night fading to

exhaustion.

“Niklas has herbs should you need them. Tell me, and I’ll be discreet about it.”

With a jolt I wheeled around. Junius grinned with a touch of mischief, Tova, and Dagny behind her.

“Herbs?”

Junius leaned closer. “Personally, I think the two of you would make beautiful littles, but perhaps now is not the best time.”

All gods.

“I . . . I don’t . . .” My words wouldn’t form, and it only added to the delight of the three women. I cleared my throat. What did it matter? It was no secret Kase held my heart, we were lovers, and naturally if the moment came, we would act upon it. “Thank you, but herbs won’t be needed.”

Junie slouched. “Oh.”

I laughed. The disappointment etched on their faces was enough to chase away despair for a moment.

“Of course,” I whispered, leaning close. “There are other things to be done that will not result in a little.”

Kase Eriksson had been my truest friend as a girl, my confidant, my safe place. I’d never bothered seeking friendship with females, but the way the three women danced around me, demanding every sultry detail I would not share with the men, it almost felt like I was home.

They dragged me back toward Dryck’s house, laughing and gossiping like a few heartsick girls.

THE NIGHTRENDER

“Kase?”

A soft, sleepy voice came from somewhere in the dark. At once, the furious pace of my heart slowed. When a small, tender hand slapped around in the tear-damp straw and took hold of mine, I almost breathed normally.

“Go back to sleep.” My voice cracked. The more I aged, the more my damn voice cracked.

“What’s wrong?” A girl yawned, stretching her skinny, freckled arms over her head. Her fiery hair was a mess. Looked like birds might come take up space in it soon with all the bits of straw and tangles.

I liked her messy hair. I could’ve smiled.

But the smile didn’t come. Too many horrible thoughts plagued my head. Thoughts that always came with screams, and shadows, and too much blood. It was always the same. The messy-haired girl being tossed at my feet, her throat a fountain of dark blood. I always screamed, raged, sobbed, but nothing ever brought her back to me.

Then, whenever I lifted my eyes to face her killer, my face stared back.

“The Mare demons bothering you with bad dreams again?”

“It’s fine. Go to sleep.” Hells, the stupid sting of tears burned my eyes. One even fell onto my cheek. I buried my face in the tops of my knees to keep her from finding out.

Should’ve known she’d stick her nose in it anyway. I startled when her skinny arms reached around from behind, hugging my back, her cheek against my bony shoulder.

“Don’t cry, Kase. I’ll snatch the memories from you if you want. I’ll take the scary things.”

“M’not crying.”

“Yes, you are, but I won’t tell no one.” She squeezed me tighter. “Want me to take the pain away?”

I sniffed, but a smile tugged at my lips. With one hand I took hold of hers that clung to the front of my sweaty nightshirt.

“No. Just . . . just stay here. That’s enough.”

She nodded, then once we both laid back in the straw, the girl held my hand and kept one arm flopped over my stomach, holding me close.

“’Night, Kase,” she whispered.

I paused, waiting for the steady calm of her breathing to give up she’d drifted back to sleep. With a bit of slyness and lithe movements, careful not to wake her, I snuck a kiss. Just a small one in the center of her forehead.

“Goodnight, Mallie.”

I snapped up in my bed, sweat soaked, heart racing. Bits and pieces of the dream still filtered through my head. Her childish, dirt-smudged face was fresh and terrifying.

Mallie.

From the moment the thief had left me a sated traitor, with the simple name in her wake, I'd been unable to shake the prickle of unease that something was horribly wrong with me. As if the name had a bit of mesmer, it struck me deep and painful.

I knew the name, and a dark, dissenting side of my heart drew me to it over and over again. Until sleep demanded I stop thinking, I'd repeated it in my head, puzzling where I knew such a name.

With a grunt of frustration, I kicked back the furs over my legs and went to the window. Dawn was barely beginning to chase away the night. Below, the courtyard was lit by torches, and several patrols of skydguard marched back and forth.

I leaned my forehead against the cool window and closed my eyes.

The dream meant nothing. The name, the things the hayloft girl said, I'd merely projected it from comments made by the thief.

I braced my clenched fists against the walls on either side of the window. Unbidden, every thought turned to those moments with the woman's warm skin under my hands. The way her breath tangled with mine, the gentle whispers she left against my neck.

I'd planned to use her as a body to sate a primal urge. Nothing more. But what began as a way to satisfy the maddening desire, ended with a new delight of discovering all the ways *I* could please *her*. Like her pleasure, her happiness, mattered to me.

What we'd done wasn't enough. She'd burrowed deep beneath my skin, and I wanted more. I wanted to taste her lips. I wanted to know what it would be like to tangle up together in my bed, to claim her in every way, then fall asleep beside her.

The same as the two littles in the dream.

But with more turns behind us, and less clothing. Much less.

Mallie. Her name danced on my tongue, in my head. I'd called the hayloft girl Mallie. I'd stared at the bright green of a child's eyes, and somewhere in my head I knew the girl with messy hair was the thief.

She'd said things as the girl in my dream that she'd said last night. More

pleading to take my pain from nightmares, from this endless confusion.

I cracked my eyes and glanced at the table, still strewn in parchment. The saga of two families and their memory mesmer. I shook my head. Memories couldn't be taken, not really. Illusion, yes, but mesmer did not have the power to permanently change something so personal, so engrained in an individual body as memories.

I could not recall, in all the knowledge I'd gained on mesmer, ever coming across anything that resemble such a Talent.

A scoff scraped off my tongue at the irony. I couldn't recall, but what if it was because the memory had been stolen?

Ridiculous.

I repeated the stupidity of the idea in my head, but nothing seemed to align when it came to the thief. Contradictions tore at me until my stomach flipped and I tasted bile in the back of my throat. I lowered to a crouch, hands in my hair, trying to settle the sick, and listed all the recent oddities to see if I could find where the lies began.

The hawker and his wooden rose. Hells, the thief wore a similarly crude raven around her neck. Told me it was a set, one with a rose. Both wooden charms were carved in poor strokes, but both had drawn me to look twice.

Next, the child thief. I understood her finger-speak, and she'd mutely shouted at me, as if she knew me. The ugly stuffed horse. I still hadn't tossed the damn thing, merely tucked it under my cot, its stuffing guts still spilling out where I'd stabbed it.

Then, the thief. *Dammit*. I jolted back to my feet and paced, avoiding any look at the parchment.

Her scent, her hair, her lack of fear. The way she knew I could not read well. How would a thief know such a thing? Why would she care to? I hadn't been her target at the Masque av Aska, power had been the target of Hagen Strom and his hired guild of thieves.

Yet the woman kept coming for me.

Possible she could desire my mesmer, but even then, the notion didn't fit. Each meet it seemed that she wanted me to do something, not join her, not serve her guild with my shadows. It was as if all she wanted was for me to know her.

I clenched my eyes and pinched my nose when heat screamed in a pulsing ache in my brain.

Mallie.

Frustration boiled over. With a kick to the table, the parchment went flying. I sat on my bed, hands clutching the sides of my head, and I fought the bloom of pain that followed whenever I tried to break apart the strangeness of my life.

She wanted me to know her. She wanted me to want her, and . . .

I did.

I bleeding knew her.

My eyes snapped open. Fiery agony raged in my skull, but something warm, something comfortable tightened my chest. Her name, her touch, by the hells we'd moved together in a perfect dance. Her body had felt beautifully familiar.

A safe place. Almost like I'd belonged against that wall with that woman in my arms all along.

As swiftly as the heat of hope came, icy fear chased it away.

In a slow, tedious turn of my head, I studied the scattered parchment across the floorboards. I knew the thief.

But . . . I could not remember her.

Licking my lips, I retrieved every scattered parchment and stacked it neatly on the table. I hurried to dress, then took up the stack and left my chamber with a determined step.

There was a deal to see through.



“*HERR LYNX.*” I paused until the blacksmith apprentice lifted his sweaty head and met my gaze. The man had enough meat on his bones most of the township girls giggled he was a visiting god in disguise.

To me he was merely another servant of the Black Palace who held little fear for me and didn't mince words because I was the Malevolent. He was one of the few who calmed some of the turbulence in my head.

The corner of his mouth twitched as he dropped his mallet onto a table and wiped his hands down his dirty trousers. “Ah. Been a few days, Malevolent. I received your missive you might be coming by today. Just in time, too, as I'm leaving the township tonight. Have a commission?”

“No. Not today.”

“Idle chat, then?” Lynx winked. “Good. I've got a new sort of tart I made

from those black river berries I found. I think you'll like it."

I scoffed. The strange thing about Lynx was he always asked for my commission but seemed more pleased when I came with nothing. Usually, he fed me since the bleeding man prepared cakes better than any of the bakers in the kitchens. Perhaps it took away a bit of my formidable aura, but I quite enjoyed idle chat and sampling whatever Lynx made like we were more than acquaintances. Like we were friendly.

Still, I was the Malevolent of the Black Palace, and admitting a shortcoming would be a challenge. Even if the apprentice had a calming nature about him, this would give him a weakness to use against me.

Before Lynx could dip into the chest where he kept his samples, I held out a hand. "Actually, I have a request. I thought you might be able to help."

He paused and quirked one brow. "More than willing." He wiped his thick hands down his trousers again. "What is it?"

"You can read, yes?" Lynx nodded. I licked my lips and slipped a hand into the black leather satchel over my shoulder, removing the stack of parchment. Tied in twine to keep it orderly, I gripped the parchment until my hands started to sweat. "I wondered if you might tell me what these say."

Tension gathered in my chest, pulling and cinching like thread on a needle as I waited for his reaction. I fought the desire to coat my eyes in shadows made from my own disquiet. To hide would be cowardly, but I quickly concluded I'd rather go to battle than admit I required assistance with such a common task as reading.

Lynx hesitated and studied me beneath a quizzical brow.

If the hells opened and swallowed me whole, I would be more at ease than in this moment.

After a stretched pause, Lynx cleared his throat and held out his hand. "Be glad to."

"I can read," I blurted out when I handed him the parchment. Gods, I could cut out my own tongue. "It's just sometimes the words . . . scramble. It'll be swifter this way."

A wave of calm eased my clenched shoulders.

Lynx smiled. "No need to explain. I'm honored you asked."

Dammit, he sounded so bleeding sincere I almost felt more foolish for being so ashamed all these turns.

With a brisk turn, I studied the walls of tools in the smithy hut while Lynx took up a stool and began to read. Time slowed to a creeping irritation.

What would I do if Mallie lied? Could I follow through with my threats? I wasn't sure how to do any of it, not when a deeper instinct told me I knew the woman.

"Interesting." Lynx's voice stopped the breath in my lungs.

Only once Lynx leaned forward on his stool did I realize I'd started pacing the length of the hut, enough the dirt floors now had a deep track of my footprints.

"Well?"

Lynx thumbed the parchment pages, then lifted his gaze, grinning. "This is an account of the beginning wars of the Eastern Kingdom. The fables of the two families who once ruled here, and their unique mesmer."

I cracked my thumb knuckles and hurried to his side of the hut. "What sort of mesmer?"

"Powerful. The kind that could twist true thoughts, or take them altogether," he said slowly, as if he did not want me to miss a word. "Power over our memories. Hells, you can imagine the damage or the strength such a Talent could give."

She'd spoken true.

Jens Strom had given me the saga on purpose.

They wanted me to know tales of such gifts existed. To doubt what I thought was true.

I could not recall moments, certainly not before the Masque av Aska. It was muddled, blurry, and I could not contain my discontent with life no matter how much I tried to empower my devotion to the Lord Magnate.

Could it be possible something—*someone*—had changed my thoughts?

My stomach turned in sick heat.

If it was true, if some manipulation had muddled my head, what did Mallie have to do with it? Why did I matter to her?

I lifted my gaze back to the apprentice. "Do you believe in such things?"

Lynx's chiseled face lost all amusement. Words seemed to bounce around in his mouth, and he took his time picking which ones to use. "I believe there are Talents that can do a great deal of damage to the ways we think, yes. I believe not everything is always as it seems. To wonder and question is good. Our sagas and poems come from some long-forgotten truth and should be used as wise guides."

He returned the parchment and smiled softly. "A good friend once told me truth lives in our instincts. When something does not make sense, it is in

those moments we must trust what our hearts tell us. My heart tells me there is a great deal of truth to these sagas.”

He gestured at the parchment and looked at me with a bit of pity.

I didn’t want pity. I wanted clarity.

“Does it speak of how such a thing could be reversed? If one had their memories altered, I mean. How could they be fixed?”

“It did not speak of those things, but what I know is even the strongest mesmer has weak points. One must simply keep searching until they are found.”

I’d found a weak point. The thief. Mallie. The woman had the ability to make me doubt every belief, every desire I thought I had. She made me want nothing more than her.

I needed to see her, speak to her. Demand she give up what she knew about me.

With a quick tip of my chin, I took a step toward the door of the smithy hut. “You have my thanks, *Herr*.”

“As I said, it was an honor to be asked, Kase.”

I stopped. Lynx had never used my given name. Hells, I did not know he even knew it. I turned slowly, catching his eyes over my shoulder.

Lynx held up his big hands. “Apologies. Meant no disrespect, *Malevolent*.”

All at once I hated the title.

“No,” I said, voice rough. “I . . . call me Kase. Seems right. Trust the heart, right?”

The way Lynx grinned one might think I’d given him the gift of endless penge.

“Right.” His voice croaked, and he beamed at me as I turned away.

The walls grew too tight in the hut. Lynx was swiftly becoming another jab to my head. His reaction hinted he had a great deal to say, but held his tongue like everyone else. I needed to find the thief.

More than I desired to rise in the ranks of the Black Palace, I needed her.

At the skydguard tower, I took the steps to my chamber two at a time. To leave after nightfall would be risky. Ivar did not want his prized Alvers outside his guards’ protection when those responsible for the Masque av Aska had yet to be caught.

I was at home in shadows, though, and would find a bleeding way.

I’d hardly stepped through the door of my room before the hope of

escaping was dashed into a thousand bloody pieces.

My heart stilled in my chest. At once, I dipped my chin. “Lord Magnate. I’m honored.”

Ivar rose from the cot, something in his hands.

Dammit. The bleeding stuffed horse. After I’d disemboweled the stuffing, I’d tossed it under my cot and promptly forgot the toy. Now, it haunted me. It meant something and Ivar knew it as well.

The Lord Magnate was not alone. Sabain stood at one shoulder and Lord Eero at the other. Between them was a man with dark hair, a bloodied eye, and a pulpy, bruised face. He wobbled on his knees, but when he lifted his head, I had to clench my entire body to keep from stumbling back.

It was the hawker who sold me the rose charm.

“What is this?” I asked, fear rippling over my arms.

“What is this indeed,” Ivar said slowly. He studied the tattered horse, then lifted his cruel gaze to me. “Are you still loyal to your Lord Magnate, Malevolent?”

Damn the hells. Ivar knew about the woman. It was the only explanation. I licked my lips. “Yes, My Lord. Always.”

“Hmm.” Ivar held up the horse. “What is this?”

“It is nothing. The child thief from the other day left it behind.”

Ivar flicked one brow, then with one swift tug, he ripped the horse’s head from the body.

A sudden wave of despair shocked me. As did the heady rage that followed. It was a bleeding toy, and I wanted to pluck Ivar’s eyes out, then feed them to him.

“I have dreary news, Malevolent,” Ivar said, tossing the ruins of the horse to the floor. “There is a traitor in my court, and Lord Eero seems to think you might know something about it.”

Had he found out about Luca?

I narrowed my eyes at the sniveling bastard. Even with Ivar here, Eero shrunk beneath my gaze.

“I HAVE MARKED YOU. I never lose sight of my marks.”

THE SAME WORDS I spoke to Nidhug filtered through a different memory. A night doused in shadows and glitter and masks. This was another cruel promise, but it went deeper than the threat to the fae. This was a promise I'd forgotten, or perhaps I made it up. Still, somehow it came with thoughts of Lord Eero.

"I don't understand how he came to that conclusion, Lord Magnate."

Ivar turned to the battered hawker and slapped the man across the cheek. The hawker groaned and coughed, blood dripping off his lips.

"Eero was clever enough to notice this man kept lurking around the grounds," Ivar said. "With assassins running about one can never be too careful. When the Benevolent recognized him from the trade square, they cornered him the next time he returned."

Ivar lifted a rolled piece of parchment. For a moment I thought he would ask me to read it, but the burn of relief flooded my chest when he continued. "He's been passing missives between the fugitive thief and Lord Jens Strom."

My pulse quickened. The woman was in contact with Jens Strom?

"It was my mistake," Ivar went on. "After Hagen Strom took hold of my masquerade, I should've looked deeper into his kin. Now, according to this missive, the thief has taken a great interest in . . . you, Malevolent. Explain."

My palms burned. I'd always taken Eero as a fool, but he'd outwitted a hawker, Mallie, even Jens Strom who would know the ins and outs of the Black Palace. Underestimating him was *my* mistake.

What was I to do now? The desire—the need—to speak with Mallie again was potent. I could not give her up. At least not until I heard the truth, but Ivar had her in his sights.

"The woman has made attempts to reach me, Lord Magnate," I said. The best lies begin with the truth. "I could not be certain where she was, so I have said nothing until I knew for certain. I swear to you, I have not betrayed you."

The lie was coming easier. So was hatred for the man I was supposed to worship like a god.

Ivar narrowed his eyes. Red lined his lids, the only clue his dance toward the Otherworld existed at all.

"This led us to believe you might know where she will go. Tell me where, and you will have my protection against their tricks."

Dammit. When I saw the woman again, I would give her a lashing on how to write coded messages.

I stiffened. Words died in the back of my throat. I was bleeding cornered.

“It is all right, Malevolent,” Sabain said in his soft, wretched voice. “You are no traitor. Your hopes have always resided here in the Black Palace. She will twist you and tear you down all for your power. Tell us how to find her and we will free you from her lies.”

Cheery warmth spread in my chest. I had so many hopes. Hopes I didn’t know existed. They all began with her. The thief could bring peace to me.

“I hope to see her.” Bleeding hells what was I saying? I met Sabain’s eyes and cursed under my breath. Those damn eyes were white as ice, flashing in his wicked mesmer. He controlled people with peace, learned their desires through their hopes, their dreams. And he had me. I raised a fist to fight hope with fear, but Ivar gripped my arm.

“Hope to see her where, Malevolent?”

I looked to the Lord Magnate. Another blast of calm, of peace loosened my tongue. “She was to meet me tonight, to tell me things I don’t understand.”

Ivar patted my cheek. “You’ve been lost, haven’t you, boy?”

“Yes, My Lord.” *Damn you.* Stop. Speaking.

Ivar smiled with a dash of wicked delight. “I would like to speak with her, with them all, Malevolent. Let us see if together we can ease your burden for good. Tell us where they’ve gone.”

“Don’t,” the hawker rasped.

I clenched my fists, fought against a scratch in my head. Sabain stepped closer, a vicious grin on his ugly face.

“It will bring peace, Malevolent,” he whispered. “Tell us.”

I opened my mouth. Helpless and filled with rage in the same breath.

THE MEMORY THIEF

Hob still hadn't returned. I schooled my face into an easy expression as I laced a dagger on a string of leather on my belt.

Inge leaned through the open window at the front of House Strom, her lashes lined in worried tears, and a slight quiver to her chin. The woman normally kept her hair braided in neat pleats, but through the journey and illness from her growing little, she was pale, and loose strands of her dark hair stuck to her damp forehead.

We didn't talk much. Truth be told we didn't meet under favorable circumstances. Tricking her into sewing my masquerade ball gown while spilling her secret of having two skydguard brothers to Hob bore nothing friendly about it.

Still, I understood worry.

When I placed a hand on her shoulder, she jerked around.

"Oh," she said in a haggard breath as she swiped at her eyes. "The night air, it helps soothe my insides."

"He'll be all right, Inge," I whispered.

Her lips pinched, and fat tears dropped onto her cheeks. Before I could stop her, the woman fell on my shoulder, sobbing.

Gods. I could be friendly enough, but living turns as a memory thief and forgotten daughter of a lord left my ability to physically console others lacking.

I patted her shoulder briskly. "Hob survives, Inge. It is all he knows. He will be all right."

"Something has gone wrong," she said in a whimper. "I feel it."

With a gentle nudge back, I urged her to meet my gaze. “Listen to me. We will go out there tonight, and if he has not returned by then, we’ll send Raum and Vali to search him out. You know there are few things that escape them.”

Inge sniffled, but nodded. “Thank you. What . . . what should I be doing before your meet?”

“Stay here,” I said. “And help us convince Ash and Hanna to stay in the longhouse.”

Inge snorted a laugh at that. “So, the most difficult task of the night.”

I grinned. “Exactly.”

Two littles ran around the inner longhouse. I smiled at Ansel’s children. After the Masque av Aska, Ansel and Sasha had returned to House Strom. With the risks of tonight, though, they would go to Sigurd in Mörplatts. I had grand plans when this was all over to visit the man who’d introduced me to the Guild of Kryv.

Ansel spoke with Hagen; the two friends had missed turns of each other’s lives. It was almost peaceful here. Almost like a home.

All I needed was Kase Eriksson.

Ansel caught my gaze, and stepped away as Sasha and Hagen carried on a conversation.

“Mal.” Ansel greeted me with a tip to his chin.

“Ansel.”

He scanned the room for a few breaths. “You know, I still can’t believe skinny Kase Eriksson is the Nightrender. I made a bleeding deal with him and never thought for a moment he once helped me dig ditches and plant turnips.”

I grinned as I recalled Ansel’s desperate pleas not to deal with the Guild of Kryv, or the Nightrender would own my soul. How prophetic the grounds master was back then.

“You know he took your deal because you were kind to us, right? He avoided folk of the past like a disease, but not you.”

Ansel shifted on his feet. “Well, he had me fooled. He was terrifying, but . . .”

“But?”

Ansel let out a heavy sigh. “He saved my son. He saved Hagen and you. Seems a good heart still lives in the chest of a villain. Even if he is terrifying.”

“Ah, I hope he still is,” I said.

“You’ll be careful out there? I don’t revel in the fact that he’s been taken, but don’t lose yourself in the process of getting him back.”

“Everyone keeps saying that to me.” I turned and held Ansel’s stare with my own for a long breath. “But the truth is I am already lost without him, Ansel. The only times I ever felt safe, or truly accepted, have been with Kase Eriksson. He is my surest foundation.”

Ansel didn’t do me the dishonor of arguing or restating his admonition to be safe. He gave my hand a squeeze and gave a brief nod before stepping back to his wife once Niklas asked to speak with me.

“Malin,” Niklas said, eyes bright with excitement. “Your bleeding stepfather has a library fitted for the gods. I’ve found something.” He held up a parchment. “Now, this is a myth, but I think by now we’ve determined much of the myths of the royal bloodlines are riddled in truth.”

“What is it?”

He beamed and handed me a faded leather book. Drawings of different scenes decorated the pages. Niklas guided me to a folded page.

“Here is a tale of the eldest daughter, the queen, who stole memories. One of her knights was said to have been her heart’s desire, but he was taken by their enemies and changed by one of her cousins. Remember, the second house could alter memories.”

I nodded, scanning the runes that told the story.

“Keep reading. See what she did, how she healed his mind.” Niklas grunted in satisfaction. “Mal, it’s eerie, but if we aren’t repeating history, then, frankly, I don’t know what we’re doing.”



TWO CLOCK TOLLS LATER and Hob had still not returned. I wouldn’t tell Inge, but a heavy stone had settled in my belly, and I was terribly worried about my friendly hawker.

A half-moon glazed the house in cold light. Outside, a small crowd had gathered near the stables.

The story Niklas had showed me settled deep in my head. A former queen had been able to clear hatred and lies from her lover’s head. She waded through the shadows and reached for him, somehow she used her mesmer to

call for him. Like she walked beside him inside his memories. Then, together they pulled back the darkness.

Niklas assured me it was more intricate, but he had a plan should Kase ever let me get close enough again to invade Ivar's curse.

Jens tugged a black cowl over his head. Strange to see him outside his finer tunics and noblemen's garb. He looked more Kryv tonight.

"Last time we had a plan like this Bard nearly ruined it," I said. "You're certain he is far from here?"

Jens chuckled. "He is with Lord Karlsson at the Black Palace celebrating Niall's future throne."

"Ah, then we likely won't see him for weeks while he sleeps it off."

"I regret causing such a rift between you two," Jens admitted. "Bard has a rough exterior, but he has always yearned to be accepted. I think he was often envious of your closeness with Hagen."

Bard had been unkind to me most of my life, but I could not forget the hurt in his eyes at the Masque av Aska. After this was over, perhaps my second brother and I could repair turns of indifference.

"You don't need to come," I said after a pause.

"I would like to see you try to stop me, girl." Jens balked, tightening an axe to a baldric over his chest, then pinned me in a burdened glance. "Malin, the more time passes, the more I realize I did not do the right things. I could've protected you and given you endless love all at once. I cannot go back, but you are, and always have been, mine. I will stand with you to the end."

I refused to cry, but the burn ached to the back of my skull as I fought. I offered a soft smile and squeezed his hand.

Ansel and Sasha had taken their children into the township already, and one of Jens's house stewards was ushering the remaining servants to a different house my stepfather often used in Rutten.

I watched the coach carry the lot of House Strom into the darkness. My chest tightened. It felt so final. As if tonight would be a turning point. A change in the way we lived our lives.

"I can go. Don't do this again."

Jens and I both looked to the corner of the stables. Gunnar was armed with his bow, speaking in a shaky voice to Hagen. My brother was dressed in black, sheathed in two daggers across his back.

"You heard Niklas, son," Hagen said, gripping the back of Gunnar's

head. “It’s possible the oldest memories will help bring him back the swiftest. House Strom came before the Kryv. We came long before he knew you, so we should go. Stay back, please.” Hagen paused, giving Gunnar’s head a little shake. “I cannot bear to lose you again.”

“And you think I can lose you?” Gunnar stepped back.

Lynx must’ve heard the distress and soon appeared by Gunnar’s side. I don’t know what the big Kryv said, but eventually Gunnar stormed away and disappeared into the trees.

I went to Hagen. My brother’s face was scrunched in distress.

“He wants to fight beside his *daj*, that’s all,” I said.

“I know he is a man now.” Hagen let his chin fall to his chest. “I know he’s fought in a bleeding war, but the thought of him getting snatched by Ivar is so strong, I can hardly think straight.”

“Malin, Hagen!” Jens waved his hand, summoning us to a growing circle of Kryv and Falkyns.

Dagny stood with Inge, both women kept a hand on the shoulders of Ash and Hanna. Ash frowned, and before we could finish gathering, the boy ripped away from the group and stomped toward the longhouse.

“He’ll be all right,” Inge whispered to a worried Hanna.

From the trees, Luca and Niklas materialized, black runes streaked down their faces.

“The road is clear,” Luca said, breathless. “There was a small coach taken from the skydguard tower one toll ago. Probably Kase. If he rides to the north side of the river, you should meet at the same time, but you need to leave now.”

“The rest of us,” Niklas said to the guilds, “we stay back in the trees. We only advance for a last resort. Too many of us all at once could overwhelm the *förvirring*.” A wave of nods and grunts of understanding went through the crowd. Niklas fitted his fingers with his gold rings. “Right, then. Go win back your future king, our queen.”

I grimaced. “That will be the last time you call me that.”

Niklas chuckled. “Doubtful, Mal. Now, fight to the end.”

I hurried and pressed a kiss to Hanna’s forehead. “Stay safe and tell Ash we’ll see him soon.”

I left her and said hurried farewells to the other Kryv except Gunnar. He’d perched in a tree somewhere out of reach, waiting for the signal—alone.

Hagen tried to pin a smile on his face, but his eyes were heavy with

exhaustion. No mistake he grew weary of the endless battles to keep his family safe and free.

My body shook with anticipation as I trudged an overgrown backtrail. We walked in silence. Damp clung to leaves as night mists threaded through the trees like fingers through a lover's hair.

By the time we reached the slope that would take us to the split in the river, my knees ached from tripping over brush and brambles, and my face had a layer of sweat and scratches.

Jens gestured for us to crouch behind a spiny shrub.

"Mal, you'll go first. Hagen and I will stay back. Get him comfortable, then see if he'll warm to the idea of us joining. He has respect for my title, so I don't see him resisting me, but—"

"He'll likely slaughter me at first sight," Hagen said blithely.

"He didn't slaughter me," I said. The snap of a branches sent a rush of hot blood to my head. I rubbed my palms together and stood. "It's time."

"We're at your back," Jens said.

I let out a rough breath and cut through the shrubs. Heat crawled over every surface of my body, tiny legs dancing across my skin as I stepped into the moonlight near the river. Blood pounded in my skull. I turned back and forth, scanning the darkness for his face.

Nothing but shadows greeted me.

Until a break in the misty black pulled back and Kase stepped out of the darkness.

"You came." The words slipped out, but greeting his golden eyes, I couldn't contain the smile. "I wasn't sure you'd come. Did I speak true about the saga?"

Kase paused. "You did."

His voice was rough, dark. The hair stood up on the back of my neck as he circled me, coming closer with each step.

I tracked him as he rounded my body. When I whipped my head to the side, I choked on a gulp of air when Kase was only half a pace away, eyes black with shadows.

"You should not have come," he whispered. A warning was in his tone, almost a plea.

"I promised you I would."

I'd hoped he might take some solace in my honesty, my devotion to him, but a flash of annoyance chased away some of the shadows in his eyes.

Kase gripped my arm, his fingernails dug into my skin. "Go. Now."
Each word cut through his teeth as if speaking was difficult.

"Kase." Jens's deep, commanding voice broke us apart. "We are not here to harm you, boy."

Kase's eyes went wide. "Lord Strom? No." He gritted his teeth and glared at me again. "Go."

My stomach dropped as understanding struck me like a bolt to the brain. I wheeled around to Jens. "Daj, we must go. It's a trap."

The words slid out at the same moment two units of skydguard crashed through the trees behind Kase. In moments they had us surrounded. Hagen was pulled from his hiding place and tossed onto the bank.

The guards parted only once a small coach, pulled by a single mare, rolled down the sloping path.

Ivar had found us.

Time moved in blurry moments. At the sight of the coach, Hagen let out a screeching whistle, a signal to the Kryv and Falkyns in the trees our meet had gone wrong. The response was immediate. A rough caw like a raven.

They'd rush to us. The reality was we'd take to battle with skydguard.

All I saw were bloodied bodies of my guild, my family, across the riverbank. But worry for their attack didn't last. As soon as the coach came to a halt, three Alvers dressed in midnight blue stepped out. Hypnotiks. Strong ones if they were brought here with Ivar. Each Alver turned in a different direction and raised their hands. Soon, the river and surrounding trees were coated in a shimmer of mesmer.

A throaty chuckle followed. Ivar emerged, donned like he was joining a battle. Black guarders, two swords on his waist, and a thick gambeson over his broad chest. "The thieves you have in the trees will be lost to illusions. It is just us here."

A collision of despair the Kryv and Falkyns would be kept back, and a fierce gladness they'd be saved from the inevitable violence knotted in the back of my throat.

"Well," Ivar said lightly, "not every thief."

The Lord Magnate snapped his fingers and two skydguard reached into the coach and dragged out a hunched man. They tossed him into the mossy dirt in front of me.

"Hob!" My voice cracked. Hob groaned. Bloodied, bruised. A gash from his scalp to his chin was sopping in fresh blood. I reached for him, Hagen at

my side, and before Ivar took him again, we pulled him between us.

One hand on Hob's chest to ensure he kept breathing, I lifted a narrowed gaze at Kase.

"You did not have to do this; you are stronger than this."

His jaw pulsed. Kase shook his head, looking away.

"Secure them," Ivar commanded.

Three skydguard stepped forward and tried to slip silver, gleaming magisk collars around our necks.

I struggled. Jens rammed his elbow in one guard's ribs. Hagen flailed, bit, and kicked, until each of us were on our bellies, three guards to one, knees pressing on our necks until the boiling fetters were in place.

My skin bubbled beneath the poisonous silver, and the thought of using mesmer burned through my head like acid.

More men spilled out of the coach. I winced at the sight of Niall Grym. Draped in furs like he was already a bleeding king. At his back, Eero stepped out. Blind rage sullied my vision.

"You are a marked man, Eero!" I shouted. "Niklas shall find you. The Kryv will find you."

Eero blanched, but buried it quickly. "It would seem you are the one marked, thief."

Kase flicked his gaze between us, a wrinkle to his brow as if confused.

I held Eero's gaze until a lanky Alver, dressed in a white linen tunic with matching trousers, abandoned the coach. Brightness from eyes to the polish on his dyed leather boots broke through the night.

"Benevolent," Ivar said to the man. "See to it their folk in the trees hold onto hope. The illusions will stop them, but I want hope to keep them searching nearby. We will meet them next."

With a horrid grin, the Benevolent stalked toward the edges of the skydguard lines. Kase's opposite. The man the Kryv once told me was dark and wretched, and controlled others through their hopes and desires.

I stared at his back and imagined my knife buried so deep it cut through his heart at the front.

Dark, biting hate soaked through my heart. In the turns I'd searched for Kase, the desire to peel off the skin of anyone who'd harmed him had kept me focused, driven.

The same desire pumped through my veins with each pulse of my heart. Now for the threats to the Kryv and Falkyns. For Hob.

No mercy. Those who threatened my folk would die. Slowly. Painfully. I could hardly wait for the opportunity.

“Ah, Lady Freya.” Niall stepped in front of me.

“Ah, the weak princeling. Miss me?”

Niall’s beard twitched with a curl to his lip and gripped my jaw, squeezing until a fetid taste of sour blood coated my tongue.

Jens and Hagen made a move for me, but were shoved back down by skydguard. It was Kase who brought me a bit of pleasure. His hand had slipped to the hilt of his blade, and glossy black coated his eyes as he glared at Niall.

He was there just beneath the surface, waiting for us to pluck him back out.

Niall’s hot breath grazed my skin when he yanked me closer. “You will rue the night you deceived me, you *bitch*.”

“To humiliate you,” I gritted out, “will never be a regret.”

The crack of his hand across my cheek echoed through the clearing. The sting was deep, like a thousand pins pricking up my cheek, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of causing me pain.

“Don’t . . .” Kase had one hand on the arm of the Heir Magnate, one hand on his blade. He winced and released the Heir Magnate. “Forgive me, My Lord. I don’t know what came over me.”

“She is a spell caster, Malevolent,” Niall said. “Keep your distance.”

I spat the blood at his boots.

“Jens Strom. Master of Ceremonies,” Ivar said with bitterness. “Held in such high esteem, yet you betray me for what purpose? A woman? And not even a pretty one.”

Jens scoffed. “I have never betrayed our kingdom, and I do not betray it now.” He raised his voice to a deep bellow. “I stand with the true queen! The heir to the throne sits before you tonight, and Ivar Grym plans to dispose of her. Demand the ring and you will see the Lord Magnate hides the truth of the bloodlines; he murders them. I stand with the queen.”

“I stand with the queen!” Hagen shouted in return.

I only looked to Kase, whose gaze widened like he was horrified. The skydguard forced us to kneel, all the while Jens and Hagen shouted disgrace to Ivar and the truth of the bloodlines.

Once Jens was on his knees, the Lord Magnate struck him. A skydguard went to Hagen next and smashed the hilt of his blade into the back of

Hagen's head. Both Jens and my brother silenced for a few breaths.

"How tragic to watch such a great man slip into madness," Ivar said, grinning at his guards. "Such a pity. This woman, as you have seen, has deceived many. A temptress sent from the hells to bury our growing empire. Shall we rid our kingdom of such a curse?"

My stomach boiled in sick at the roars for my death from the skydguard.

"Malin," Jens whispered. "I'm sorry. I failed you. I failed both of you."

Hagen's face turned to stone. "Until the end. We stand together until the end."

Kase was silent. He looked at the guards, then locked his eyes on mine.

Tears dripped onto my cheeks. "I would've taken the pain from you."

His face paled, but shadows soaked the whites of his eyes. Gods, he was in such turmoil.

In the distance the cries of the guilds split my heart in two. Thoughts went to Gunnar, how desperately he feared for Hagen. Now he could lose him.

Falkyns and Kryv would fight to the end. How many would fall? And Kase, if he ever found himself again, what would become of him when he remembered this moment?

"Bring him," Ivar said to a guard.

With a nod the man rushed back to the coach and wrenched the door open, pulling another man from the seat.

"Dammit," Hagen breathed out.

Moonlight washed over the man's face, and my breath stilled in the back of my throat.

Bard, his russet hair was tousled, and he was dressed as if he'd been dragged from bed. With a bit of horror, he looked at the three of us on our knees, guards at our backs.

"Daj," he said in a gasp. "What the hells?"

Jens clenched his jaw and reeled on Ivar. "You bastard, he knew nothing. He is not part of this!"

"Daj, Hagen." Bard blinked to me. "What is this?"

"Release him," Jens shouted again, ignoring Bard. "He is not part of this."

"I know," Ivar said. "I have questions for the young Lord Strom." Bard startled when Ivar gripped behind his neck. "Tell me who the woman is. Do not lie, Lord Strom."

Bard swallowed. He licked his lips and said nothing.

“Perhaps he needs some motivation,” Ivar snarled. At once a guard leveled a blade at Hagen’s throat, cutting just enough a blast of cloying blood wafted into the air.

“No,” Bard said. “She . . . she is my . . . sister. Malin Strom.”

“Malin Strom,” Ivar repeated, then chuckled wickedly.

A grunt drew my attention to Kase. He leaned over his knees, drawing in sharp breaths. My name must’ve impacted him somehow.

I took a risk. “Nights in the hayloft are my most precious memories!” Kase lifted his glassy eyes, the gold cutting through the shadows. I forced a smile. “I was safe with you. I only wish . . . I only wish I could end this agony for you now.”

“Enough.” Ivar slapped me harder than Niall. I hated how a squeak ripped from my throat. The Lord Magnate stepped between me and Kase, a dark storm billowed behind his eyes. “So, this is your plan, Jens? Convince the kingdom your bastard daughter is the heir to the throne, that Strom blood holds the royal bloodline? A weak attempt at a coup. In truth, I expected more from a man like you.”

“What? The heir?” Bard’s eyes widened. He knew his bloodline. Kept the truth that every child brought to House Strom came from the ancient lines. True, Hagen and Bard did not work in memories, but it did not lessen their blood and the risk should Ivar ever learn the truth.

“The true heir, son,” Jens said. “I kept it from you, tried to protect you all. But I stand with the queen. Even to death.”

Ivar tilted his head. “As you wish.”

Before the Lord Magnate could lift his hand, a gravelly battle roar shattered the tension. From behind the coach a long, thin body darted into the clearing, a knife raised above his head.

Panic gripped me, but his name dragged from my throat in a strangled scream. “Ash, no!”

THE MEMORY THIEF

“**A**sh, stop!” How was he here? He must’ve slipped us before we even left.

The boy, braver than any warrior, bolted into the clearing. He raised a hand and a skydguard shouted in pain as his legs snapped. I fought to get to my feet, but a guard pulled my hair, kneeled on my back, pressing my body into the cold earth.

I sobbed, helpless. “Ash.”

The boy wasn’t aiming at us. He was beelining it for the Nightrender.

“You remember!” he shouted in his pitchy voice. Two more guards fell, bones jutting from their ribs. Ash gasped. Mesmer was taxing, and he was brutalizing too many skydguard too quickly. Still, he bolted forward. “Remember me! Remember me! Please!”

Ash tried to rift the bones of another skydguard, but the guard found purchase on the boy’s head, knocking him across the skull with the hilt of his blade. I screamed, fighting with everything I could to break free.

The skydguard who’d leveled Ash to the ground picked him up by the hair. The boy was paler, dirty tear tracks stained his cheeks, but his eyes remained on Kase.

“Remember,” he pleaded once more and tossed something at the feet of the Nightrender.

“Ah, the little bastard has grown a great deal since I saw him last,” Ivar said. “Keep him. He is foolish, but even foolish Rifiers have their uses.”

While they bound Ash in a burning magisk collar, I watched Kase bend over and pick up whatever it was Ash tossed.

My stomach flipped. The hooked karambit knife. Kase studied it like he

had never seen a blade before. Then, uncaring if anyone saw, he stuck his finger through the hole in the hilt and spun the knife around his finger twice.

Ivar watched his Malevolent falter. His face hardened, and he used his chin to signal the Benevolent over to Kase. I don't know what he could do, but no mistake, the hopeful bastard was put in place to keep Kase subdued.

"Our future king will decide the fate of our guests," Ivar said, stepping back as Niall took the lead.

The Heir Magnate wore a dark grin as he paced the line. On his second pass, he clapped a hand on Bard's shoulder, startling him. "The way I see it, your entire household is on their knees as traitors. There will always be a question if you are one of them. So, I shall give you the chance to prove a bit of loyalty tonight."

Niall handed Bard a bone dagger, tied in leather and feathers. A fine blade, but Bard looked at it as if it were a mutilated carcass.

"You will end your brother, Lord Strom," Niall said. "Next, your father. As for your sister—" I glared at Niall. Doubtless he looked forward to running me through. "The honor of her death shall fall to the Malevolent."

Kase's face was unreadable. Cold, fearful, excited? I could not make him out as skydguard ushered him forward. He looked down at me, the slightest twitch to his jaw.

"We shall give the thief's courier to the skydguard," Niall went on, "let them have their fun and make an example for any other crooks who want to play the hand of the Black Palace."

"It is all right, brother," Hagen said to Bard. "Stay alive, stay safe. We will save your place for you."

Bard looked like he might retch at any moment.

"I stand with the true queen!" Jens shouted. "To the death! Our queen lives, and Ivar robs our kingdom of her."

Hagen raised a fist. "To the true queen!"

Over and over, they repeated the words. Skydguard shifted in disquiet. Ivar was as stone, merely giving a nod at Niall who raised a fist for Bard to do what was commanded of him.

My stepbrother's eyes were hooded, red, they were broken.

"No." Bard spoke in a low growl. I wasn't certain he'd truly said anything until he tossed the bone dagger on the ground and knelt beside Hagen. "I stand with House Strom." A ripple of heat on my skin came when he looked to me. "I stand with . . . I stand with the queen."

Niall's skin deepened to a bloody red as anger raged. "Have it your way, Lords. I will send you to the gods myself. Malevolent—take your time with the damn woman. Make her suffer."

I lifted my eyes to Kase, voice soft beneath the cries of the men of House Strom. "Do not blame yourself for this night. Keep seeking the truth." My voice quivered, and I didn't care. "I love you, Kase Eriksson."

He hesitated. Then, stepped close to me, voice low. "Out of all the men who can lift a blade, I was chosen to take you. Because you matter, right? It will break me because they know, somewhere in the chaos, you matter to me. I feel fear for you, but I cannot remember why I should."

"You will. You are stronger than them, never forget it." I forced a smile. "I will save your place—"

"No." Kase gripped my chin. To others it would look forceful, cruel even, but to me his touch was gentle. On the side of my face aimed away from Niall, his thumb brushed over my cheek. "There will be no talk of the Otherworld tonight. Keep your head down."

He'd barely gotten the words out when a cloud of thick, cold shadows encircled me, my two brothers, Jens, and a limp Hob. I screamed when we were tossed out of the reach of Niall's blade. Ten paces away I came to a rolling stop. Hagen's boot in my gut, Hob groaning as he tried to stagger to his knees, Jens and Bard tangled together.

There was no time to rest. Ivar's roars rose over a rush of icy wind, and his skydguard ran for us.

I whipped around. "Kase!"

He held out his palms, surrounded by skydguard and the Benevolent. With a painful cry, Kase flooded the trees, the night mists, the whole of the area with inky skeins of darkness. Bones cracked and blood spattered across the blades of grass.

When the shadows recoiled, dozens of guards toppled to the ground. Necks twisted, or bellies slashed open, their insides spilling onto the soil. Next to them, the three Hypnotik Alvers were bent and broken. Dead. The only one near Kase who was left standing was the Benevolent. He'd wrapped himself in a gilded mist.

With mesmer illusions lost, the roars of the Kryv hidden in the darkness rose to the stars.

"Dammit!" Eero shouted. He dragged two guards in front of him. "The thieves come. Do your duty and defend your lord, skyds."

The guards walked backward as they shielded the bastard until he was clear of the trees. Doubtless fleeing for his life.

The Benevolent lifted his hands at Kase, but lowered them when Kase stumbled to his knees, screaming, and clutching his skull.

Ivar twisted his fingers. I swore to the gods the faintest sliver of gold glimmered in the night, connecting the Lord Magnate to Kase. The threads of a puppeteer. Exactly like Luca said.

Ivar was tugging Kase back to him. He'd be lost if the bond was not severed.

I bolted to my feet, desperate to reach him. "Kase!"

Hagen gripped my waist and spun me away from the chaos. "No."

"Let me go, you bastard!" I kicked and thrashed and screamed. "He'll take him. I'm not letting him take him again!"

Big hands landed on my shoulders. Jens met my eye. "Move aside, Mal."

Hagen tossed me to the ground. Jens gritted his teeth through the pain as he peeled Hagen's burning magisk collar off his neck.

At once my brother raised his hands. A frigid wind blasted over the river and trees. The golden ropes died. Kase collapsed, breaths ragged and weak.

Ivar stared at his hand, then at Hagen. "Kill him!"

Hagen shuddered, eyeing the circling guards as he held his block against the Lord Magnate's mesmer. In truth, I suspected he blocked everyone. No spark of mesmer was found in my veins, and the Benevolent cursed as he glared at his hands.

"Mal! Mal! They're snatchin' me! Mal!"

Ash.

A skydguard hugged the boy to his chest. Kase would demand I go after Ash. He would not hesitate to save the young Kryv. But to abandon Kase again . . .

Ash shrieked when his skydguard stiffened, then crumbled. His neck bloody, sliced from ear to ear.

Out of the shadows, a hooded figure stepped forward, gripped Ash's arm, and pulled the boy behind him.

The Benevolent raised his blade ready to strike, but Luca Grym tossed back his hood, stunning the bastard cold.

"Young Lord."

"Try to strike me down, Sabain, and you will earn a blade in your belly."

The Benevolent's mouth dropped as Luca stormed past. Doubtless he

could not kill Ivar's son, not without an order.

"It ends now, Father!" Luca's eyes were dark and dangerous.

Ivar gaped, unmoving. The sight of the second heir sent the skydguard into a frenzy. Niall roared to capture Luca, but the guards hesitated, looking to Ivar for direction.

It was wasted time to our benefit.

In two breaths the river bend spilled with Kryv and Falkyns. Skydguard were forced to turn away from Luca and fight for their lives. Steel scraped over steel. Wet slices of blades through flesh rattled the treetops. Groans and cries of dying men would haunt the wood for turns.

"Get the Malevolent," Niall's voice rose over the frenzy.

I'd kill the bleeding Heir Magnate before he touched Kase. I sprinted across the wet grass. Kase was coiled on the ground. Each breath brought a flinch and groan of agony. On his knees, his fingers tangled in his hair, and he pressed his head against the ground.

My hand fell to his shoulder. He managed to turn his red-rimmed eyes to me.

"I'll be with you until the end." I scooped one of his arms over my shoulder, but let out a scream when Niall stood above me, sword raised. On instinct, I covered Kase's body with mine, ready to take the blow.

It never came.

A sword blocked the strike, and Jens shoved Niall back.

"Get him, Malin. Get out of here." My stepfather grunted through another swing at Niall. Jens was a head taller, and twice as broad. He jabbed and sliced until the Heir Magnate stumbled.

I took Kase's arm over my shoulder again.

He groaned. "If you plan to kill me, thief, then get on with it and save me from this bleeding fire in my head."

"I plan to do many things to you. Killing you is not one of them. Gods, Kase, pick up your damn feet."

I thought he snorted a laugh, but the sound was blotted out by the screams of battle. I'd be forced to drag him if he could not quit losing his balance, but before he dropped again someone stepped into Kase's opposite side.

Bard's gray eyes met mine over Kase's head. Blood was in his beard, and it looked as if someone had taken a chunk out of his ear. He didn't stop trudging for the trees. "Hurry, little mouse."

"Mal, here! Hand him here!"

I let out a breath of relief as Tova waved her hands. At her back, Junius and two bulky Falkyns helped load Hob and Ash into the cart. The hawker leaned against the edge, holding an elixir pouch to his swollen eyes. Ash hugged his knees, rocking and trembling.

A whistle echoed over the clearing. The signal for the guilds to disappear. We had what we needed.

Draping Kase's arm over a Falkyn's, I waited until he was in the back of the cart, then turned back to the river. Hagen was on one knee, his arms still outstretched, fading beneath his mesmer. Guards tried to reach him, but arrows ripped through their throats and chests if they stepped too close.

Gunnar balanced on a thick branch, firing his arrows without error around his father.

"Pull back, Hagen!" Bard shouted.

Hagen took a few sharp breaths, then dropped his hands and staggered back to his feet. Gunnar launched his arrows, keeping the guards at bay while his father got clear, then he turned and started to scale down the tree.

"Stop!" Niall bellowed. A trembling silence wrapped around the trees, the guards, the guilds. "We do not need mesmer to take what you want."

I looked down at the water. A sick rush of heat flooded my chest, spilling into the back of my throat until I tasted bile. "Daj!"

Niall Grym stood in front of Jens. Four skydguard surrounded him, short blades at his throat.

"Bring the Malevolent back, and you can save your father," Niall said.

"This is my day to meet the gods!" Jens shouted. He snatched a small pick knife out of a sheath on his baldric and made a terrifying attempt to stab his own chest.

Niall was swift on his feet and managed to kick the knife out of Jens's hand.

"They'll use me," Jens shouted at us. "They'll use me against you. No one will know the truth. I won't remember any of you. Kase, boy, kill me."

At the mention of his name, Kase curled over, roaring in agony again. His hands slapped at his head, and when I went to the side of the cart to reach for him, he swatted me away.

"Don't touch me, thief."

"It's Ivar," Niklas said. "He's pulling him back. Hagen, can you block him?"

"I . . . I can't. I used too much." Hagen cursed under his breath.

Luca broke through the trees. “It takes distance. We need to go. Hurry.”

“I’m not leaving my father,” Bard snapped.

“Bring us the Malevolent and Lord Strom goes free,” Niall said smugly.

Jens shook his head. “They lie.”

“Time is up,” Ivar interjected. He let out a hacking cough but started to spin his fingers like swirling water. “We’ll take both.”

Kase retched. I grabbed hold of his arm, the heat of his skin scorched my palms through his tunic. Blood leaked from his ears and nose. It looked as if the life was being ripped from his soul. “We’re going to lose him.”

“My life does not matter, but they must live—” Jens jutted his chin toward me and Kase. “The queen of shadows will rise. You know this, Malin. You heard her say it.”

By the gods. My heart was being wrenched in two.

Skydguard marched toward us. In a few moments they’d surround the guilds, and we would once more be fighting or dying under their blades.

“We must go,” Luca shouted. “Now!”

“No.” I trembled. How could we leave Jens behind?

He’d turned his eyes to the trees where Gunnar had frozen on his descent. “Boy, one arrow, one shot. Kill me. Protect your family as your father has always done. Dammit, there is no time! You’ve seen what they will do to an Alver like me.”

Jens struggled against the guards, against Niall. The sword sliced against his shoulder, but he didn’t flinch. “Do it, boy. Now.”

“Daj.” The bow trembled in Gunnar’s hand as he looked to Hagen.

“No,” Hagen said, he turned back toward the river. “We need to go back.”

“We’re surrounded in ten more breaths, then,” Niklas said through a growl.

“Do you all die here, Hagen? Or do you protect our family? Do not leave me to this fate, this *torture*. Do not make me an enemy of my children. Do not—”

His voice choked to a halt. I screamed. Skydguard rumbled their shock at the sight. Jens’s neck twisted at an ugly angle, and he went limp. Dead.

Niall leapt back, eyes wide.

“Brother.” Hagen’s breathless voice drew me to look.

Bard slowly lowered his hand. His face was twisted in pain, and tears streaked his dirty cheeks.

He’d—gods—he’d killed Jens.

A thick sob broke from my throat, tears blurred the horrid sight. We'd only begun our new story. A father and daughter at last, and now . . . he was gone.

With nothing to leverage against us, the Lord Magnate and Niall demanded their guards to slaughter everyone. No survivors.

"Go!" Niklas commanded the Kryv.

Kase resisted, shouted for our deaths much the same as the Black Palace guards as Ivar beckoned him back.

He jolted when Lynx bent to his side, a hand on his shoulder. "Lynx?"

"Time to rest" was all Lynx said before he pulsed his calming mesmer through Kase and the Nightrender fell back as if asleep. Gunnar raced from the trees and helped shove the cart into motion.

"Bard," Hagen said thickly, and placed a hand on Bard's chest. "We must go. You did as he asked."

Bard hadn't blinked, hadn't looked away from Jens's lifeless body. His tears were silent, painful, but his face was carved in anguish.

Only when Hagen pulled on his arm did Bard finally break away and follow the guilds.

I closed my eyes and raced into the darkness.

Nightmares at my back.

THE NIGHTRENDER

My skull split in two. From the front to the back, the bone throbbed as though iron hooks had been lodged through my head, tugging me in all directions until I wished it would hurry along and get to killing me.

Whispered hisses rippled around me as though through a thick door. I focused on them, the pain great enough I had a desire to cry out for help. Words wouldn't come, but my eyes fluttered. The lashes had clumped together and stuck a bit when I blinked against cool air.

Darkness stretched on forever. If not for the few gilded flames from lanterns, I might think I was trapped in a dank pit.

The air was cold here—wherever here was—and the murky hint of mold burned the back of my throat.

“Keep expectations low,” one voice, deep and low, said.

A woman responded. “He fought for us.”

“A brief moment of clarity. Be ready. It's all I'm saying.”

I made a move to reach for the knife I kept sheathed on my leg, but my hand stopped. The scratch of rope dug into my skin. Heated blood thickened in my veins. I was bound at the wrists.

My eyes snapped open. I'd been placed in some sort of hut made of tree branches and pelts. A stack of folded rabbit fur made a makeshift bed beneath me. So, I was a prisoner, but someone had tried to make me comfortable.

I had no plans of being shackled today.

I jolted upright, ignoring the bright spark of pain in my head, and pulled on my wrists tethered to a thick branch overhead.

I curled my knees into my chest, ready to kick against the branch, snap it

in two, anything, but stopped at a voice.

“You’re not going to do anything but snap your wrists that way.”

My shoulders heaved with sharp, anxious breaths when I peered around my arm. “Luca?”

Luca smirked and knelt beside me. “Sorry, my friend. We didn’t know if you’d wake with knives in hand, so we locked you up like a dog.”

“You’re a bastard.”

“No doubt my father wishes I was right now.”

Ivar. The mention of the Lord Magnate sent my head reeling. The riverbend. Skydguard. A smoky hint of blood.

“Remembering what happened now?” Luca asked in a soft voice.

“I fought against the Lord Magnate.” My brow furrowed. “No, I was . . . taken.” With enough force the rope burned my skin, I pulled my arms. “Release me and return me . . .”

Words faded. The desire to return to the Black Palace was as weak as cracked glass. A burn to comply and obey my Lord Magnate came, then faded, then rose again. If I believed the collision of chaos in my mind had been painful before, now I could hardly keep a single emotion straight.

Luca clapped a hand on my shoulder and gave me a small grin. “If you’ll trust me for a moment longer, we can take this pain from you.”

I’ll take this pain from you.

The thief—Mallie—she kept telling me that. My eyes widened. “The woman, Lord Strom, they were to be executed.”

Luca’s jaw pulsed. “Yes, I know. You pulled through for them.”

Dammit. I groaned and winced through another dig of fire in my head. “I’m a traitor.”

“Oh, we all are. It is the better side of the line to be on.” A woman’s voice whipped my eyes open again.

I pressed away from her when those sharp, green cat eyes winked at me. Hells, she was . . . “You. I’ve seen you at . . . the Black Palace. The goat woman.”

She shoved Luca’s shoulder when he snickered. “Don’t even think of it.”

“Goat woman is your new name, Tov.”

She looked back to me. “I brought you some herbs to help with the ache in your head.”

I went stiff, marking her, studying her as she placed a basket of pouches and vials beside me. She no longer looked like a goat herder. She was dressed

in a black tunic, heavily armed with knives and daggers, and black kohl streaked over her eyes and chin.

Another body dipped beneath the flap, and I swallowed bile at his silver eyes.

Raum was no skydguard, and in truth, he seemed rather pleased at my reaction to his face.

“Good morning, darling,” he said. “Been sleeping long enough. I’d like to get back to normal now, so are we ready?”

Raum flicked a knife back and forth around his fingers. A threatening move, one I felt like I might use, but it didn’t put me on edge. Raum did it to keep his hands busy, and I didn’t know how I knew it.

“Luca,” I said. “No more holding back. Tell me the truth.”

Luca shifted on his knees and glanced at Raum.

Another spin of his knife, and Raum nodded. “Nik says it’s time. He’s open enough.”

Turning back to me, Luca held my stare for two breaths. “Kase, I’m going to tell you things, and I beg of you not to reject them straightaway. This is me, Kase. We’ve always trusted each other, and I have no reason to lie to you now.”

I glared at him. “Tell me.”

“You have been made to forget things about your life, Kase. Lord Strom —” Luca paused and cleared his throat. “He sent you the parchments on memory mesmer because it exists. Ivar, he can manipulate memories, and he warped yours.”

At once the instinct to dismiss him thickened in my throat. I clenched my fists at my sides and forced myself to keep quiet and listen.

“Imagine a disease has spread over your true past,” Luca went on, “it coats the truth, eating it away, making it sick until it dies. This is what Ivar’s mesmer is doing to you. He can pull you back to him if you start to question too much.”

My stomach cinched. At the riverbend, he’d done something to me, or had started to. I recalled the jab in my brain, the itch I couldn’t explain.

Luca lowered his voice. “But there are other Talents. We call them memory thieves. This Talent, we believe, could take the diseased memories, leaving the truth behind. Your truth, Kase. No questions, no confusion.”

“This is madness,” I said before I gave myself a chance to consider any of it.

“Is it? Or would it explain why your life has not made sense? Why I am here, a fugitive, instead of standing with my folk at the Black Palace? Would it explain why the thieves—” He waved his hand at the goat woman and Raum. “—of the Masque av Aska have never tried to harm Ivar since that night; they’ve only focused on you.”

“I have nothing to do with them.” I scrutinized the goat woman and Raum. Thieves. They were part of the guild, and I’d been blind to it.

“The Masque av Aska was your bleeding scheme, my love,” Raum patted my cheek, laughing when I frowned.

“You can remember it,” said the woman, “if you want. You can remember that you are the Nightrender and one of the Kryv.”

I held her stare. The name carved deep into my chest, a pull to turn away from them was fierce and potent, but for the first time in weeks it did not grate down my spine, and was more like an idea not fully formed in my head.

“Trust.” I turned my gaze to Luca. “You want me to trust you on this.”

“A little longer, my friend.”

“You plan to . . . do what? Invade my head?”

“In a way,” Luca said. “But it is more to put the pieces back into place, to bring you relief.” Luca reached into his pocket and pulled out a ball of twine.

I flinched when he looped the twine around his fingers and a charm dropped into view. A wooden rose.

“Took this from your chamber before I left the palace,” he said. “Why does it mean something to you, Kase?”

Muscles pulsed in my jaw. “I don’t know.”

“But it does?” He didn’t wait for a response before going on. “Those are the answers we’ll give you again. Will you trust us for a little longer?”

No. I did not want to trust anyone. I wanted to fade into shadows of my own making and be left alone for the rest of my miserable life. Yet something drew me to raise my mesmer against Ivar. The thief, when she’d been forced to the ground, her head on an executioner’s block, I’d never experienced such a rush of panic.

For a few breaths, I would’ve given the heart from my chest to keep her safe, to hide her away.

Then there was Lord Strom. A nobleman who’d given his bleeding life to defend her because he . . . he believed her to be the queen? Now the confusing pull toward the woman had turned me into a traitor, a killer, and a man without a past, or a home.

I shook my head. Too many moments made too little sense.

I lifted my eyes back to Luca. "If you destroy my head, or make it worse, promise me you'll kill me."

His brows arched.

"I mean what I say," I insisted. "I cannot live in this madness any longer."

"You'll allow us to try to help, then?" His hand fell to my shoulder and squeezed.

My mind fought against the idea of trusting anyone here, but my heart urged me to follow, to trust. Even for a moment. I gave Luca a curt nod. Raum and Luca made quick work ridding me of the rope around my wrists.

I rose from the hut and followed them into the hedgerow. On the other side there were old shacks and shanties tangled in vines and dried branches. Tall willow trees draped their leafy fingers over an old, cracked bridge. Twenty paces into the trees, ruins jutted toward the clouds like jagged teeth.

It was a miserly place.

It felt peaceful. Like home.

The moment we stepped into the forgotten township people materialized from every corner. Most faces were unfamiliar, but a heated frustration boiled in my brain when too many were recognizable.

I glared at the redhead and the man who stood at his side. Fiske and Isak, the serfs from the Black Palace. Now they were formidable, armed, and watching me like I might lunge at them at any moment.

The hawker who sold the rose and delivered missives between the thief and Lord Strom met my eye. A woman with long raven hair stood at his side and dabbed his bruised face with an herb-soaked cloth.

When I strode past, she drew in a sharp breath and paled. The hawker scoffed and winked against the swelling in his face. But it was the two children next to the hawker who brought me to pause. The boy, I recognized him. He'd . . . he'd rushed the skydguard. Brave or stupid, but either way he'd done it for me. To give me that knife.

I narrowed my eyes at the small girl who held his hand, who shared a resemblance to the pale boy.

The child thief.

The same wet eyes locked on mine. She leaned her head against the boy's skinny shoulder and seemed ready to break into tears.

"Damn you, Luca," I muttered through gritted. "Have you been manipulating everything in my life?"

“Manipulation can be a good thing, Kase. You’ll see.”

At the final word, movement drew my attention to the edge of the trees. The reaction took me from behind, swift and violent. From the first sight of her fiery hair the thought of curling my fingers around her neck took hold.

Her vibrant eyes looked at me with pain. Sharp, wretched pain. A longing was in them that both fueled my murderous intent and raged against some deeper piece of me that never wanted the woman to hurt.

I’d lost everything because of her. Because I’d succumbed to the desire for her, I’d saved her, and was marked as a traitor.

My steps were heavy, assertive. I was intent to reach her, and the two men, the two sons of House Strom, were intent to stop me.

Hagen and Bard Strom stepped in front of the thief, blades drawn. But it was enough to halt me in my place.

Hells, what was I doing?

The pull to slaughter her, it couldn’t be real. Not when this fierce need to keep her alive, to keep her breathing and unharmed, was as potent.

“Luca,” I said, gritting my teeth. I held out my arms. “Hold me back from her.”

Raum was the one who whooped. “That’s a first bit of control, but I’ll bleeding take it.”

He helped Luca take hold of my arms.

“Lynx, Isak,” a man with messy dark hair and gold beringed fingers called out. By the gods, it was the pickpocket from the gambling den. “We might have need of you. Malin, we’re ready.”

I glared at the man. He smiled at me in return, and opened his arm, gesturing for the thief to join him. Luca and Raum nudged my shoulders until I kneeled. My eyes didn’t fall from the thief, didn’t blink. I studied her, tried to make sense of her. She’d cleaned the dirt and tears and blood from her face. She’d dressed in a simple woolen dress with her hair in a loose braid. The nearer she came the more her voice replayed in my head.

I love you, Kase Eriksson.

She’d said it like a declaration written in stone. The way she looked at me now, as if my suffering were her suffering, I almost believed in another life I could’ve loved a woman like her too.

Whatever violent desire lived inside me forced me to curl away when she stopped a pace away. She reached out a hand and I jerked back.

Her chin quivered when she tried again.

My breaths came sharp as her warm palm rested against the side of my face. Her touch erupted into a flame through my chest. She kneeled and brought her other palm to my face, trapping me between her hands.

At her shoulders Lynx studied me. Clearly, he was no blacksmith, but he'd done something to me at the riverbend.

"I want to hurt you, and I don't all at once," I said.

The thief nodded. "I know."

"Whatever they are here for, if . . . if it will keep you safer, they should do it."

"I'll b-b-blind you for a time, Kase," Isak said.

"I can help you be calm," said Lynx.

I didn't look at them, and held Malin Strom's gaze. "And you? What will you do?"

"I'll take this pain from you," she whispered. "I'll bring you back to us. To me."

For at least ten breaths I stared at her. "Then do it." I flicked my eyes to Isak and Lynx. "I want to be awake; I want to see it. To know what is real. But if I lift a blade, do what you must."

Malin's mouth twitched in a small grin. "It will be over soon."

"This will work differently than before," the pickpocket said. He held a knife in his hand. "She'll need to dig deep, and like with most magic, blood is a key to connect two souls. Hand out."

I hesitated, and it only made the man laugh.

"What?" he said. "Afraid of a little scratch?"

"Bastard," I muttered under my breath.

The pickpocket laughed harder. "Hells, I've missed you."

The man sliced a gash over my palm. I winced, but didn't look away as a bubble of blood spilled onto the meaty part of my thumb.

"Malin," the pickpocket said, "just like we talked about. Not bone, but—"

"Blood," she whispered.

With a hard swallow, she dipped her trembling fingers into the gash. I watched with a bit of horror, and a touch of fascination as she licked the drop of my blood from her fingertip.

"What does that have—"

I did not have time to finish my thought, or protest before she crashed her lips to mine. I jerked, disgusted with myself, but disgust faded into want. Into need. Into a calm I could not explain.

This was not a normal kiss. She was inhaling as her mouth moved. My body trembled. Sparks of pain stabbed into my skull as thoughts spun like a maelstrom.

Shadows took hold and pulled me down until I was lost among a thousand passing moments of lies, hate, and love.

THE NIGHTRENDER

Childish laughter rang through a moment in time. Gray light from a storm rolling in from the fjord filtered over the images in my mind. Two littles strolled along a dusty path, licking sweet honey sticks, praising each other on their ability to snatch the treats without being caught.

The girl's hair was braided, but stuck out from her leather bands, sort of wild and untamed. Her fingertips brushed the boy's when she reached for another sweet stick.

Me. A memory from a past I'd forgotten, and I was seeing it clearly now.

Fiery heat prickled over my knuckles as her touch fastened to every sense, every emotion, until it settled clearly in my brain.

I knew the boy was me, but I also knew the girl, she was mine.

"I remember how the older we grew the stranger you made my insides feel."

I startled. "How in the hells?"

Beside me Malin Strom stood in my head, watching the memory. She smiled and took my hand. "I've discovered my mesmer can be quite powerful against false memories. But it is tiring."

This isn't real.

"It is," she said, although I was certain I'd kept the thought to myself. She looked at me. "There is an ancient spell, one only capable of working through trust, devotion, and a bit of blood. One only the first family of memory workers could perform to counteract any attack made by the second family against their loved ones."

"I don't understand."

"Do you recall the two families from the saga of memory mesmer?"

Before times of peace between the two bloodlines, those who could alter memories often attacked the most cherished of the memory thieves.”

She rubbed her thumb over my knuckles. The touch sent a ripple of warmth shooting up my arm.

“This spell was their way to counteract those attacks,” she said. “We’ve been favored by the gods to have found it. I am only here with you to help you break free. Lies believed as fiercely as you have believed them are not so simple to steal.” She squeezed my palm. It was like a breath of wind, but I knew her touch was there all the same. “I’ve never done this, and it’s taxing. Let me in, Kase. Trust me, and we will see the truth together.”

I blinked back to the flashes of the laughing children. A memory. My heart burned with the truth that these two littles were real.

This had truly happened.

A dark-haired boy and a fiery-haired girl. A girl who looked a great deal like the woman at my side. Perhaps it was all part of her tricks, and she’d created the illusion.

But something stirred deep in my stomach, something told me I was finally seeing clearly for the first time.

I clenched my jaw, nodded, and squeezed Malin’s hand

Like walking through a misty path beside the children, we watched the memory unfold.

The little girl’s hand came so close to my dirty boyish fingers. I laughed softly, remembering how I’d tangled up in knots from wanting to hold her hand, but I couldn’t find the bits to do it. Instead, I suggested a bleeding race to the pond. As if it might soothe the sudden twitching of my heart.

Brevity faded to the distant sound of a child sobbing.

“I hate this memory,” Malin whispered at my side.

The boy cried, trapped between two skydguard. “Tell her I didn’t leave her because she was a bad friend. She isn’t!”

A tight bunch of tension ached like a blade to the breastbone when a younger Jens Strom stood by and said, “I’ll tell her.”

Fear gathered in dark, cold tendrils surrounded my heart as a memory crept up from the crevices of my mind. Being taken into the walls of the Black Palace, of living in a cage for months.

“By the gods, Kase,” Malin whispered, a sparkle of a tear that looked like mist dripped onto her cheek as we strode past the cold bars and the scratchy quilt they’d given as my only bed. “I never knew how wretched it was.”

“It was. Until I met—” As I said the words, thoughts shifted, and the next scene was a dark-haired boy with rings in his ears hiding beneath a table in one of the rooms in the Black Palace. From the laughter and lyres surrounding us it was clearly some kind of fete was underway. He was hiding away, wiggling his fingers to create an illusion of the sea snake, Jörmungandr, in his palm.

“Maj is making you be my playmate. Says I need more than books,” said the dark-haired boy. Luca Grym. His first glance at me had been filled with disdain, like I was an enemy. “But just don’t. I don’t need you.”

“And I don’t need you. But I like your mesmer. Bet you could do some tricky things with it to some of those sods out there.”

Young Luca regarded me with suspicion for a long breath before a vicious little smirk broke over his face.

Shadows danced across my brain, shaping into moments. Malin stayed beside me offering bits and pieces. She’d inhale, and any shadows would pull away until the memory was bright, and clear, and sturdy.

Moments shattered through opposing thoughts like stones breaking through thin ice. Memories of honoring the Black Palace all my life, of being obedient and devoted to Ivar, broke into jagged pieces, giving way for the truth to come out.

All the devotion I’d battled these last weeks was replaced with tricks and schemes from Luca, me, and so many younger faces who would someday become the Guild of Kryv.

I shuddered. Malin held tighter to my hand. She closed her eyes and seemed to breathe deeply.

“You’re resisting,” she whispered. “Let me in, Kase.”

My mind fought against her, but my body leaned closer, craving every piece of her.

Childhood faded. Still there, but more recent memories surfaced through the shadows. The thief—Malin—kneeled at my feet.

“We were separated for turns,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

I watched the memory chase away the darkness hiding it.

In this moment, Malin didn’t recognize me, but . . . I recognized her. In my heart, I knew she was the honey stick girl, the girl I ached to see even if Luca and the Kryv filled some of the open wounds left behind after I lost her.

Whether she truly stood beside me or not, it didn’t matter, I faced her. I

studied her. Her misty eyes locked on my gaze. Gods, she'd always been there. The truth of it settled deep in my stomach.

My attention abandoned her face when the Malin in the memory pleaded with me to find someone.

Hagen.

I remembered. Hagen Strom had been taken and she wanted him back.

He *hadn't* plotted an attack while locked away in a sea prison. A lie dissolved as the roots of a new memory took hold.

As though through the dimness of dusk, I watched Malin and me race over rooftops. Hints of brine and piss burned my nose. I glanced over my shoulder. Red hair blew around her face. Malin cursed me in the memory as I tossed her off the top of the roof.

The glare she cut back at me once she landed made me want to laugh if scenes weren't moving so swiftly.

"Skítkast," I whispered.

At my side, Malin smiled.

A sudden feeling gripped me like a vise—no question—I would kill anyone who tried to harm her.

Malin stilled when a new memory surfaced.

A night of her body tangled with mine. My shoulders slouched as a recollection of genuine, pure calm, safety, and love had been mine that night. The night we plunged headfirst in desires which began in childhood, and sealed our fates as one. My heart raced when the taste of her coated my tongue, her body beneath me, naked and perfect.

"You see it?" she whispered.

All I could do was nod as I held tightly to the thoughts in my mind, the sounds of her breathless cries of my name, her gentle touch along the scars of my back.

Malin inhaled again and the bright golden highlights of her hair in my bed transfigured into glitter and bright colors of the Masque av Aska. Sugared pomes, cream cakes, spices, and ale hung over the festival like a fragrant cloud. Until fire and smoke and blood stained the cobblestones of the courtyard.

At first, Sabain and I fought against the guild of thieves. Niall was there, injured by a blade and being tended to by another Mediski. Ivar barked orders, called for the slaughter of Hagen Strom and his thieves. But in the next move, the battle flickered and was swallowed by the smoky mists.

When the smoke cleared, instead of fighting beside him, I *battled* Sabain. We'd bruised and injured each other, but I scoffed. The bastard's limp was because of me. There was a touch of satisfaction knowing it was at my hand.

And he'd taken my damn blacksteel sword!

The same anger I'd embraced these last few weeks was there in the memory, but none of it was aimed at the guild of thieves. No, I feared for them. I wanted to murder someone—a traitor. I wanted to find Malin Strom and take her away and protect her.

Hate burned at the edges and love bled through.

The thoughts overtook everything. My body weakened to the point I could hardly stay upright. I cried out. The masquerade swirled away into a final moment. A final look at the tears on her face as the guild pulled her away from me.

In the distance, a tug pulled me from my head. Back to reality. Back to the trees and ruins and Malin Strom with her mouth pressed to mine.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't think.

My body slumped against her, and she broke the strange kiss.

"Kase?"

I closed my eyes.

"Mallie." Her name—*my* name for her—scraped out of my throat.

But when I reached for her, everything went black.

THE MEMORY THIEF

“Kase!” My voice cracked.
Tears soaked my cheeks. He’d said my name, then fallen back. There he’d stayed, unmoving, and sprawled out on the lawns of Felstad.

We’d left for Felstad the moment we were free of Skydguard. For two days Kase had been locked in Lynx’s Hypnotik trance. The hope had been that the Kryv haven would help ease his mind, but now he was so still, so cold. A steady pulse, but too faint.

A sob broke through me. I’d walked with him in true memories. A power I never imagined possible, but after Niklas had pointed out the ancient queen’s tale of guiding her love through his lost mind as she stole the poisoned pieces of memories, I had held onto hope it was real.

Niklas had given me an elixir filled with energy to buffer the strain of the deeper magic, and he’d warned me that stepping into such a deep memory would be dangerous.

There’d been the risk we both could’ve been trapped in a place between truth and lies. It had all hindered on Kase’s ability to trust and open to me. He’d let me do it; the warmth of his affection for the true memories had been shared with me, and I dared hope.

Then, the connection broke, and reality ripped us apart into a new nightmare.

He wasn’t moving. I padded at his chest; my shoulders heaved as despair devoured the rest of my energy, and I slumped over his body. Beneath my ear his heartbeat shuddered, his breaths rattled.

Alive, but what if I’d destroyed his mind? What if he never woke again?

When Kase was first taken from me as a girl, my heart shattered. Finding him again repaired my whole soul, but the cracks remained. To lose him once again, I knew it would be the final blow. I would not recover. Damn being strong, damn stealing a throne. I would break, and I would plead with the gods to rid me of this cruel world.

For most of my dreary existence the sure light, the safest place I could go, lived in sunrise eyes and shadow mesmer.

“Come back to me,” I whispered, my fingertips stroking the lines of his chest. His body shuddered. My eyes clenched against the harsh tears spilling onto his linen shirt. “I’ll hate you forever if you never wake, Kase Eriksson. I promise I will.”

“Liar,” a rough voice responded.

I froze for half a breath, then lifted my head with such a start my neck popped.

Kase stared back at me, the same villainous smirk he wore when I first met the Nightrender and his guild teased the corner of his mouth.

My fingers dug into his chest, curling his shirt in my grip. What move did I make next? Did he know me? Was he back, or fooling me all to give him a clear shot to run a blade through my belly again?

I wasn’t left to wonder long. Kase lifted a strong, beautifully rough hand to my cheek. With the pad of his thumb, he wiped away my tears. “I don’t know what I did to deserve your devotion, Malin Strom, but I cherish it.”

The back of my throat grew thick, like honey lined the edges. Pressure gathered in my chest until through the thickness a sob gurgled out, and I fell over the top of him, clinging to his neck until he coughed.

Kase smashed me to his chest, burrowing his face against my skin. A delightful chill hummed down my spine when his lips pressed to my neck, and he speckled kisses against my skin.

His body still caged beneath me, I pulled back and looked down at his face. Kase kept brushing my hair off my wet cheeks, studying every ridge and curve of my face, as if he didn’t yet believe I was real. Without a thought for the others standing patiently around us, I crushed my mouth to his.

Wisps of smoke came at once, and I ignored my mesmer’s attempt to steal more of his thoughts. I’d grown more skilled at pushing my Talent down. Niklas believed it was because I’d accepted my true path of fate.

I didn’t think it had anything to do with fate. It had everything to do with my entire body and soul obsessing over kissing this man, and no piece of me

was about to let mesmer interfere.

Kase kissed me back much the same. There was nothing gentle or sweet. We behaved as if we were desperate to devour each other after starving for too long.

When he broke the kiss, Kase held my gaze for a long pause.

I traced the curve of his lips, and whispered, "It's you, right? I couldn't pull back everything, but it was enough. Tell me it was enough."

"You revealed most of the lies." He nuzzled my neck, holding me tighter. "But what I do remember, the beliefs I had, I clearly recognize as deceit."

A strangled hiccup drew both of us to look up.

I'd nearly forgotten the others still huddled close by.

Tova had her eyes pointed at the sky, and she blinked incessantly. Dagny clung to Luca's arm, for once, seeming unbothered to stand close to the man. She dabbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

I forced myself to untangle from Kase and rose to my feet, taking his hand to help him up.

Kase brushed dirt and dried grass off his legs, then lifted a hesitant gaze to the crowd of thieves and our family. With the distance between them, I doubted any of the Kryv heard the rough swallow of emotion in his throat.

Kase squeezed my hand until the tips went bloodless. "I want to call you all fools for risking so much for me. But . . ." He cleared his throat.

He didn't have time to finish before a bruised and teary Ash slammed against Kase's body, his skinny arms locked around the Nightrender's waist.

Kase grunted and was forced to release my hand, clinging to Ash's bony body to keep from falling back. In two more breaths, his jaw pulsed, and he held the back of Ash's head to his chest. Kase buried his face in the boy's black hair, brow furrowed.

More Kryv fell in. Raum and Vali gripped both of his shoulders, shaking him until Kase shoved them off. Hanna clung to his leg, and he did nothing to remove her until Ash told her she looked like a whimpering little.

The girl flew off the Nightrender and attacked her brother, pinching him on the chest as she waved her hands in a furious rant.

Tova flicked Kase's ear. "About time your stubborn ass got wise."

He rolled his eyes and made a heartfelt promise to buy her a crate of her favorite roasted nuts at the next trade square visit. Fiske and Isak clasped his forearms as Lynx and Gunnar went on about the threats he'd made to the Northern Kingdom's ambassador.

Kase rubbed his head. "I vaguely recall recognizing someone. He truly threatened war?"

Gunnar scoffed, grinning. "The same way you threatened to cut off his head."

"Hells," he grumbled before the Kryv split, opening a path for Niklas.

The Falkyn tossed a pouch of some elixir between his hands.

Kase frowned. "Don't look so bleeding smug. Admit it, you've enjoyed learning all the ways to get through to me."

"I've learned a great deal about mesmer, and have several new sagas to add to my collection, true. But you will owe me a favor, guild lead to guild lead. If the Falkyns need to smuggle a massive haul through Felstad, you'll let it happen and won't gripe to me."

"Done." Kase chuckled and clapped Niklas on the back, but after a moment, he sobered. "Thank you. If I know you, and I do, no doubt you have not slept in weeks."

"A fact I plan to remedy tonight, tomorrow, and perhaps into the next day. And I want your chambers in Felstad to use. Trust me, Junie and I will leave your bed greatly appreciated."

"Niklas," Junius scolded, but she didn't deny it. In fact, she gave Kase a look that dared him to argue.

Kase's eyes blackened, and it only brightened Niklas's grin.

My brothers stepped from the crowd. Hagen and Kase shared a long look before Hagen extended his arm. The moment Kase clasped my brother's arm, Hagen pulled him into an embrace.

Kase stiffened against the affection, but Hagen only held him tighter.

"We had little time to speak at the Masque av Aska," Hagen said. "But my debt shall never be repaid to you, Kase Eriksson. From the boy who gave up his life for my sister, to the man who freed my family, and to the thief who will lay down his life for the woman in his heart, I will never be able to repay you, brother."

Kase's face tightened at the final word, and he mutely hooked an arm around Hagen's shoulders, pounding his back five times before he pulled away.

Bard was there. Kase would be like me and hold few kind memories of Bard Strom. He'd dismissed us both, but since we'd left the riverbend Bard was sullen, broken, and fiercely loyal. In every somber conversation he'd joined, his desire to defend what was left of his family bled through.

He carried suffocating guilt for ending Jens's life. I did not know how to heal him—he wouldn't allow me to take the memory—but the same as he was forever changed, so were we.

I trusted him for the first time in my life. He was my brother as much as Hagen.

Bard did not embrace Kase, but the two men clasped forearms briskly.

"I was never fair to you," Bard admitted. "You or Malin, but you have my loyalty until my last breath for saving us, for saving my family."

"Always," Kase said. "House Strom was all I had once too."

After Bard, a few Falkyns greeted him. Luca embraced him and muttered something in his ear that almost drew Kase to truly smile. Dagny gathered him in her slender arms right after, then called him a name for killing me.

Kase whipped around, face pale, and looked at me with a bit of horror. "What?"

Dagny winced. "Oh, I thought you might've remembered. Malin must've completely stolen that one."

"For a purpose," I chided, then tilted my head at Kase. "It doesn't matter."

Kase took hold of my arm, drawing me against him. Dark heat behind his eyes sent a tantalizing shudder down my spine. I would do anything to keep him looking at me in such a way.

"I did what to you?" Each word hissed through his clenched teeth.

"You didn't know me, and clearly, I'm not scorched on a funeral pyre. I'm fine." I placed a hand on his chest. The thud of his rapid heart kept time with mine. "We used Luca's illusions."

His eyes went black, and I wasn't certain it came from anger. Kase lowered his voice, so only I could hear. "You will be my undoing, woman. Convenient of you to take the memory of me slaughtering you but leave *others*."

I licked my lips. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"You do," he whispered. "And that night in skydguard tower is not the half of what I have planned for you the moment we are alone."

All gods.

My skin burned as if it were kindling going up in flames. I flicked my eyes over Kase's shoulder. "It's been a . . . a long few days. We ought to get some rest."

The sun had barely begun to fade behind the trees. No mistake, there were

those who laughed, not fooled by my sudden interest in a bed chamber.

Kase grinned with a touch of viciousness. "Anxious?"

I curled my fingers into the top of his belt and tugged so his hard hips slammed into mine. His eyes widened in surprise when I kissed his jawline, working my way to his ear.

"No," I whispered. "Ravenous."

He didn't break his gaze from mine as he said, "Mal's right. Everyone should rest while we can."

"Gods," Hagen cursed and shook his head.

Tova and Dagny winked, but Ash and Hanna protested, insisting they wanted to stay with the Nightrender. It took Raum and Vali promising some of Lynx's hidden sugared berries to get the two children to leave.

"Niklas has my chamber. He wasn't lying about taking it," Kase said, voice rough, once we were alone.

"I don't care." I pressed a kiss to his neck, the tip of my tongue leaving a trail down the muscles.

He drew in a sharp breath and tightened his hold on my waist. "Come with me. I know where we can go."

I slipped my fingers into his and followed him into the trees, away from the Felstad ruins.

He was mine once again, and I had plans to engrain in his head a dozen new memories he would never forget.

THE MEMORY THIEF

Kase led me half a length from the ruins. Limericks was a forest made of crystal streams and ponds, mossy trees, and shrubs. A place to easily hide a secret refuge.

With his hand in mine, Kase helped me over the top of a large, damp boulder. A trickle of icy water flowed over the top to a narrow stream below. Kase pulled back a wall of white blossom vines from a flowering tree. The motion caused a bloom of sweet honey to waft through the air.

Behind the vines, a hut was tucked between two towering white aspen trees.

“What is this?” I asked, accepting his hand to drop off the boulder.

“When we found Felstad it was nothing but a heap of old walls. While we worked to make it somewhat habitable, we stayed here.”

“The entire guild squeezed in that?”

“On cold nights,” he said, pulling back a long, sun-worn leather skin over the doorway.

I ducked under the header beam and stepped inside. Walls were made of sod, clay, and pelts, and shaped around a decently crafted wood beam skeleton. In one corner was a pit for a fire and stacks of clay bowls and ewers. The dirt floor was coated in furs and woven rugs, and across an entire wall was a straw stuffed pad for sleeping. Large enough to imagine the Guild of Kryv squeezing together to keep warm during frosty nights.

Worn quilts and old furs covered the pad, and a few feather pillows were organized across the back wall. A flutter overturned my insides, like a swift drop, but something wonderful awaited at the bottom.

A firestick hissed with a new flame. Kase lit a withered tallow candle in a

tin lantern. His eyes never looked away from me as he blew out the spark on the firestick. The light was enough to cast his features in a soft glow, and I could not keep my hands from him a moment longer.

Kase must've felt much the same, for it took two strides before we collided in the center of the hut. He tangled my hair around his fingers and tilted my face to the angle he wanted it. I parted my lips to meet his demanding kiss. His tongue was warm and needy. The taste of him was like clean rain, a forgotten treasure I would cling to until my last breath.

Kase's frenzied fingers unlaced my dress. In steady paces, he backed me to one of the beams of the hut. Hips pressed to mine, he pinned me there.

My hands trembled when I went to his belt. "I almost thought I'd never see you as you again."

"I dreamed of you every night. I craved you." Kase pulled the sleeves of my dress off my shoulders and kissed the bony ridges of my bare skin, then trapped my face between his palms. "You never lost me, not really. I would die before I gave up fighting my way back to you. And you're too bleeding stubborn to give up."

I laughed against his mouth. "I promised you I would never stop."

Shadows soaked his eyes and he kissed me with something new, something desperate. He stripped away the rest of my dress, baring all of me to him. Kase groaned, palmed one breast, gripped my hip with the other hand, and aimed us at the fur-covered bed.

I peeled his belt away as we walked, kissed, and clawed at each other. The only break came when Kase stepped back to pull off his shirt, but he fisted my hair in the next breath, slanting my mouth over his. As if he could not stay parted for more than one item of clothing at a time.

Back in his arms, I dug my fingernails into his shoulders, grinning when Kase shuddered at the bite of pain.

One of his hands slid up my chest to my throat and nudged me back, breaking the kiss. The heat of desire blazed in his eyes. "Lie on the bed."

Gods! I'd do anything he bleeding commanded if he kept speaking in such a way. The silky darkness of his voice soaked through to my bones, my blood, to my very soul. My lips parted, unable to keep the rough, sharp breaths in any longer.

While I settled back on the soft furs and quilts, Kase kept me locked in his heated stare. The tip of his tongue slipped out, wetting his lips, as he watched. He toed off his boots, then with careful, steady hands he sloughed

off his trousers.

If I did not love the man, I might fear him by the way he looked at me, the way he prowled across the bed like I would not survive whatever he had planned.

When he was close, I sealed my knees together demurely. A slow rumble escaped his throat. He laid a hand on my breastbone, pinning me against the bed as he pulled my knees apart with a rough hand.

“Hide yourself from me,” he said, leaning his mouth to my neck, kissing and nipping at my skin, “and you’ll pay for making me lose my mind.”

“Don’t threaten me. *Prove* it,” I said and crushed his mouth back to mine.

Kase kissed along the lines of my ribs and ran his palms across my chest, taking my breasts in his hands. My head fell back, throat bared; my body was no longer mine. He called out pleasure like he called to shadows, and in moments my heart raced like a violent storm inside my chest.

Kase let his weight fall over me and fitted his hips between my thighs. He taunted me, pressing close, but never taking me fully.

“What are you waiting for?” I said, breathless as I kissed his chest, my fingers running across the taut ridges of the scars across his back.

Kase shook my hands off his body and with one hand, yanked both my wrists over my head. “Patience. You asked for proof, and you’ll get proof.”

I whimpered into the next burning kiss as his free hand slipped between my thighs and brought me to a vicious, shuddering peak. When I thought I could take nothing more, Kase’s mouth devoured my body. The scrape of his teeth and tongue on my skin threatened to burst my heart into a dozen pieces.

“Hells, I’ve craved the taste of you,” he said as he blew a cold breath along my chest until my skin pebbled. He rolled his gaze up and shot me a wicked-looking grin. “You are worth the wait.”

I had no doubt this would be my last night breathing. Kase Eriksson would end me in the most beautiful of ways.

Forehead pressed to mine, at last, Kase released my wrists and threaded our hands together on either side of my head. In a painfully sensual crawl, he nudged forward until we fit together.

Not near enough, I wrapped my legs around his waist, digging my heels into the backs of his legs until there was no distance between us.

I let out a sob at the beautiful way he filled me not only physically, but how he filled every piece of my heart.

A hot tear fell from the corner of my eye when he started rolling his hips.

He kissed it away.

Slow to build, but it wasn't long before our pace quickened to a frenzied rush and the wooden posts of the hut groaned when the stuffed bed slammed into them. Kase placed a hand between my head and the wall, always protecting me, always keeping me safe.

"No mesmer, no damn spell can take what's mine. You're *mine*, Malin," He gritted out as he bit down on my bottom lip. "Say it."

My body had gone into a new plane of existence. To form words seemed too great a task, but the haggard whisper slipped out with each thrust. "I've always . . . been . . . yours."

The candlelight, the heat, the rush of our bodies, burned together until I cried out in a shuddering finish. Kase held my gaze as he took another rough thrust and groaned my name.

He sank over me, both of us gasping and holding onto each other like this had all been a dream.

With a sweet kiss, Kase rolled onto his shoulder, and pulled me to his chest. He brushed my damp hair off my brow, kissing me there, then looked at me without a shadow in his eye.

"Malin." He kissed the tip of my nose. "I love you. Every good piece of me, and every dark, cruel piece of me loves you. But loving you has put a great many lives at risk."

I stroked the side of his face. "How so?"

Kase gripped my jaw, holding our lips a hairsbreadth apart. "I would take heads, I would take hearts, I would destroy this entire kingdom without remorse, for you."

I curled my fingers around his hair. "What did I tell you? Be a brute, be wicked, be the damn villain, but in these moments, be mine. You are mine as much as I am yours, Kase Eriksson."

He grinned, then kissed me until I was hardly able to catch a single breath.

THE NIGHTRENDER

“Malin, no!”

Cold air whipped against my damp skin. I blinked in the darkness, hand to my chest, as if trying to hold my wild heart from breaking through.

“Kase.” Malin’s groggy voice tethered me to reality.

I shuddered when her gentle palm reached out and rubbed along my shoulder. Without a word, I pulled her into my arms, the warmth of her skin chased away the frigid, horrid thoughts in my head.

She didn’t flinch at my suffocating grip. No, Malin Strom let me crush her. She stroked the back of my head, caressed the tension in my neck until it started to fade, and kissed the sweat off my brow.

“You’re real.” I dropped my forehead to the crook of her shoulder and breathed her in. She was a sweet slice of honey with a hint of me still on her body. My arms tightened around her waist. “You’re here.”

“I’m right here,” she soothed, leaving kisses down the edge of my jaw. “A nightmare?”

I nodded against her neck.

Malin leveraged into sitting and pulled a fur cover over her folded legs. She patted her thigh with a grin.

I chuckled. She didn’t need to say anything. I knew exactly what she expected. It was what we’d always done as children when one of us had a nightmare. I laid back down, my head on her leg, and her gentle fingers started to play with my hair and rub my head.

The nights Malin laid her head on my lap as a boy had taught me how to braid.

“Start at the beginning. It’s the only way the Mares leave you in peace.”

I snorted. “Who told you that?”

“A boy. One who always thought he was the smartest in the hayloft. Now, quit stalling. Out with it.”

I didn’t want to talk about it. The vivid images were as if they were plucked out of my head, but I could not fully shape them. But somewhere, deep inside my heart, I knew it was more than a dream. Truth be told, it felt a great deal like a warning.

“It is a dream I’ve had since childhood,” I whispered, my arms hugged her legs as I relaxed the more she played with my hair. “It is about you.”

“I’m not certain if I should be offended you wake so unsettled over dreams of me.”

I scoffed and kissed her palm. “Someone has you and I can’t reach you in time. I find you bloody, and when I look around, I face your killer.” I closed my eyes. “It’s always me.”

Malin’s hand stopped in my hair. “Kase, you know it’s only a dream.”

“Yes. But dreams have a way of showing the fears we don’t want to face.” I rolled onto my back and looked up at her. “My path is dangerous. It’s the reason I kept a distance from you. The fear that my life will be the end of yours is always there.”

Malin stroked the side of my face. “I would rather meet a gruesome end loving you than living an empty life without you. I’ve experienced the latter, and I have no plans to do so again.”

I took her hand in mine and kissed her knuckles. “Good to hear. I’m unable to let you go, so that’s settled.”

With a laugh, Malin adjusted until she laid next to me again, one arm and leg draped over my body. Her cheek rested on my chest, and I could not think of a time I felt more at peace.

Naturally, the moment was dashed too swiftly.

A heavy knock pounded on one of the beams keeping the old hut from caving in.

“All right, you’ve had enough alone time!” Tova’s voice rattled through the walls. “Come on out, and quickly. I will shake this old shack until it falls in on you both. We have moves to make.”

“Niklas said he would hole away for days,” I shouted back. “I plan to do the same.”

“True enough, but that was before we realized it was a full moon tonight.

For some reason it has Raum and Vali rather anxious. Now hurry.”

I groaned and tightened my hold around Malin’s shoulders. “We could run away. Leave them for a week, at least.”

She kissed my chest and pulled out of my grip. “The duty of a leader of thieves never ends. You have me, Kase Eriksson. Tonight, tomorrow. We know how quickly life can change, so I have mighty plans to never waste a moment with you.”

Hells, I would give every bit of breath in my lungs for this woman. I folded my hands behind my head, watching her dress until her cheeks pinked, then dressed myself, and followed her to the main ruins of Felstad.

In the front courtyard of the ruins, Falkyns and Kryv stood around drinking warm ale and using wash basins as they readied for the morning.

Tightness in my gut drew me to a halt at the entrance. Each person in these walls was mine. A valued piece of a twisted, thieving family I took for granted. To nearly have them ripped away from me, to not even know they were gone, created a tangle of hatred for the Black Palace, and a love for the foolhardy loyalty these people gave me.

Malin looked at me over her shoulder. She smiled, as if she knew exactly what I thought, and held out her hand.

I slipped my fingers into hers and stepped into Felstad for what felt like the first time.

“Finally.” From one of the broken ledges Gunnar looked down at us, one of his legs dangling over the edge. He chuckled, then scaled down the side of the wall until he could safely drop. He landed in a crouch, and rose again with a grin. “Thought we might never see you again.”

“Great hells, we’ve been gone a few clock tolls,” Malin said.

“Not long enough,” I muttered.

Gunnar laughed and walked with us toward the center of the courtyard. A few paces off from where Raum and Vali had most of the guild members gathered, I tugged on Malin’s hand.

“Give me a moment.”

She followed my gaze and smirked, releasing me. Alone, I went to one of the water barrels where a couple filled skins and flacons.

“Hawker.”

Hob jolted and faced me. Bruises still marred his face from the night at the riverbend, but his arrogant grin came soon enough. “Ah. What name shall I call you today? Last time I said the word Nightrender I thought you might

strangle me.”

His woman shrunk against the barrel when I looked at her. Not that I blamed her. Our last meet was not entirely pleasant, what with me giving all her dreary secrets to her lover, then threatening her.

I was not accustomed to manners, politeness, or general niceness, but I buried the unease and held out my arm for Hob. “You have my gratitude. I know what you did and the risks you took. You have my loyalty for *your* loyalty to Malin.”

Hob looked at me like my words unnerved him as much as they did me. But after a moment he took my forearm. “You hear this, love. We’ve got an ally in the bleeding Nightrender.”

Inge stood a little straighter. “Call it even, then. We . . . we know what you did for us before the masque. We know you arranged to have my debts to my brothers paid off.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She smiled. “Of course. How foolish of me. Such a man as the Nightrender would never do something so . . . *good*, right?”

“Never.” I almost returned the smile, almost felt light inside. “You both have the protection of the Kryv. Always.”

Hob dipped his chin and released my arm. I turned away without another word. The limit of emotion for anyone beyond Malin Strom was reaching the brink.

“Kase.” Raum waved a hand, urging me to slice through the crowd to the center. “It’s a full moon tonight.”

“Tell me that is not why you sent Tova to drag me out of bed. She already informed us.”

Tova snorted. “I suspect for the next half-turn we’ll need to drag you both out of bed to keep you fulfilling your basic needs for living.”

“Stay in bed all you like,” Raum said. His tone raised in pitch as it always did when he was excited, “but do it after tonight. Don’t you remember?”

“I would like to not think about the things I was supposed to remember for the rest of my damn life. What have I forgotten now?”

“The fae! The one you sent scurrying away to Hemlig.”

I rubbed my forehead. My brain was a muddled mess of memories. Malin took away the cloak of Ivar’s spell. She took the hate and bitterness, but there were still many of the moments left behind.

My eyes shot open. “Nidhug. The assassination.”

Raum's smile fell. "What assassination?"

"The Lady Magnate. Gods, there are two littles—I think—she wanted me to kill them. They are somewhere in Hemlig. She wanted it done so Niall's future throne wouldn't be threatened and before Ivar . . ."

I clamped my mouth shut. Luca was standing across the circle from me. Hells. He didn't know.

"What?" he asked. "Why did my mother ask this of you?"

"Luca—"

"What do you know, Kase? Tell me."

His jaw tightened. He never blinked. For his sake, I would've preferred to do this away from the others, but there was little time. With the memory returned in my head, Raum was right. We had a meet to get to.

"Ivar is dying," I said, voice low and rough.

Luca flinched but didn't turn his eyes away. "How?"

I quickly repeated what Britta told me, of the rogue Elixist, of two potential threats to the bloodline of House Grym.

"I can only assume they must have mesmer, or blood from the ancient bloodlines." A thought struck me like a blow to the throat. I reached and touched Dagny's arm. "Britta said one was a boy. A young boy. Dag, what if . . . I don't know for certain, but what if one of these littles is a threat because he could be an illegitimate heir."

Tears glistened over her lashes as she sucked in a sharp breath. "Do you think . . . all gods, Kase. Do you think my boy could be there?"

"I think it is a very real possibility."

Tova and Lynx both wrapped arms around Dagny's shoulders when she trembled, trying to hold in a sob.

Luca ground his teeth together, and once Dagny gathered her breath, she met his gaze.

"Luc. If it's him . . ." With a pained look, she rested a hand to his arm. "I misjudged you for so long."

"Dag, don't."

"No," she said. "I thought . . . I thought you simply weren't trying."

Luca's eyes darkened and he took her upper arm tightly in his grip. "I have never stopped trying to find him. Gods, to think how long you remained in that damn place—" He dropped his eyes to the tattoos on her fingertips, and the one that was missing. "Do you know how it killed me to think of you there? Why did you not let me free you?"

Fat tears welled in Dagny's eyes. "Luca, it was not your choice to make. I could not hide away when traders came through, and I . . . I couldn't be by you when—"

"You only see Niall when you look at me," he interjected in a dark, sullen voice.

Dagny winced and tenderly took his hand. "I do not see Niall. I see a life I lost. A pain that lives between us too great to overcome, and now I see all the misconceptions I've allowed to shape in my mind. I see what I have ruined."

"Dagny—"

"Not now," I snapped, hating myself for it, but there was no time. I softened my tone. "Later. If we have a meet involving a bleeding assassination, how long do you think it will be before the Lady Magnate hires another now that I am gone?"

"Yes, well, she made a mistake asking you," Tova said.

"Keep your heads," Lynx insisted. "We don't know for certain who these littles are."

"We're going to find out," Luca snapped. "If there is even a chance it is Von, we're going."

Dagny squeaked. "You remember his name?"

"Gods, Dag." Luca's eyes were wild. "What else has occupied my damn mind? You. Him. You. Him."

Dagny trembled enough I thought she might shiver out of her skin. Luca cursed again, then pulled her into his big arms. Dagny let out a whimper against his chest. He stroked her icy blonde hair and whispered in the old language close to her ear. A thing he used to do when the serf girl of the Black Palace let her nerves bring her to panic.

I stepped back, feeling like an intruder in a private moment.

Raum clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Shall we prepare, then?"

Malin came to my side and slipped her fingers through mine. I squeezed her fingers, and gave her a soft smile, then looked back to the Kryv. "Be ready. We have deals to make."

THE MEMORY THIEF

Perhaps I was more villainous than I thought. There was no feeling quite like being blanketed in night, weapons strapped across my body, the chill of a scheme rolling in my veins. I did not start this way. Over the turns, through cruelty, desperation, and tricks, this was how villains were made.

I grinned, looking across the dark space near the run-down worship house. Kase pulled his dark hood over his head, shadows wrapped his shoulders, and he spun the karambit knife around his fingers as if he'd never forgotten his place here.

Many Falkyns remained in Felstad with Hob and Inge to keep watch while the rest of us stepped dangerously close to the Black Palace for the meet.

"How do you do it, Mal?" Dagny whispered, sidling up to me. "How do you keep composure when you've lost your heart the same as I have?"

"I do not keep my composure. As you recall, I snuck into the skydguard tower just to see him. How are you, though?"

She glanced at the dark sky. "For four turns I've bedded traders in exchange for information. There were rumors the Lord Magnate hid away all the shameful pieces of the Grym line, but no one knew where. I've ruined myself to find my son, yet I would do it all again for this chance to hold him, to breathe him in again."

I tugged her against my side, my arm around her shoulders. "Dag, you are not ruined. You are relentless. You are one of the bravest women I've met. If your son is there, if we find him, he will never doubt you would go to the hells and back for him. He will live, he will grow, and someday he will tell

his children's children the sagas of his warrior mother."

She hiccupped as she swiped at tears on her cheeks. "What tricks the gods play in our lives. Did you ever see your life turning out this way? A hidden queen who loves the Black Palace's greatest enemy?"

"No," I said, smiling at the soft gray sky. "I was certain I'd live out my days in that hayloft at House Strom."

"I had such different hopes for my life too. Even as a serf there were those things that brought me such . . . light."

I did not miss the way her eyes dropped to the damp grass, and when they lifted again, her gaze was on Luca's back. He stood between Fiske and Isak, strapping a sword to his belt.

With a squeeze to her hand, I lowered my voice. "What is your story with Luca? I cannot decide if you hate him, or if you think something else."

A bit of pink stained her wet cheeks. "That life I envisioned, those light pieces, those belonged to him."

"What happened between you?"

Dagny licked her lips and looked to me. "My daj was a serf in the Black Palace, the same as me. I lived on those grounds from before I could walk. Being so close in age, I grew up with Luca, then with Kase and the Kryv once they arrived. Luca was kind to me; he didn't treat me like a servant; he didn't mention my status once. I was simply Dagny.

"One day, a few weeks after my daj passed into the Otherworld, the grief caused me to grow quite ill. But what did it matter if a serf grew ill? Chores still needed to be done. Luca stole my illusion and made it appear as if I were busy, but in truth, it was him who did every one of my chores. Then he stole half a dozen honey cakes from the kitchens for me. I think that was the moment it changed."

"When what changed?" I asked.

Dagny let out a long sigh. "When I started to love him." She covered her face with her hands for a few breaths before going on. "I kept it a secret, of course. Even from him. How could a serf even entertain a life with an heir of the Black Palace? Until he kissed me." A smile twisted in the corner of her mouth. "In the gardens on the eve of my eighteenth turn. I did not expect it, but he took my hand and sternly told me I'd taken much too long to kiss him, so he was stepping up instead."

I snickered. "It sounds like something Luca would do. Turn it on you, then make himself the hero."

“I’ve never felt so safe than in those forbidden moments we would steal away. There couldn’t be a life with him, though, and we both knew it. I think we chose to ignore the truth. Sometimes we would dream of running away after Luca returned from his mandatory studies in Furen. I thought we were clever never getting caught, but we were not as invisible as I thought.”

My jaw tightened. “Niall?”

Dagny dragged her bottom lip between her teeth and nodded. “On the night Luca sailed to the higher academy, Niall cornered me. He told me he never knew I was so willing to give my body to the sons of the Black Palace.”

Dagny’s hands shook with rage or fear, I couldn’t be certain. I took them in mine until they stopped twitching and her voice steadied.

“Once, Mal. I’d been with Luca once the night before he left. It was . . . it *is* my most tender memory, but Niall soiled it. Luca and I thought we were careful, we thought we were alone. But clearly, we weren’t.” Dagny’s eyes flashed in a spark of hate. “Luca Grym showed me what a true lover should be, but Niall . . . he just took without a care. Then, weeks later, when it was clear a little was due, the Lord Magnate locked me away in Niall’s chambers. Like an object he owned and could use as he pleased.”

“Dag.” My stomach burned in sick.

“I thought of Luca every time. Prayed he’d return. Niall may be the older brother, but he fears Luca, fears his power. Luca’s magic is the closest to memory mesmer after all. Ivar resents him for it, I think because despite the Lord Magnate’s strength in mesmer, the ring does not choose him. I believe Ivar is not worthy of it.”

But there was his kind, honorable son. There was a part of me that suspected if Luca stood near the queen’s ring the golden runes would ignite much like it did around me. Another reason I had no desire to fight for the throne. There were too many with a claim to the bleeding thing.

“Then Von was born,” Dagny said. “Gods, he looked just like a Grym.”

I held her hand. “You said he belonged to Niall, but could he be Luca’s?”

“I never considered it. Niall had me more, so I just thought . . .” She closed her eyes. “It doesn’t matter who fathered him, Ivar took him anyway, and Niall sent me to the Lark. Said he was finished with his whore and others would make use of me. The Kryv tried to reach me when they heard, but by then I had discovered how willingly the bastards who came through the Lark doors spilled secrets for a bit of pleasure.”

I'd known she'd chosen to remain at the Lark cheer house, but to hear the account of all she'd survived before—there was no mistaking the woman was not brittle. She was carved from iron.

“And Luca? What drove you apart?”

She closed her eyes. “Likely my bitterness. He came for me disguised as a patron. Begged me to leave with him, but I would not give up the search for my son. I told him he'd abandoned me. I said such awful things to him.”

“Dag, you must be kind to yourself. I cannot imagine the horror you were living.”

“I think I made Luca the villain in my mind. Imagined him living a rich life with his books, new lovers, while I suffered, and my son was lost. I did not realize he has been searching all this time.” She hesitated. “Don't take this wrong, but I have a bit of gladness Kase was taken. It was as if fate had a hand in finding an answer to my prayers. Without him being in the Black Palace, Von would've died by the hand of another assassin. I have no doubt.”

I squeezed her hand again. “I'm simply glad you get your chance at the life you dreamed of after such pain.”

Dagny snorted. “Ah, Mal. That dream life is gone.”

“So sure?” I glanced at Luca as he went to stand beside Kase. “He is fallen from the Black Palace. He can live his life without Ivar or Niall commanding his steps. To me it seems like you two can have the life you wanted. Free, with no status, no levels between you.”

“Too many words have been said, too much anger. He cares for me, but Luca does not love me anymore. Not after my rejection.”

I disagreed, but Dagny spoke with such finality I didn't take the time to argue the point. Instead, I pointed ahead of us. “Dag. It's time.”

A sharp breath slid between her teeth when she focused ahead. From a path carving through the trees, a man in a thick fur coat and straw hat sauntered toward the worship house.

The Kryv formed a line, weapons in hand. Even Ash and Hanna held small stiletto knives. Falkyns fell in behind Niklas and Junius. The Elixist tossed one of his pouches between his hands, gold rings on his fingers.

Hagen and Bard muttered something to each other, and I considered standing beside them. To see my two brothers, Bard especially, stand shoulder to shoulder with Kase Eriksson twisted a delightful knot in my heart.

An ache was there since Jens was not. He'd been a stern man, but there

was a voice that whispered if Jens Strom were here, he would be indescribably pleased to see his family all together.

I glanced at the clouds. Hells, I hoped he was smiling and raising a massive horn of the gods' ale right now.

"I'm hesitant to interrupt you. When you get so lost in thought, I recall you getting irritable when you were interrupted." In my distraction, Kase came up behind me. His face was buried in shadows beneath his cowl. He brushed a lock of hair off my face, smile fading. "What troubles you?"

"A great many things, but we have a mark to meet with."

"And if you are troubled, the mark can wait."

Hells, this man had ways of bursting my heart with sweetly villainous words. I kissed his lips softly. "I wasn't thinking troublesome thoughts. I was hoping Jens was proud of us, that he watches us from the great hall. I know you don't believe—"

His fingers to my lips silenced me. "He is. If anyone could make the great hall of the gods a tangible place it is Jens Strom." Kase pressed a kiss to the side of my head. "We have not had time to talk of all that happened, but I mourn for you, Mallie. For Hagen and Bard. I even mourn for myself a bit because of his death. Jens Strom kept me alive, and I wish I could've thanked him for it."

I hugged his waist and rested my cheek against his heart. "I wish I would've known the truth before. The conversations we might've had. The time we wasted in indifference."

"I know. We act now for him. To honor his sacrifice."

I blinked through tears, refusing to begin a new—dangerous—scheme sobbing. "Then let us act, Nightrender."

"Join me at the front?" He held out his hand.

My heart skipped. I'd played important roles in his schemes with the Masque av Aska, but to be asked to stand at his side when my role wasn't yet clear was a declaration of his heart deeper than any words spoken.

I accepted his hand, and he brushed his lips over my knuckles. Before we stepped to the front where the quivering fae stood waiting, Kase shadowed his eyes, wrapping me in his chilled mesmer until it looked as if I carried his darkness the same.

"You . . . you've got a bigger crew than I thought," the fae said through a thick swallow.

Kase scoffed. "I warned you, Nidhug, I make no threat I cannot deliver

on. Now, shall I send those letters to all reaches of the Fates' Ocean and mark you as a man without a home? You can see I stand here with Luca Grym, the second son of the Black Palace."

Luca took a step forward. His laughter was dark and low when the fae stiffened at his face. "A seal of the Black Palace on a missive has great power."

"I've got what you asked for, so there's no need to send my name out to anyone." Nidhug scrubbed his hands together. I took note at the grungy cloth bandages on one hand. "Found the camp, found a few upper guards. Hells, they're so bleeding bored, a few horns of brän had them singing."

Kase closed the distance between them. He canted his head, black eyes drinking in the nervous fae, and before Nidhug could dodge, Kase gripped his chin. In a rough tug, Kase had the fae nose to nose. "I don't trust you, Nidhug. For all I know you could be leading us straight into a trap."

"N-No. I wouldn't."

"Put my mind at ease, and play this game the way I choose. You may tell your tale to her." He tilted his head to Junius. "But she will know if you lie. Trust me, my friend, she does not care for liars. They leave a bad taste in her mouth. Or give your memories to her, and we will see for ourselves what you know." Kase turned to me, a devious sort of grin on his face. "What do you choose?"

He gripped Nidhug's jaw with more force.

"G-Give my memories, I—"

"Good choice." Kase released Nidhug with enough force, the fae stumbled.

"No, I didn't mean that was my choice, I—"

"Isak," Kase interrupted again. "Lynx, see that he holds still for Malin."

When Kase strode past me, he paused and brushed his thumb over my bottom lip, as if he could not keep from touching me.

Nidhug whimpered as Lynx took hold of his arms and forced the fae to kneel. Lynx rested one of his big palms on the side of Nidhug's head, keeping it there until the man slumped a bit. Still awake, but he looked as if he would fall asleep the moment he hit his bed. Isak covered Nidhug's eyes with his hand. The only hint that his mesmer had blackened Nidhug's mind were the soft whimpers of fear.

I'd not anticipated this. Nerves rattled my fingers, but I walked forward with my back straight. The rest of my days would be spent by the

Nightrender's side. As a Kryv, as his in every way. I would need to be bold, and doubtless, a little wicked.

Once I reached the fae, I leaned by his ear and whispered, "Think of all the things you saw on your journey. Then, you must give them to me."

Nidhug groaned as I used my thumb to pull his chin down until his lips parted. I did not kiss him. No, the taste of Kase still stung my lips, and I did not want to soil it.

My lips hovered over the fae's, as close as possible without touching, and I inhaled his hot breath. By the taste of old onions and the burn of ale, he'd not cleansed his mouth out in at least a day. I ignored the reek of it on my tongue and inhaled until my lungs couldn't take more.

Smokey shapes built in my head. Mists of darkness formed jagged peaks. A swirl of gray rounded out to a fire pit. All around the flames were big, hunched guards, bundled in furs against the bite of the mountain night wind.

Laughter floated in across my mind as shadows moved with drunken guards dancing around the fire. Songs were sung at the stars, and one skydguard pounded the tune on a roughly made rawhide drum.

Nidhug had sat amongst them, provided the unit with ale, and had gotten them drunk as he said. But in the revelry, he made a point to speak to one of the guards. A gilded chain clipped the thick, wiry fur over his shoulders symbolizing his higher rank.

"Why're they even important? Seems you lot would be better served elsewhere."

"That's what I say." The guard raised his horn, toasting to the stars. "What's with shoving the lot of us into the bleeding cold when the damn house is full of Watchers?"

"Watchers? From the prisons?"

The skydguard shrugged. "Suppose in a way." He pointed a thick finger toward the shadows of two hills. "Bastard House in't nothing but a prison."

"Bastard House?"

"It's what we call it. Folk assume they're Ivar's bastards, but we don't know for certain."

"Don't know for certain, but you've never wondered why they were sent here?"

"Oh, no, I wondered," said the guard with a deep nod. "From what I know, from what I hear, the Lord Magnate keeps them locked up like a dirty secret. Probably waiting for them to show tricky magic. You know how Ivar

loves his mesmer.”

Nidhug nodded and took another weak drink while the guard gulped back half his horn. “So, you’ve seen them.”

“No. Don’t even know where the bleeding place is. We’re only here to guard the border.”

“How do you know they’re even back there then?” Nidhug’s anxiety rose in the memory.

“Guess we don’t. No one has ever known the location except Ivar and his skydguard lord. Personally, I think his new lord is a risk. Used to be a thief, you know.”

Nidhug pressed for more, the way his heart raced, it was clear the curiosity in him took hold. Most crooks had it. Always wanting to know things, always plotting, always trying to find a bit of leverage to use against someone.

Smoke began to gather as the memory started to fade. The last remnants were Nidhug asking, “What do you know of the Alver with shadows? The one who changes his eyes to night.”

The guard stopped lifted his horn halfway to his lips. “You talking about the Malevolent?”

“Yes.” Nidhug clapped his hands together. “Is he the sort to fear, or is he a talented illusionist?”

The guard licked his lips. “My advice—keep your bleeding distance, fae. Before he disappeared for all those turns, I saw him kill folk. The Malevolent and a few other Alvers tried to break out, you know, turns ago. He snapped the bones of the guards, bled out their eyes. He could do it all because they feared death. You think he’ll kill you gently, no. If you have a fear, he bleeding tortures you with it until you’re begging for . . .”

The sour taste of Nidhug’s memory sank into my tongue. Smoke swallowed the campsite, and voices dissolved into empty thought as my mesmer fatigued into nothing.

My eyes fluttered open. Nidhug slumped on the ground. Lynx and Isak had left him by now.

I grinned and ran my fingers down the fae’s cheek. “You considered not returning. I promise you, what the guard described is not the worst he’d do if you betrayed him.”

He looked at me with a bit of horror as I stood and faced the Guild of Kryv. “He found the camp, but the guards don’t know the location of this

house. All they know is it is guarded by Watchers.”

“I did what I could in the time I was given,” Nidhug said, voice small.

“There is someone who might know how to find it, though.” My voice darkened. The thought of him had a grip on a crueller side of me. “Eero. The guard said all the skydguard lords knew the location.”

A hiss rose through the Falkyns. Niklas stopped tossing his elixir pouch, and Junius studied me for a few breaths.

“The truth,” she whispered.

“Good,” Kase said. “We’re overdue for a meet with our old friend anyway.”

Kase stepped forward, eyes on the fae, pausing long enough to brush his fingers over the tops of my knuckles. “You’ve done your part, Nidhug. Consider our dealings at an end.”

For the first time the fae breathed deeply. “I’ll be free to go?”

“Scream, run, skim your game chips. I care little.”

I grinned. No mark was ever truly free of the Nightrender.

The fae scrambled to his feet and took a step away from Kase. His fingers dug into the brim of his dusty hat, and he kept stealing glances between me and the Nightrender. “I’ve never seen that glamour she used.”

Kase locked me in a heated stare, one rife in unspoken desire. “Because there is no one like her.”

Nidhug took the answer and made quick work of gaining distance from the Nightrender.

Kase blinked until the shadows left his eyes, and took my hand, leading us back to the group. Bard studied him as he approached.

“Words you need to speak, Bard?” Kase asked.

My brother shook his head. “No, it’s just . . . hells, it’s unnerving to watch you. I didn’t know the Nightrender was the skinny little from the stables until the masquerade, and now . . . Gods, you’re bleeding terrifying sometimes.”

I snorted a laugh and squeezed Kase’s hand. Hagen clapped Bard between the shoulders, laughing until even Bard cracked a small smile.

“Kase!” Isak shouted. He gripped Fiske’s arm as his husband’s head fell back, eyes toward the sky.

My heart leapt to my throat. Fiske’s eyes were milky and rapidly twitching back and forth.

“Dammit,” Kase muttered. He pulled me closer. “Brace yourself.

Something wretched is about to happen.”

THE NIGHTRENDER

Fiske's visions lasted mere moments but left him gasping over his knees every time. The guilds surrounded him by the time the dark brown of his eyes returned. Isak kept a reassuring hand on his back until he caught his breath enough to speak.

"What did you see?" I asked.

Fiske lifted his gaze. "Never had one like that."

"It t-took you so fast," Isak whispered, worry carved on his face.

"Is something going to happen if we go to Hemlig?" Gunnar asked.

Malin tightened her grip on my hand, then clutched my arm with her other, digging her fingernails into my muscle. I understood her rush of fear without needing mesmer. The last premonition Fiske gave of dreary things to come ended with me forgetting my entire guild and hating the woman I loved.

"Fiske." My voice came rough and dark. "What is it?"

"It wasn't so much a warning of something bad to come," he said. "More like a warning of . . . change. A warning that if we go down this path, our lives will never be the same. Something will happen that will change everything about the Kryv."

Change could mean a thousand different things. Death, war, a discovery. I looked to Malin. What if this time Fiske's vision meant she was lost to me? There would be no worse change than losing Malin.

She met my eyes in the dark, offered a small smile, then rested her head on my shoulder. To have her next to me, clinging to me as if I was her reason for living, perhaps I was a selfish, frightened bastard, but I would not risk her.

Not for anyone.

“What do we want to do then?” Gunnar asked.

I opened my mouth to stand against the move to go after the littles, to forget them and turn it over to the Norns; Dagny would need to forgive me.

“We go to Hemlig,” Malin said.

I cursed under my breath.

Her voice was so sure, so steady. She looked to me. “Right? This could reunite Dagny with her boy. I thought we did not stop fighting for one of our own.”

By the hells, she spoke like a bleeding queen.

“But we don’t know if it is her son,” I argued.

Malin narrowed her eyes. A look I knew well. I’d been earning such a look since boyhood whenever I would irritate her or say something to draw out her temper.

“And we did not know if you would ever remember your name, Nightrender.”

I gripped her elbow. “I need to speak with you.”

Before she could protest, I yanked her away from the others. A few mutters and chuckles followed. I was not the same man I was before the Masque av Aska. No mistake, the Kryv knew it too. My steps were now guided by sunset hair and a mouth that loved to argue.

Alone, I spun Malin around to face me. “This move is not so easily decided.”

“Seems simple enough.”

“We can’t rush into a fire because littles are at risk. It is a daily occurrence in the East.”

“Tell me you don’t feel it to your bones that this could be what Dagny has been searching for. A chance to heal from her pain. Not just for her, but for Luca too.”

“We also can’t mend every broken heart.”

Malin pinched her lips. “Tell me the truth, Kase Eriksson. What is bringing you to pause? Because the man I know would walk to the hells for his folk. I thought that meant Dag and Luca too.”

I let out a rough sigh, one closer to a growl. “It does.”

“I understand what Fiske said is unsettling, but you have never let a little unease stop you from acting. Hells, Kase, you fought in a bleeding war in the North.”

“It’s you,” I said softly. “You are why I hesitate.”

Malin’s face softened. She said nothing, simply stepped closer and pressed a warm palm to the side of my face.

I leaned into the touch. There would always be a memory of not having her. As if imprinted on my heart, the pain of being torn apart would never leave me.

“The last time Fiske had such a strong premonition was the day before the masque. I can’t . . . what if this time you’re the one who is taken, or harmed, or *killed*? Even the thought of it fills me with enough fear I feel as if I could crack the earth in two.”

Malin threaded her fingers behind my neck. She did not negate my fear by telling me it wouldn’t happen; she did not offer false assurances.

“This is the price of loving someone. One day you could lose them.” She pressed a gentle kiss to my lips. “I make no promises that nothing bad will ever happen again, but I can promise you no matter what, I will always fight and claw my way back to you. Even in the Otherworld. That is my vow to you.”

My pulse quickened. The idea settled so swiftly it must’ve always been there. I took her face between my hands. “Do more than that. Take true vows with me. Tonight.”

Malin let out a soft gasp. “Kase.”

“I mean it. My heart is yours; it always has been. Since my earliest memories, you have been there. But there is a connection that comes through Alver vows, one so powerful not even a *förvirring* could break it.”

“But the time it takes to plan—”

“Nothing is needed but you and me. No witnesses, no grand fete, just pure, honest vows.”

Malin’s eyes filled with glassy tears, but she smiled. “Tova will kill you if you do not include her.”

“As will your brothers. I will buy Tova two dozen plums and hide from Bard and Hagen for a day.” I wrapped her in my arms, pulling her close. My lips brushed hers as I whispered, “Take vows with me.”

Her eyes bounced between mine, mouth parted. After a few breaths, she nodded and gripped my body like it held her upright.

“Yes.” Malin rested her forehead to mine. “Gods, yes.”

I kissed her hard, greedy, with enough passion it almost hurt. When I pulled away, her tears wet my own cheeks, but she laughed. I kissed her

again, and again, until I was forced to return to the Kryv to finish our plan.

“We go to Hemlig,” I said, heart racing. “But first we have another meet with the Lord of Skydguard.”

Niklas’s face curled in a cruel grin. “I’ll start packing straightaway.”

“Rest,” I told the Kryv. “We leave at dawn.”



WE DIDN’T MAKE the journey back to Felstad. Raum searched out a concealed place to set up a camp near a rocky hillside dotted in caves instead.

My body trembled in anticipation. To keep occupied I helped set up a space for Hanna and Ash to sleep, saw to it a night watch was set up with rotations, then sent Gunnar and Tova to follow and encourage Nidhug to leave Klockglas before he got the notion he could babble about a memory thief.

If he refused, they knew what to do.

After it all, my body had not stilled. Any moment my heart was going to snap through my chest. I caught sight of Malin standing on the edge of the camp, tugging on the ends of her hair, her bottom lip smashed between her teeth.

Hells, the woman was going to bite it off.

I grinned and hurried across the camp. Her eyes widened when she saw me; a flush filled her face.

I brushed a thumb over her cheek. “Malin Strom, do I . . . unsettle you?”

“In so many ways.”

“Are you ready?”

She flicked her eyes to the camp where Kryv and Falkyns flopped onto furs or their coats to sleep. “They will be upset we cut them out.”

My smile faded. “We need not do this if you would rather wait. If you wanted something more.”

“No.” She curled her fingers around my tunic. From shoulders to hips she pressed against me. “No. I can think of nothing else since you brought it up, I’m merely warning you to fear for your life when it comes out.”

I laughed and picked up one of the lanterns we traveled with. “It will be worth it.”

Malin clung to my hand as I led us to the cave I’d selected the moment

we arrived. The mouth was narrow, but it opened to a large cavern with smooth stone on the bottom. I'd placed a roll of furs at the entrance and gathered them as we stepped inside.

My hands shook as I lit the flame in the lantern and ignited a cloak of crimson shadows over the walls. If Malin noticed my nerves, she said nothing. Truth be told, I had no doubt she was curling inside out the same as me.

Once we'd traveled at least thirty paces into the cave, I stopped at a rounded-out bulge, laid out the furs, set the lantern in the center, then kneeled on one side. Malin took the other.

"I'm not sure how this is done," she whispered.

"I witnessed Fiske's and Isak's. They did it in the middle of a scheme, and Niklas and Junie were on a smuggling run when they did theirs. Seems the guild life does not lead to romantic vows."

"I don't need more."

"In the beginning you say what you want, only the end is the same." I took hold of her hand. "I'll go first if you'd like."

She nodded and held my gaze. My voice knotted in the back of my throat. I'd never experienced such a rush of emotion. Such heat in my blood. The moment had hardly begun, and a sensational burst of rightness struck me silent.

It took more than ten breaths to find my words.

"Malin Strom, I vow my heart to you. I vow to be your husband, your protector, your lover, and friend. I vow to be only yours for all our days, then into the Otherworld for all time."

Malin smiled, eyes bright. "Kase Eriksson, I vow to be your wife, to give you my whole heart. I vow to be a safe place for you, a lover, a friend. I vow to be only yours for all our days, then into the Otherworld for all time."

A tug in the center of my chest burned. Malin winced and rubbed the space over her heart. I kissed her palm and removed my karambit from my boot. "Alver vows use blood to seal them."

Without hesitation, Malin held out her hand. I carved the simple rune meant for joy. She closed her eyes, but didn't flinch. She tried to be tender as she cut into my palm with the same rune, then pressed a kiss to my fingertips once she'd finished.

I held out my hand and placed her bloody hand over the top of mine.

"What power I have is yours for all your days," I whispered.

“What power I have is yours for all your days,” she mimicked.

Fingers laced, our palms connected.

A bolt of furious heat rushed through my veins. Wind and shadows and fiery light swirled around us. My forehead dropped to Malin’s. An overwhelming bite of heated mesmer clashed with the chill of my darkness. There was a pull to be near her. A feeling like it might make me physically ill should I resist.

The rush ended as abruptly as it had begun. When Malin opened her eyes again, for the briefest moment a blanket of night shrouded the brilliance of her green.

Alver vows made in love were powerful. Strengths were shared, even bits of mesmer could be shared between partners. For Isak he oftentimes knew before Fiske when one of his premonitions would come. Niklas was unmatched when it came to truth serums, and Junius had developed her proclivity to taste lies. As two Anomali Alvers, I could only guess what Malin and I would do.

Mesmer didn’t matter, not right now. What mattered most was she belonged to me. I belonged to her. Nothing had the power to break it but us.

I studied her for a few breaths. My fingers traced the line of her nose, the dust of freckles over her cheeks, the fullness of her lips as if for the first time.

Malin curled her grip around my tunic again and pulled me against her body. “You’re mine, Kase Eriksson.”

I had no time to respond before she crashed her lips to mine. By the hells, I devoured her. My tongue swiped against hers, a greedy pull and tug at clothes. All the build, the excitement, collided into a furious passion to feel her skin beneath my hands.

In a frenzy we tossed tunics, boots, trousers, until nothing remained between us. I dragged the roll of fur to us, set a smooth pelt beneath me, and leaned against the wall of the cave. Malin leveraged her legs over my hips in a straddle.

I groaned. Hells, the heat from her center pressed against my skin was enough to send me into a haze. Holding her gaze, my thumbs brushed over the tops of her breasts. She shuddered and curved her spine, pressing closer.

Where my fingers went, my mouth followed.

Malin whimpered as she held the back of my head in place, granting me free reign to taste the sweet heat of her skin on my tongue. Her teeth scraped down my ear, my neck. She rocked against me as my mouth left her skin raw,

and my fingers worked between her thighs to bring her body to the edge.

With a gasp of frustrated tension, Malin pulled back. Her eyes simmered in a brilliant green fire. One hand on my heart, Malin slid her fingers between us and took me in her hands.

Gods. What power I had left fled the instant she took control. She tortured me until I could not take in a full breath. If ever a moment led me to believe in fate, it was now. My path had been designed to love Malin Strom. She fit my darkness too perfectly, it was not possible our souls had not been predestined to unite as one.

“You command me,” I said in a gritty rasp. I clung to her waist, guiding her movements. “Do you know that? I bow to no one but you.”

Malin kissed me with as much desperation as I had for her. No space between us, and still we were not close enough. My forehead fell to her shoulder, breaking the kiss as she aligned my length against her center.

Her mouth parted when we slid together. For a moment we did nothing but breathe, eyes locked with each other. When she started moving against me, I nearly came undone.

Hands on her hips, I dug into her flesh, meeting her pace. She braced her palms on the wall of the cave.

“Kase,” she breathed. The sound of my name from her lips in moments like this—I could think of nothing I wanted more.

“Mal . . . gods.”

I wrapped her waist in my arms, holding tight. Her body trembled. Over and over her breathless sobs of my name heated the crook of my neck until we came apart together. Sweat dripped off my brow when I lifted my eyes. I could not catch a breath. Malin cradled my head to her chest, against the furious thud of her heart. I clutched her body; I refused to release her.

This was a moment I never wanted to end. The moment when the girl who burrowed into my soul as a child, the only girl who knew my deepest fears, who would burn the world for me as much as I would burn it for her became mine throughout all the lifetimes.

Bonded until the end.

THE NIGHTRENDER

“What the hells happened to you?” Raum shouted from the opposite end of the camp.

We paused at the edge of the trees. The moment we’d stepped beyond the shadows and caught the gleam of moonlight, we were seen by his tricky eyes.

At his voice, dozens of eyes whipped around, locked on the two of us. My skin prickled in unease. There were times when I demanded attention to be turned to me, but most days I’d be content to surround myself in shadows and stand aside from scrutiny.

“What’s happening?” Hob tipped a tin cup to his lips and sipped, one brow arched.

“What?” I took a protective step in front of Malin. If anyone knew what we’d done just now and had bitter words to speak, it would go through me first. We’d decided to keep the vows from the guilds until after Hemlig. Focus should be on finding Bastard House and destroying Eero in the process, but perhaps Raum could see the sliced runes on our hands.

Until Malin gripped my arm. “Kase, look.”

My eyes widened when she stepped into the moonlight. Wisps of darkness coated her shoulders, as if her shadow followed like a diaphanous cloak. But it was more than that. Where our hands were linked, the faint mists of black swirled together with a hint of gilded light.

The faster my pulse raced the deeper the shadows and light grew.

“And your bleeding eyes!” Raum didn’t know how to stop once he began. “Look at their eyes.”

In the same instant, Malin and I looked at each other. Her lips parted in a gasp. I assumed one of my eyes looked much like hers. Two separate colors tangled like spilled ale colliding with sweet wine.

A vibrant mix of her beautiful green and my gold.

Malin's fingertips brushed over one of my eyes. "How did this happen?"

Tova shoved through the guilds, glared at us, then snatched our hands apart. She made a deep rumbling growl in the back of her throat at the sight of the runes on our palms. "You fools said vows, didn't you?"

Chaos rained on us before we could utter a single reply.

A feral attack from the women of the guilds had me wishing we'd never left our cave. Dagny snarled like she might wring my neck. Tova refused to look at me. She gave Malin the same sort of treatment, storming away from us, only to glare from the opposite side of the camp as she stuffed her mouth with roasted nuts. Junius frowned and muttered something about never being included in vows with folk she cared about.

"It will only benefit us," Niklas said. "Who knows what strengths you'll take from each other. It's changed you physically, I can only imagine what it will do with your mesmer, but I plan to enjoy watching it all unfold."

At the sight of Hagen and Bard, I started to nudge Malin behind me again. Bard did not have the history of kindness toward her, and Hagen was probably about to slit my throat. Better to have her behind me where she couldn't see.

But Bard wore an amused smirk, and Hagen did nothing but pause for a moment, then jut out his arm for me to take. With caution, we clasped forearms.

"I suppose this makes us true brothers now," Hagen said.

Out of all the words that could be said, I never anticipated such a simple phrase to grip my heart. I couldn't be trusted to speak, and merely gave a curt nod.

To most, it was not a surprise, but a celebration. The one who seemed ready to gut me was Gunnar.

"Say what you must say," I told him when he'd leaned against the trunk of a tree, arms folded, nothing but venom in his eyes.

"I'd rather not."

"Gunnar," Malin said, a bit of heartbreak in her voice. "I thought out of anyone you'd be happy."

"Happy? That you've joined together? I'm bleeding thrilled. My daj's

sister vowed with the Nightrender.” He spun to me. “You’re my bleeding family beyond the Kryv now. I’m *ecstatic*.”

His words didn’t match his tone. He kept hissing and spitting, but speaking like it was the sweetest news he’d heard in turns.

“Junius,” I said. “Is he lying?””

“He might be. He might not be.” She lifted her chin and went to stand by Tova.

Hells, our folk were irritating.

“I’m not lying,” Gunnar snapped. “But everyone I bleeding know keeps loving in shadows, and I tire of it. My daj and maj were never allowed to be free together, my aunt and uncle in the North were forced into exile to be together, now you. A queen and the Nightrender. You should’ve taken vows in Ivar’s great hall to spite the bastard. And you certainly should’ve included us.”

The corner of my mouth twitched. He was worse than Junius. “We did not take vows in a cave to hide.”

“After all that has happened, we couldn’t go on without the connection of Alver vows,” Malin said.

“They’re powerful,” Niklas added. “Look at them. Clearly something has changed.”

Lynx clapped a hand on Gunnar’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, little prince. If you manage to find some unfortunate soul to take vows with you, we will throw you a fete every kingdom will envy.”

Gunnar shook him off. “When I take vows, no one here will be invited but Daj, Ash, and Hanna.”

He picked Hanna from her seat on a fallen log and swung the girl over his shoulders, until she was perched behind his neck.

I stepped forward, the smile falling as the mood sobered. “We can speak of this later, but now we must turn our attention to the Black Palace.”

Kryv and Falkyns nodded, banging fists over their chests, or raising weapons.

“After the riverbend, I’ve no doubt Eero will be tucked away in his private chambers.” I darkened my eyes. “It is a good thing the Black Palace Malevolent knows exactly where they are.”

Barks and roars shook the leaves. Calls for our enemy rose to the stars. We’d find Eero, break him, bend him to our bidding, then he’d meet his fate. It took a few breaths to arrange the group that would go to find Eero.

“I keep getting left behind,” Hob muttered.

“Your woman has your little in her,” I said. “You want to risk waking in the Otherworld and another man raising what’s yours?”

Hob tightened his mouth until his lips went parchment paper thin. “You know how to shape horrid thoughts, Nightrender. It’s pure manipulation, but it bleeding works.”

The hawker went to stand by Inge, an arm around her shoulders like someone might come snatch her at any moment, and agreed to stand with half the Falkyn guild and defend Felstad.

“Meet your marks,” I said, facing the others. “Let’s go visit our old friend.”



I RECALLED the whole of Eero’s betrayal now. From his love of penge over the lives of his guild to the way he tried to give Malin to Ivar.

He’d been the cause of my capture, but there was a bit of good to come from all this. As the Malevolent, I knew where skydguard boarded; I knew where treasurers lived; I knew where everyone, including the new lord of skydguard, took up residence.

The west gates were positioned on a slight hill just beyond the masquerade courtyard. A few longhouses filled the lawns, but it was the smaller, narrower house in the far corner that held my attention.

I drew a deep breath through my nose, embracing a bit of hatred, and turned back to those who’d enter first.

My grip curled around the back of Gunnar’s neck. I pointed to the small house. “Raum spotted eight skydguard in total. Four outside the door, and four inside. You have your plan on what to do?”

“Yes,” Gunnar said. “I plan to get very creative for our friend.”

I released him and faced Malin. She stood between her brothers, all three dressed in black. Behind her Isak and Lynx stood, sheathed in blades and ready to blacken Eero’s mind should he get close to my wife.

One palm placed on her cheek, I pulled her close. “We don’t know if it’ll work.”

She grinned. “Even if it doesn’t, you won’t keep me back. I want him to see my face, to know he threatened and betrayed the wrong people. And if

you think these two—” she gestured at her brothers, “will let him get close, you’re fooling yourself.”

“It’ll work,” Niklas said as he adjusted his rings. “He’ll be focused entirely on her. Gunnar, take a few swigs of this.” He handed over a flacon of ale. “It’ll help with the headache sure to come your way, my friend.”

Gunnar took the flacon and tipped it to his lips. With the back of his sleeve he wiped his mouth. “With any luck this’ll be over quickly.”

“Ah, let us make our own luck,” Niklas said. Beneath the lightness of his tone, there was a bit of vitriol. Doubtless, Niklas Tjuv was in a battle with memories of the Falkyn he once loved as a brother in Eero, and the enemy who nearly got us all killed. Niklas nudged my arm. “Kase, Luca is waiting for you.”

My stomach clenched. This scheme felt different. Less time to prepare, more unknowns, too many emotions involved.

I lifted Malin’s knuckles to my lips. “You make this more difficult.”

She chuckled and brushed her palm over the side of my face. “Anyone else might take offense to those words.”

“But for you?”

“I know what you’re saying, and trust me, you make this difficult too. But I will let you go be wicked and cruel because you are capable of terrifying the entire kingdom. And I believe it was the Nightrender who told me I was more capable than I thought.”

“Don’t use my words against me.” I paused, dragging my fingers through her hair. “He doesn’t touch you. Understand?”

“He wouldn’t stand a chance.” She kissed the corner of my mouth. “I will see you soon. Fight to the end.”

I forced myself to turn away before I refused to leave her.

In the darkness of the gardens, the Kryv and most of the Falkyns would be there should Eero try to flee. A cruel smirk cut over my mouth when a steady beat of Ash and Hanna’s drums eerily flowed from the trees.

I wrapped my body in darkness, reveling in the shuffle of skydguard at the front of the house.

They shouted orders at the sound of the drums, frantically searching for the source without leaving their post.

Fear was heady. Gods, I hoped it came from Eero. If anyone would recognize the beat of Ash and Hanna’s drums, it was him.

With my mesmer spilling across the lawns it would give Malin and those

who would meet their marks with her the advantage to advance unseen. When I reached the back of the house, I pulled my shadows back. The chill absorbed into my blood as I hoisted onto the thatched roof.

I scaled to the center with soundless movements. Luca met me on the center ridge. He straddled the beam and never took his eyes off the front lawns of the house as I settled beside him.

“I have a good vantage on her,” he muttered.

My fists clenched, and a rush of blood raged in my head. The four skydguard guarding the outer house shouted a command and sprinted for those approaching on the front path.

“I need to be closer.”

“Kase . . . hells. We need to be here.”

I ignored Luca and crept along the ridge on my belly, watching the scene below me unfold. Schemes using bait to draw out a mark were always risky, but schemes using Malin as the damn distraction had promptly become my most despised plans.

More so because it was hard to argue the sense of it.

The skydguard had been trained for weeks to slaughter those responsible for the attack on the masquerade. Malin and Hagen would be the perfect distraction. A chance to lessen Eero’s protection, but it did not lessen my distaste for the whole of it.

A roar from the four guards outside tightened my grip on the edge of the roof. Swords raised, they charged at Malin.

The lead skydguard made it five paces before a violent crack twisted his legs until his toes nearly pointed backward. He screamed in a delirious sort of pain and crumbled. His agony lasted another breath, then his neck bent horridly wrong, and his cries silenced.

Bard stepped between Hagen and Malin, hand raised, pushing back the remaining three skydguard.

The drums grew louder. A steady battle beat that lifted my skin in a dark, giddy thrill at the notion of causing a bit of damage.

Luca hissed at me to catch my attention. “Get over here you paranoid bastard. Do you trust your woman in a fight or not? I’m told a little confidence in a woman’s ability goes a long way.”

I ground my teeth together and forced myself to peel back toward the smoke hole.

My lip curled. Eero cowered behind his four skydguard inside. A blade in

his hand, a pouch in the other. No mistake he had a few elixirs from the Black Palace on hand knowing Niklas hunted him.

I could practically taste the pleasure of spilling his blood.

“Now.” I smacked Luca’s shoulder. “Luca, now.”

“Gods, patience. You’re a complicated illusion.” Luca closed his eyes, a vein popped in the center of his forehead as he focused.

Whenever Luca stole a piece of my image, it was as if cold water filled my veins. Like he took small pieces of every part of me to shape a walking memory of what I looked like, what my mesmer could do, what my bleeding voice sounded like.

I shuddered, but focused on the inside of Eero’s longhouse. Choked sobs, the snap of bones and skin ended at the front of the house, and I fought every urge to race back and check on Malin.

Soon enough the front door crashed open. A skydguard from the front strode inside, Gunnar at his shoulder.

“Birger, put down the knife,” an inner guard shouted at his companion.

Gunnar stroked his skydguard’s cheek. “No, don’t listen to his nonsense. You’re going to take that knife, and you will not stop striking your friends until I tell you to.”

“Gods. Birger, stop.” An inner skydguard in front of Eero held out his sword.

“Uh-uh,” Gunnar said, holding up a finger. “You boys want this to happen. You want to stand still. Now, be good skyds, and don’t move.”

The four guards trembled but froze.

I chuckled darkly. Gunnar had improved his skills with the mind to terrifying abilities since joining the guild. But this was the first I’d seen him take hold of so many at one time. Hagen circled around the back of his son when Gunnar flinched. One hand on his boy’s shoulder, and Gunnar seemed to take a bit of added strength.

The guards protecting Eero were marble still.

With a nod, Gunnar silently urged the lone outside guard forward.

In the next breath the man lunged, flailing his knife wildly. He lashed at throats, ears, at limbs; When the frozen center guard was shoved by a dying guard at his side, the feral skydguard rammed his blade through his eye, dropping the man in a pool of blood.

“Snap out of it, you bastards! Push back and get the woman!” Eero shouted, fumbling for the pouch in his hand.

“Ready,” Luca whispered, eyes still closed.

Below us shadows scraped from the walls, as if dark ink spilled from the veins in the wood planks.

Eero cursed and backed against the wall.

“That’ll do.” Gunnar held up a hand, his face contorted in pain. Hagen gripped his son’s shoulder until the skydguard stopped his slaughter.

From the shadows an image of me stepped into the center of the room. Lifelike enough when my boots went through the blood it left a mark.

“Get back, Kase!” Eero held up the pouch of whatever elixir he’d brought.

“I told you, I never lose sight of my marks,” I said on the roof, but the voice came from the illusion in the room.

On cue, Gunnar and Hagen abandoned the house.

In a desperate attempt to escape, Eero tossed the pouch at the last standing skydguard and my illusion. He dove for cover as the powders inside burst into white flames. The mesmerized skydguard fell face down on the floor. Flames licked up the beams and posts, devouring the death and gore of the guards. My illusion was wrapped in shadows.

Eero lifted his head, coughing against the smoke.

Fool. So predictable.

A scheme made in haste, true, but we did know Eero. Niklas predicted his old friend would make a cowardly attack somehow. Likely sacrificing the lives of his guards for his, so we prepared. Each mark was clean and set. Malin would bring the first distraction. Gunnar would disable most of the guards. My stolen illusion would force Eero’s hand to waste whatever fail-safe escape he had up his sleeve.

With Eero’s eyes still locked on the reforming shape of my illusion, I slid off the roof through the smoke hole and landed at his back.

The moment my feet slammed onto the floor he spun around. Eyes wide, he stumbled.

“Hello, Eero,” I said, black soaking every ounce of color in my eyes. I snatched his chin in my grip and squeezed without thought of his teeth or blood or pain. “Niklas would like a word with you.”

Wooden shutters slammed open; more pouches were tossed into the longhouse. When they touched the floor, an odd wind seemed to draw out every flame like a whirlwind until the flames were gone.

I blinked against the sting of lingering smoke and reached for a rope Luca

dropped through the smoke hole, a noose on the end.

Eero tried to fight me off. I smashed my boot against his knee, knocking it out of place. He cried out and stumbled to the floor.

“Ready.” In the smoke hole, Lynx waved a hand. He and Fiske now crouched beside Luca.

A few swift motions, and I had the noose around Eero’s throat. I patted one of his sweat-soaked cheeks. “Hold tight, Eero. We’re going for a journey.”

I tugged on the rope and Eero was wrenched from the safety of his hovel through the smoke hole.

The sweetest sounds were his screams filling the dark night.

THE MEMORY THIEF

Niklas hadn't taken his eyes off Eero for nearly two days. He'd kept an unnerving, wistful, almost giddy, expression for the whole of it.

No words needed, his face and mannerisms brought enough fear to unsettle half the guilds. Niklas looked like a man who'd slipped off the ledge and had found his place in a bit of delightful madness.

The Falkyn lead sat on a cask of water, slowly taking bites of leavened bread, smiling at Eero's bloodied face. Since we'd snatched Ivar's skydguard lord, Niklas had said nothing to his former guild brother, no threats, no promises. He'd made no attempt to touch Eero.

Silence had a way of doing all those things. A mute vow of pain to come, of agony and vengeance.

Eero's wrists were bound to the mast of the Kryv's longship. After taking Eero we'd sent three Falkyns back to Felstad to inform Hob and those left behind, then immediately boarded ships, some stolen, and set course for Hemlig.

Niklas insisted on sailing on the black Kryv ship to keep Eero surrounded by those he'd hurt the most with his betrayal.

When a spray of sea water spurred Eero from a restless slumber, he groaned the moment he realized Niklas hadn't budged and kept staring at him.

"You think I'll give anything up, Nik? Think I want to see you win after this?"

Niklas kept chewing, kept smiling.

"Say something!" Eero roared.

Nothing.

Eero spat blood and looked away disgusted. "I won't give anything up." His eyes turned to Kase who stood beside me, his arm draped possessively around my shoulders. Eero sneered. "Malevolent, did you know I told Ivar all about your woman? He knows who she is; he knows everything. Do you think he will ever stop hunting her now?"

I placed a hand over Kase's heart when skeins of darkness billowed off his skin, and his eyes burned in violence.

"His tongue is tied about me," I whispered. "He's lying."

Eero laughed, his teeth pink with drying blood in his mouth. "Not anymore, Malin. When your own brother snapped old Jens's neck, his mesmer died with him."

Mention of Jens's death sent a chill down my spine. The longship was not so large Bard didn't hear. His eyes closed, and he dropped his chin.

"Try to keep breathing now, Memory Thief," Eero said. "How many heirs have there been, and how many are left? Seems to me, Ivar is better at killing folk like you than you are at staying alive."

Kase moved so swiftly I didn't have time to consider stopping him. In one slice, he cut the karambit knife through one of Eero's fingers. Eero cried out, but it choked off when Kase gripped his hair, wrenching Eero's head back, and held the bloodied finger in front of his face.

"Don't you find it strange how the Lord Magnate did not invite one of his lords into the Black Palace for protection? In fact, he only offered eight of his skyds to protect you." Kase inspected the bloody finger, a cruel smile played at the corner of his mouth. "Almost as if the Lord Magnate didn't truly care if his reformed thief got snatched or not."

"Probably did my father a favor," Luca said, turning around on the bench where he'd helped row. "To make a vow with a thief wouldn't have sat well with him. He's probably been looking for ways to rid the palace of the bastard."

Kase scoffed and teased Eero's mouth with the end of the finger. I fought the urge to retch at the sight of it.

Once Eero was trembling, Kase leaned close, voice sharp. "Speak to her again, and you'll swallow this whole."

Kase released Eero's hair and placed the finger stump in front of the former Falkyn as a reminder of his threat to feed it to him.

Eero slumped forward, pale and sweaty.

Niklas chuckled through a mouthful of his bread, but didn't waver in his

eerie stare.

“Prepare to dock,” Raum shouted from the prow.

Less than a hundred paces away, the white, rocky shoreline of Hemlig gleamed in the first glimpses of dawn.

Oars shifted, being used to guide more than row. Raum took his place at the stempost, studying the black water, and guiding the ship through the precarious rocks. The two Falkyn ships fell into our wake, following precisely as we maneuvered toward the shoreline.

I leaned over the rail and took in the landscape. I’d crossed the sea to only Skítkast before this day and had heard grand tales of the unique peaks and white sand on the Hemlish shores.

Ominous mountains made of bleached stone broke the soil in sharp shards of rock and thick forests. The sea was wild, but once we made it beyond the rock reef, the beaches looked like Klockglas during the frost season. Pearly sand stretched on until damp mossy hills led the paths away from the water.

Once the Falkyn ships were tied off, and their guild was standing with us on the shore, Kase stepped to the head of the circle. He glossed his eyes in black and led us up a path until we were concealed by a grove of thick aspens.

Kase crouched and used a jagged stone to carve a rough map into the soil. “According to Nidhug’s memory, the skydguard camp is here, right?”

He looked to me after he drew a sphere around what appeared to be a mountain.

“Yes.” I kneeled beside him and pointed behind the camp. “The guard seemed to believe the manor was somewhere here based on where the units were placed.”

“There is one way to know for certain.” Kase turned to where two Falkyns kept Eero on his knees.

He didn’t need to say more. I’d steal the memory. If fate had any love for us, we’d get out of this unscathed. I strode over to Eero. Weak as he was, the man glared at me and clamped his mouth shut.

Kase stood beside me, knife in hand, shadows coiling around the two of us.

“This will be simpler if you give up what you know of Bastard House,” I told Eero. My fingertips reached for his face. I’d pry his damn mouth open if I had to, but the moment I touched him a bright flash of an image sparked in my head.

I jumped back. Kase caught me around the waist. "What is it?"

I blinked, a little stunned. "I-I don't know. At my touch, I thought I saw . . . something."

"We need to hurry," Tova said. Her tone was brisk, but I knew her well enough by now to understand she was trying to be encouraging.

"I'm going to take the memory, Eero," I told him. "Whether you're willing or not."

I reached for him once more, but this time, placed my whole palm on the side of his face. A force gripped me, alighting my mind in a frenzy of smoke, of light, of shapeless images swirling back and forth until scene after scene flashed through my skull.

"All gods," I gasped, clinging to Eero's face.

"He's doing something to her," Kase shouted.

"No!" I shook my head. "No, I-I'm seeing his . . . gods, Kase, I can see the memory."

"Without breath?"

I nodded and closed my eyes. Almost the same breathless sensation as I'd experienced when I'd stepped into Kase's memory, pulled me into Eero's head. Not completely walking alongside his thoughts, but close. Eero cried out and I hoped to the gods the mesmer gave him a brain ache harsher than a kiln's flame.

A memory of Ivar's private chamber filled my head. Grand furs draped the walls and floors. Smoke from the inglenook burned the back of my throat as I breathed deeply. In the corner, the Lord Magnate sipped from a cup that had a potent scent of clove and mint. Eero stood over a table and scanned a map of Hemlig.

The memory of him lifted his eyes. My body stilled. He seemed to stare directly through me, almost like a shadow of a memory could sense me. Like I'd stepped into a past moment and my essence was felt.

Mesmer I'd had for so long was changing.

A rough hand curled around my wrist. Kase. Though my eyes were closed, I knew his touch.

"You're trembling," he whispered.

"I don't know what's happening, but . . . stay with me."

"Always."

"How is she taking it?" Tova whispered at my other side.

"Alver vows are powerful," Junius's voice carried over the wind.

By the gods, was this what had happened for me? I could touch another and take the memory I sought without breath? Could I step inside as if I'd been there? For turns the easiest way was to have a mark think of their memory. To force them out had been tiresome and at times painful.

Now, it was as if my mesmer could conjure the thought I wanted without trouble.

A whimper from Eero drew me out of my frenzied thoughts. I blocked the voices from the guilds and focused.

Eero's meet with Ivar was brief, but the Lord Magnate spoke of a manor in the Hemlig hills.

"The boy has hints of mesmer. I plan to grow it to see if he is a formidable addition to House Grym, or a waste," Ivar said. "The woman, she must be guarded, and her gifts used for our benefit. This place is to be guarded with utmost secrecy. Understand, the only reason you know its location is because you see ways to infiltrate impossible gates that my more trustworthy guards do not. Speak of it to anyone, and I will feed your tongue to the ravens."

Eero declared his secrecy with blood, then studied the map of the manor's location. His attention to detail was a gift to me. The more he scrutinized the parchment, the more I learned.

I pulled my hand away from Eero's face and the connection to his mind faded. My shoulders slumped, and Kase's warm palm was there on the small of my back at once.

"Are you all right?"

I nodded, grinning with a touch of wickedness. "It was incredible. Almost like I could command his mind to recall the memory and touching him connected us. Kase, it was like I was there."

Eero groaned and rubbed his head.

His pain seemed to draw out Kase's vicious grin. Kase kissed me quickly. "Then our enemies ought to guard their thoughts."

The praise was subtle, but heated in the center of my chest. "We must take the Eastern paths. There is a narrow tunnel that cuts through a peak. The manor is hidden in a vale with cliffs and forests on all sides. There will be Watchers."

"We'll deal with them," Raum said.

"Quickly," Kase said. "Ivar could piece it together now that we've taken him."

Niklas stepped next to Eero and spoke for the first time.

“Stay with your old brothers, my darling.” He grinned a frightening sort, one only those filled with hate could produce. “When I return, we’ll have a little chat.”

Ice coated each word, and for once Eero looked truly afraid.

THE MEMORY THIEF

Eero's memory served us well. We kept to rocky paths that rounded nearly a length away from the huddle of skydguard tents and shanties in the valley between mountain passes. Hickory smoke and spiced meats coated the air, the only sign a campsite was nearby.

Kase darkened our path with shadows. Tova clung to Hanna's hand, Dagny took Ash's, and Luca took Dagny's. Fear was solid, like I could reach out and touch everyone's terror. A consequence of my vows? I didn't know, but more than my own aversions rippled over my skin as we trudged a rocky slope.

At the top, Raum peered over the edge and held up a fist. He glanced side to side three times, then slid off a smooth bolder back into the huddle of thieves.

"There's a longhouse," he said. "A dozen Watchers, a few serfs. This has to be it."

Kase stood shoulder to shoulder with Niklas, the two guild leads equally invested in this scheme. Dagny was neither Kryv nor Falkyn; she belonged to us all, and secrets lived in that house. Secrets that could mend her turns of suffering.

Fiske's warning rang in my head.

There was something about tonight that would change our lives. Who was to say how deadly such a change would be? Kase slipped his fingers through mine and gave my hand a reassuring tug. No mistake, he sensed my fear.

"Break into areas. Nik—" Kase glanced at the Falkyn. "You and your guild take the grounds."

Niklas winked. "Done."

“The Kryv will take the house.”

“I am going inside.” Dagny shoved through Isak and Fiske.

“Dag, you’re not a fighter,” Kase argued.

“Try to stop me, Kase Eriksson, and see how well I fight.”

“I am going in as well,” Luca said.

Tova and I shared a look, trying to bite back a grin.

Kase frowned. “Do I lead this damn guild or does everything I say get overruled?”

“Say better things,” I muttered, “and they will not overrule you.”

Kase shot me a glare, but gestured for Ash to hand Dagny an extra dagger. He smashed it in Dagny’s hand, then cupped the back of Luca’s neck. “Fight to the end.”

“We’ll light them up. Be ready to move,” Niklas said, digging through a pouch on his belt. In his palm were five polished black stones. He said nothing more before climbing to the edge of the peak and tossing the stones to the longhouse below.

I stumbled back against Kase’s chest when a deafening boom rattled the stones at our feet. Billows of thick, white smoke rose into the night sky, and roars of the Watchers below followed.

Niklas wiped his hands together, grinning. “Shall we?”

No other words were needed before Falkyns and Kryv leaped over the side of the peak. They raced down the winding path toward the hidden house, shadows swallowing them from view. Kase stood on the ledge, palms open, covering the guilds until they reached the lawns.

He balled his fists, releasing the darkness, then took my wrist and pinned me to his chest. Kase kissed me, hard and fast, but our breaths were heavy when he pulled back.

“Return to me” was all he said before he hooded his face and ran with my two brothers down the path.

“Looks like it’s you with me, ladies. And Luca, of course,” Gunnar said, notching an arrow in his silver bow.

The Masque av Aska had been dangerous, but this was different. I’d never gone into a battle. Not even when the Kryv fought my stepfather’s guards at House Strom. I’d been utterly worthless, and Lynx had been forced to numb my mind into sleep.

Tonight, I would need to fight. I’d need to be a guild lead’s bleeding wife. A queen.

Fear faded behind raw adrenaline as we took off in a sprint toward the longhouse. On the edge of tall grass surrounding the longhouse, a line of Watchers met the guilds. The glide of steel on steel turned my stomach. Sick, wet sounds of blades slicing through flesh and bone rose over cries and commands.

Smoke from Niklas's combustible pouches still soured the air, but the guilds were pressing back.

Until one Watcher stepped forward.

He lifted his hands and in the next breath two Falkyn's screamed in agony. They crumbled to the ground, legs bent. One Falkyn had the thigh bone splitting through his skin.

A Rifter.

Junius cried out for her guild to hold. Niklas tossed a barrage of white stones at the Alver Watcher. The instant the stones struck the ground, a hiss followed with a sickly, fetid aroma. I slapped my hand over my nose, racing forward against the burn in the back of my throat.

The Rifter scrambled away from the hissing smoke, doubtless a toxic elixir, but it gave Junie time reach her Falkyns, and Hagen time to leap between the Watchers and the guilds. My brother held out his hands. The air grew colder as he blocked mesmer.

"Hanna!" Ash's squeaky cry rang out.

Gods. The girl darted for my brother.

Hagen looked at the small girl with a bit of horror as she mimicked his movements. He shouted at her to go. Hanna ignored everyone and held up her hands.

The air grew colder, like a frost storm had moved in. The Rifter Watcher leaned over and retched. Another Watcher in the back, who hadn't shown any mesmer yet, tossed his insides on the grass.

Hagen barked a laugh and beamed at Hanna. "By the gods, girl! Keep pushing, can you do that with me? It's eating at them."

Hanna nodded and bit her bottom lip. She began to move to one side, while Hagen took the other. If I could see their mesmer, I imagined it would glow like a circle surrounding the hidden Alvers in the Watchers, blocking them, invading their ability to draw out magic, and making them violently ill in the process.

With the Alvers subdued, the guilds added more speed to their strikes. More madness. I caught sight of Kase. His blacksteel was missing, but he

used the seax in his hand with such magnificent violence, I was captivated.

“Mal, we’re going in, hurry!” Tova shouted.

I blinked away from the Nightrender and sped after Tova and Gunnar. Luca stood near the entrance of the longhouse, eyes closed. Only then did I notice there was a double of most guild members. Two Valis, two Isaks. He’d stolen several likenesses and projected them against the Watchers, confusing them enough it split a path toward the door.

“I’m pulling back,” Luca shouted as he ushered us into the longhouse. Vali was closest. He took a strike at his Watcher, then braced. I shuddered knowing they would go through the disorienting sensation of Luca’s mesmer releasing them.

The Kryv were more skilled than me. Each took a pause for a breath before they were cutting their swords once again.

I crashed into the front of the house. A serf woman screamed and ducked behind a thick chair at the long table in the center of the room. Before I took another step, a bellow roared, and from the staircase leading to a loft room, another Watcher raced for me.

Sword raised, the Watcher aimed at my middle. Pure instinct led my movement, and I managed to create a sloppy block with the edge of my bone dagger. The tip of his blade nicked my ribs, but the brunt missed my insides.

With a grunt I shoved back, giving enough space to scurry back.

A madness lived in the Watcher’s eyes. Fury, rage, bloodlust. It came at me again and again as he struck.

I fell back. Heart racing, I blocked his strike and screamed when my dagger snapped. He reeled back, ready to land the final blow.

There was no move to make. No real weapon to use. The Watcher was large and thick with muscle, but I was swift. With all the force I could gather, I rammed the jagged, broken blade of my dagger through the center of the Watcher’s thigh.

He roared in pain, but it didn’t last.

A swift breath of air, then the sick, wet gurgle of blood in a throat choked off sound.

One of Gunnar’s silver arrows split open the Watcher’s neck. The man wobbled on his feet for a few breaths, then crashed backward onto the table.

Gunnar gripped my arm and yanked me to my feet. I buried my disquiet quickly and followed close to Dagny as she rushed into a back room. Tova went to another.

“Where are the children?” Luca shouted at the whimpering serf woman. “Answer me!”

With a trembling finger, the woman pointed at a narrow staircase that led to a loft room. Gunnar was nearest to the staircase and took them two at a time. I followed while Luca called for Dagny and Tova.

At the top of the stairs there was only one door. No Watcher I could see.

Gunnar flicked his eyes to me. I nodded and held my breath. Gunnar braced against the rail of the upper floor and kicked at the latch of the door. It took two tries before the wood splintered and smashed against the inner wall.

Gunnar had his bow raised, arrow notched. I stuck to his back. If Kase knew I was stepping into an unknown room without a weapon, he’d murder me.

“Drop it.” Gunnar’s rough voice sent a frosty chill dancing down my spine.

I peeked over his shoulder and gasped. A thick Watcher held a young woman with snowy hair and enormous, terrified blue eyes against his body. A knife was leveled at her pale throat.

“Take another step and I’ll end her.” To prove his point, he squeezed the edge of the knife into her skin, just enough the woman winced and a bit of dark blood dripped down the curve of her neck. “You came for her? More trouble than she’s worth. Bleeding mad. Now, put it down and—”

The woman screamed as the Watcher’s head flung back, the point of Gunnar’s arrow burrowed deep into his skull. The guard fell, dragging the girl with him. In half a breath, Gunnar had another arrow in place and rushed to the fae woman.

She scrambled off the dead Watcher and jolted when Gunnar towered over her. I anticipated her to fight, to scream, perhaps draw more Watchers, but when her eyes locked on Gunnar’s, her head tilted, and a soft smile spread over her lips.

“It’s you,” she whispered, her voice like a song on a breeze.

“Is there a boy with you?” Dagny frantically rushed into the room. “A boy. Four turns. Is he here?”

The girl studied Dagny, then looked back to Gunnar. The Kryv hadn’t taken his eyes off her.

“Is she safe?” she asked.

Gunnar blinked and swallowed with effort. He nodded. “She is here with us. The boy is her son.”

“I thought so.” She tucked some of her icy hair behind her ears.

My eyes widened. All gods, she was fae. The points of her ears were bloodied and swollen as if they’d been pierced, then left to draw in infection, but tapered into clear, sharp points.

Slowly, she rose to her feet, accepting Gunnar’s outstretched hand. She gave him a cautious smile, then drifted to the back of the room behind a straw mattress. She stomped twice. The smack of a hand striking the floorboards returned the sound.

She bent down and lifted away two loose boards. In the darkness a head of messy hair, the color of roasted nuts, poked through. A small boy looked at the fae and whispered, “Safe?”

She smiled. “Safe.”

When he turned his rounded face at the room, Dagny let out a strangled sob. Luca caught her around the waist. The boy’s eyes were not the same as Dagny’s pale ones. But dark blue, like a clear sea.

They were nearly identical to Luca’s.

His jaw tightened the same as his arm tightened around Dagny’s waist. For the first time since meeting him, the second son of Ivar was still and silent.

The boy hugged the fae’s skirts.

She patted his messy hair. “Safe. *Maj*.” The woman pointed at Dagny. “Remember? We’ve talked about that word. *Maj*.”

The boy flicked his eyes at Dagny, then back to the fae. “Soft?”

The girl nodded with a smile.

Dagny sniffed and released Luca’s waist. She took a small step, then lowered to her knees. “What . . . what do they call you?”

He hugged the woman’s leg tighter and shook his head.

“They call him a cruel name. One for fatherless,” said the fae. “But the woman who comes to bring him new clothes knew him as a babe. She insists she knew what his mother called him. What did *you* call your son?”

“V-Von,” Dagny whispered.

“I thought so,” the woman said again, the same whimsical smile on her face. “It is what the woman heard.”

Dagny pressed a hand to her chest, and silent tears slipped down her face. Luca stood beside her and reached down to squeeze her shoulder. Dagny didn’t look away from the boy, but covered Luca’s hand with hers. “Luc, he looks . . . he looks like you. Do you think—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Luca interrupted. “He was always mine. You both are.”

“What is your name?” Gunnar asked the fae.

It seemed only Gunnar Strom could bring color to the fae’s cheeks. When she faced him a splash of pink tinged the sharp edges of her slender face. “Eryka.”

“Well, damn.” Tova huffed in the doorway. “Bleeding Ivar! Now the East will be at war with the South.”

“What?” I asked.

Tova pointed at the fae. “Her name? Eryka? Weren’t any of you listening when the big fae prince showed up? He was looking for his missing cousin named *Eryka*.” Tova turned back to the fae woman. “You a princess by chance, fae?”

Eryka smiled. “Not a very good one. My aunt says I dream too much.”

Tova tossed her arms in the air. “There you have it. War.”

“I did not see war in the stars tonight, but it is coming. There is a piece you must find to reach your strength,” Eryka said, looking to me. “You know what I speak of. The ring is a key you must seek.”

I furrowed a brow. “Do you see something? Are you a Profetik?”

“Star seer. Your Lord Magnate feared my glamour and placed me here.”

“He feared your *glamour*?”

“Southern fae magic,” she said. Eryka met Gunnar’s gaze, then schooled her attention at the ground. “I’m afraid I might have been a tad theatrical. I see moments in time through the stars, and your ruler seemed quite taken with the gift. He kept saying it was like a myth your folk have here. So, I . . . well, I played the part well.”

“Explain,” Tova snapped.

“The man is ill. For a short time, a woman with strange magic was sent here. She insisted she poisoned him. I saw the effects when he came to execute her. While she was here, she told me he feared folk who could see like me and often killed them. When she died, I thought I would be next.” Eryka lifted her gaze and shrugged. “I played like I’d gone into a trance. There was a great deal of convulsing, chanting, and whispering horrid fates should your ruler attempt to kill me and the boy. It seemed to work. He has not visited since, but whenever the guards come, I’ve gotten rather skilled at rolling my eyes back. See, like this.”

She demonstrated pulling her eyes into the back of her head, so the eerie whites remained. Once she stopped, Eryka looked away sheepishly. As if she

were ashamed for her lie.

The room remained quiet for at least ten breaths, then Gunnar barked a deep, rough laugh.

He laughed and laughed, leaning over his knees, clutching his chest. Soon enough, he drew in a deep breath and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “Hells, woman. That’s the best thing I’ve ever seen. Who needs to take knives against Ivar, we’ll simply send her twitching and screaming.”

I dared smile, but it fell when Eryka looked my way again.

“I’ll say this again, I’ve seen the one with fire hair take a strange ring,” she said. “I have also seen what becomes of her should she not accept it. It is key.”

“Key for what?” I asked.

“I do not know.”

Gods, seers were infuriating. Giving half bits, then leaving the rest up to fate.

“Pain is coming.” Eryka’s tone sent a shiver up my arms. She looked to me, to Tova, then to Gunnar. “Your hearts will break soon, and I wish they wouldn’t.”

My pulse thudded in my head. I took a brisk step back to the door. I needed to get to Kase. “We must go.”

The moment my hand reached the latch on the door, it slammed open. Vali and Lynx rushed in, breathless, covered in sweat and blood.

“Thank gods we found you,” Vali said. “Some of the Falkyns at the beach arrived. Patrols . . . patrols came close and Eero shouted where we were. This place is about to be flooded with skydguard.”

My blood went cold.

“Then we go now.” Luca crossed the room in three strides and scooped up a screaming Von. The boy reached for the fae woman, sobbing and terrified.

Luca didn’t loosen his grip and Lynx didn’t ask before gently placing a hand on the boy’s head. It took no time before the child slumped back in Luca’s arms.

Gunnar held out a hand for Eryka. “We must go. We can get you back to your cousin.”

“I will go with you,” she said, smiling as if the moment had not turned critical. “This is where our story begins.”

“Sure. As you say,” Gunnar furrowed his brow at her, then loaded his

arrow, and followed Lynx and Vali.

Tova handed me one of her knives. “Don’t break this one.”

I took it and spun it once to hide the way my hands trembled. As I ran after the Kryv, all I could think about was the warning that this night would change our lives . . . forever.

THE NIGHTRENDER

“I expect a great deal of pain when you kill him, Nik,” I snapped at the Falkyn.

His two men leaned over their knees, gasping. Five Falkyns remained with Eero. We’d been told they had dragged him back to the ships when the bastard shouted our plans at the shore patrols. Then two Falkyns had bolted to find us, and promised Niklas the others had used anything sharp and rusted they could find to pin Eero to the mast until he returned.

“Don’t insult me, my friend,” Niklas said in a growl. “I have thought of this for a great deal of time. It will be remarkable. I wonder what caused him to hate us so. I, for one, find myself to be rather pleasant.”

I scoffed. “Greed, Nik. Pure, wretched greed.”

The Watchers were dead, but units of skydguard would come, no mistake. We needed to go, and I had yet to catch a glimpse of Malin. Niklas told me of the Alver vow, how it connected two Alvers so fully if one were ever in danger the other would sense it.

I sensed nothing. The only reason I had not ripped the longhouse apart searching for my wife.

Until a distant thump of battle drums sent a rush of panic through my chest.

Alver vow or not, if I did not put eyes on Malin soon, the mesmer boiling under my skin would erupt.

Malin’s ability to steal memories had changed, but I’d changed too. Shadows came swifter, the slightest hint of adrenaline, the smallest blanch of fear, and it was as if I could bend the earth with my magic. It was stronger. Crueler.

I loved it.

“Time to move,” Niklas said. He scanned the bloodied lawns, no doubt searching for Junius. When he caught sight of her beside his broken Falkyns, Niklas jabbed his fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle. “Get to the ships!”

“Go,” I said, taking a step toward the longhouse. “We will catch up.”

Niklas tipped his head and rushed to help carry the two injured Falkyns.

“Kase.” Bard caught my arm. “Where’s Malin?”

“I’m going to get her,” I said. “Stick with the Kryv and get to the ships.”

Should’ve known Bard Strom would follow. Hagen wasn’t far behind. He’d sent Ash and Hanna with Junius, then sprinted to us. His son *and* sister were inside; I couldn’t fault him for following.

Drums grew closer. I quickened my steps.

“Kase, the ridge!” Hagen said as he grabbed my shoulder and spun me to the side.

Dammit. From the darkness a row of skydguard stepped onto the ridge of the peak. The captain at the point lifted a blade, and a ripple of battle cries shook the night. They spilled onto the rocky paths, racing in great hoards for the fleeing guilds.

“Go get her,” I shouted at Hagen and Bard, and faced the onslaught of skyds. Fear was there, buried beneath their hatred for us, their devotion to serve the Lord Magnate. Hidden, but there. No one truly wished to die tonight.

A thousand screams echoed in my head as ways to slaughter the most terrified took shape. Broken necks. Falling off the cliffside. A knife to the throat. Trampled. There was no shortage on the ways I could bring death tonight.

My mesmer was stronger, but to slaughter two hundred men? I could put a dent in their units, give Malin time to run. I’d find my way out later.

Hands raised, I startled when another figure stepped beside me.

Bard wore a cruel grin. “Don’t have all the fun, little rat.”

Gods. I’d nearly forgotten his name for me. Malin was his mouse; I was the rat. A pest who ate their food.

Bastard. A smile crept over my mouth as I faced the skydguard again. When the first line of guards hit flat ground, I gathered silky shadows around my hands and threw my arms open. A flood darkness pummeled the ranks like a battering ram.

Hands raised, I twisted my palms and the ribbons of night coiled like phantom serpents around legs, waists, necks.

Pungent, sour fear seeped into my tongue, like each breath lapped it up, pulling more until my mesmer needed to act or pull back.

I closed one fist aimed at one flank of guards, then tilted my head toward the other. No less than twenty skydguard on each side fell to the ground. On the left flank the shadows ripped through their chests like iron spikes, shredding their ribs into jagged pieces. To the right, my mesmer sliced across the unit like a long blade and snapped each spine, so when they fell, their bodies were bent backward like the shadows had attempted to fold the skydguard in half.

“By the hells, Kase,” Bard said. He shook away his stun and lifted his hands. With a grunt, Bard swiped his palms over his body. Half a dozen guards tumbled forward. One man’s jaw had bent at a horrid angle. Another had an open skull. Four were dead before they hit the ground, necks broken.

It was grisly. Bodies expelled piss and waste, soiling the air. Bones cracked. Blood stained the rocks. When Vali’s voice came at my back, commanding everyone to follow, relief brought a new wave of strength.

A glimpse of red hair soothed the worry in my heart.

“Kase!” Malin cried.

“Go, Mal,” I returned without taking my eyes off the skydguard. “I’m behind you.”

“You must think me mad to leave you again.”

“Gods.” The woman would be the end of me.

“Welcome to a strong-willed wife, brother.” Bard laughed and cut down another skydguard. His breaths came with more effort. “Make a run for it?”

Through the threads of my shadows was a gory scene. We’d slaughtered many and had the rest hesitant to move forward.

“Go!” I spun around, dropping my mesmer hold, and raced with Bard after the others.

Malin ran with Vali once she saw me coming up behind them. The skydguard regrouped and shouted their advances. They were too few now, and too terrified to come too close. We’d be loaded in our ships before their courage took hold again.

Those who’d been with Malin in the house were already far ahead. Vali and Malin cut into the trees. Bard and I followed. I slapped at branches, leapt over hedges and stones. The Kryv would’ve scattered with the Falkyns,

everyone going different directions until we collided at the shore.

My lungs burned by the time violent crashes of waves came near. Almost free of this damn place. No trouble had been in the trees. We were the last to leave. I had to believe the others had made it safely to the ships.

“They went this way. I hear them!” Vali shouted, tilting his head.

I breathed out in relief, anxious to rest eyes on the Kryv, the Falkyns, to know if Dagny had her boy, or if we’d come here for nothing. The path widened as the shore came nearer, but at the bend, my heart stopped.

Vali cursed loudly and skidded until he stumbled.

Kryv were not the ones waiting for us.

Two haggard skydguard stood in the path. Noses bloodied, tunics and guarders askew. They must’ve been from the shore patrols, a few who’d scrambled out of the fray. And both guards had an arrow aimed at Malin’s heart.

In all the risks I’d taken with the Guild of Kryv, never had such a sharp, angry panic gripped me.

The two skydguard looked at us with such hatred, it burned to my core. Time seemed to slow. Each motion burned into my skull in a memory I would never forget. Both guards stretched their bowstrings, arrows ready to fly.

“Malin, get down!” Vali moved without a thought. He wrapped Malin up in his arms, covering her with his big body, and crouched.

Blood throbbed in my head, but not enough to dull the wretched thrum of bowstrings, the breathy wisp of air as arrows flew.

Not enough to silence the sick thud of steel stabbing through flesh.

“Vali!” Malin’s scream shook the stun from me.

My shoulders heaved. Vali coughed. Two arrows were burrowed deep in his spine. Anger, hatred, fear, all of it suffocated any rational thinking.

I lifted my hands as Vali slumped forward. With a cry of my own agony, a blast of the blackest mesmer shot at the two guards before they could even consider reloading their bows. The skeins of darkness sliced through their bodies like an oar in the surf.

Innards and bones and blood splattered across the path as their mangled bodies sprawled out in pieces.

I was at Malin’s side in time to catch Vali’s head when he couldn’t sit up any longer.

“No, no, Val.” I clutched his face, shaking him. “Vali, look at me. Look

at me.”

His dark eyes were wet and glassy. Blood dripped over his lips. “I’ll save a place . . . for each . . . of you bast-bastards.”

“No.” My voice broke as I cradled his head, careful not to shove the arrows deeper. “No, you stay here. *Dammit*, Val. You stay with me.” I kept grappling for his face, his chest, anything to keep him warm and breathing.

Vali swatted a hand searching for mine. I clasped his hand tightly. His body shuddered, then his grip went slack.

“Val.” I scanned his face. I shook his shoulders. “Vali!”

Malin’s hand fell to my arm. She said nothing. But I didn’t need words. I needed Vali to take a damn breath.

“No.”

My head snapped up.

Raum, breathless and twitchy, stood ten paces away. “No. Val. No!”

He skidded to Vali’s side. Vali and Raum had lived in the same chamber at the Black Palace. I considered Raum one of my closest Kryv, but there was a connection with Vali and Raum that made them true, inseparable brothers.

My scorched and scabrous heart bled into pieces watching Raum pad at Vali’s unmoving body.

“No. Kase, is he breathing? Where was he hit?” Raum looked to the shore. “Tova! Niklas! Get here, he . . . he needs healing. Kase, he needs healing. Is he breathing?”

Raum was frantic. He tugged at Vali’s tunic, his face. Like me, he shook his shoulders. Big, raw tears rolled down his cheeks. His breaths were disjointed and short.

“Vali, you bastard, it isn’t funny.” Raum gritted through his teeth. “Wake the hells up.” He broke, face twisted, voice like jagged glass. “Wake up.”

Raum was clinging to Vali and losing himself.

I clamped my teeth until I thought my jaw might snap, moved to my fellow Kryv, and ripped Raum away.

I let him crush me instead.

Raum was a bit taller, but he braced against me, his big arms choking my neck. He burrowed his face against my shoulder and roared his pain until his body wouldn’t stop shaking. I gripped his tunic, slapped his back over and over.

My head rejected that Vali, my Kryv brother, my bleeding *friend*, was gone. That his scowls, his rare fits of laughter, his loyalty would never be

added to any future days.

It was too much.

Too severe to take.

Like a piece of my heart had been burned and blackened, there was an open wound bleeding uncontrollably.

The Kryv were always one unbreakable unit. It was how it was always meant to be.

Now, there was a hole.

An empty space we'd never escape.

THE MEMORY THIEF

We didn't return to Felstad.

It was too much. To walk through the gate with one less in our number, the sharp agony would ruin us all.

The Falkyns offered their refuge in Skítkast, and we took it without a thought. A few Falkyns had set sail before dawn to retrieve Hob, Inge, and the Falkyns who'd remained at Felstad.

"I think he'd want it," Ash said in a soft voice. He held up one of his favorite shiv blades.

I cupped Ash's cheek and took the blade. "I think it will be his most valued piece."

With care I tucked the shiv beneath Vali's hands, then placed them one over the other on his middle. His face was peaceful. He was every bit a warrior in a fine black tunic, a polished seax in his grip, runes of protection and power, all surrounded with wreaths of velvet blossoms.

Ash held out his hand for me to take and helped me over the edge of the small longboat.

Kase was there, and took my hand when Ash released me. I met his burdened eyes. He'd not smiled once in the days since arriving in Skítkast. I did not think any of us had smiled. The loss of Vali left an ache that could not be soothed.

At our backs the Falkyns and a few girls and boys from the Lark who valued the Guild of Kryv stood in reverence.

Luca held Dagny's hand, and in his other arm he held a clean, bright-eyed Von on his hip. The boy looked like Luca more than Niall, but he and Dagny

had asked the lot of us never to bring up the question of his blood father again.

To them, Von was Luca's, and Niall was no longer worth their care when it came to the boy. He would pay someday. I'd already vowed it, but I could respect their wishes. Dagny and Luca were cautiously picking up where they had left off all those turns ago. To piece back together what had been broken would take time, but it helped the way the boy had warmed to them both.

Almost like a true family who had not suffered greatly.

Isak and Fiske shoved the boat into the gentle flow of the private Skítkast fjord. A ripple of water slapped against the vessel as it drifted across the black water of the Howl.

Kase and I took our place at the head of the Guild of Kryv. He looked to the right where Gunnar, Raum, and Lynx held bows. With a soft nod, Tova walked in front of each of the archers and lit their oiled tips until the steel ignited in golden flames.

Eryka stood beside Gunnar, humming a sweet folksong. She looked nothing like a princess in an oversized dress Junius had lent her and her snowy hair loose over her shoulders. She'd taken to Gunnar and hardly left his side. Truth be told, I didn't think he minded.

The princess had not mentioned the South, she'd not bothered to bring up anything at all except for a moment where she told Raum the gods welcomed Vali with laughter and battle tales.

Something in the stars told her.

I cared little if the stars gave the fae princess visions. Her words almost brought a smile to Raum's face. As far as I was concerned, she could star speak to him all day.

Raum pointed his arrow at the sky. The others followed his lead. Normally playful and lighthearted, now Raum reminded me of a gray storm. He spoke to no one but Kase, and even then it was rare. Raum closed his silver eyes for half a breath. When he opened them again, he said, "*Tills vi ses igen.*" Until we meet again.

We all mumbled the same phrase and watched the arrows fly.

The longboat caught fire slowly, but soon the gilded flames ignited the darkness of the Howl in a beautiful glow. Kase slammed his fist over his heart. I followed. A ripple of thuds echoed along the shoreline as Falkyn and Kryv bid farewell to a friend and brother.

When the flames of the funeral pyre died, I sat alone on a large stone in

the sparse forest ten lengths from the inner township of Skítkast. Niklas hadn't left this place since the funeral pyre. Most often he sat alone, eating bits of a meal Junius would send with him. He always talked as he worked, and I found a bit of solace watching from the shadows.

Eero hung by his ankles from a thick tree branch. Naked, covered in blood. Moaning. Falkyns came and went, each watching as their guild lead strategically cut Eero in places that would slowly bleed. He'd hung there for nearly a full day. His skin looked a sickly sort of purple, and his life was teetering into the Otherworld.

Niklas had determined Eero would bleed to death. Slowly. To give Niklas time to speak about all the pain caused by his betrayal. Sometimes Niklas would repeat fond memories they'd once had before he slashed Eero's skin.

Heart heavy, I tried to find peace knowing one of the traitors responsible for Vali's ultimate death was getting what was due. But solace was fleeting. Most moments were filled with a wretched kind of guilt seeping through my heart.

Vali had died protecting me. I closed my eyes against the truth of it.

"Do you wish to be alone?"

Kase leaned against a thick tree, the odd green-gold color of his one eye flashed in a pain I feared would always remain.

"No. I always long for you." I scooted over on the boulder.

Kase draped his arm over my shoulders, pulling me against him with a touch of possessive need. We sat in silence for a long time, watching Niklas torment Eero with eerie calmness. Niklas had monstrous sides to him, but he was loyal, a friend. He did this not only for his guild, but for the Kryv. For Vali.

"I think I hate myself a little," I whispered.

Kase pinned me in a narrowed glare. "Why the hells would you say that?"

My voice quivered, so I paused until it steadied. "Vali died protecting me, and . . . and I can't help but think, why didn't I shove him away, why didn't I protect *him*? It haunts me, and I hate myself, and—"

My words turned to sobs I'd held deep inside since the moment Vali died. Kase pressed me to his chest; his hands stroked my hair. He left gentle kisses to my neck, my head, and whispered soft words until the tears dried. Until I couldn't shed another drop.

"You listen to me." He held my face between his callused palms. "Don't you dare dishonor his sacrifice by hating yourself for surviving. He made a

choice, and he chose you. Gods, I will love him for all the lifetimes for that choice.”

Kase kissed me. Desperately.

When he broke away our breaths were ragged and heavy. He used his knuckle to tilt my chin and a glisten of emotion coated his eyes. “Had it been you, Malin, I would not have lived to today.”

“Don’t say that,” I whispered against his lips. “We vowed we would always claw our way to each other, not even the Otherworld would stop us.”

Kase pressed his forehead to mine and closed his eyes. “I would burn the Otherworld down to get to you.”

“Be wicked, be a brute, but be mine.” I gave him a weary smile, then held tightly to him, breathing in his woodsy skin until the moon hung high in the sky.

Until Eero finally took his last breath.

THE NIGHTRENDER

“This isn’t over.” Niklas bent down and kissed Junie before he removed his cap and slumped into a chair at the large table in the Falkyn’s underground nest.

For the last week, we’d hidden ourselves from the world, mourning, surviving. The Falkyns from Felstad had arrived with Hob and Inge.

I didn’t know when we’d be ready to return to Klockglas, but the Falkyns made no sign of irritation to have another guild loitering in their realm.

“What is it?” I asked.

“My men returned with news from the Black Palace.” Niklas scratched his forehead. “It has reached the Lord Magnate that his Hemlish camp was obliterated, but a Southern queen of the fae High Court arrived to sign the alliance for her daughter to vow with Niall. On the condition her niece is returned safely, of course.”

“No, the prince was adamant he would not allow his sister to take vows,” Malin snapped.

Junie’s face contorted in disgust. “The fae queen wants to vow her daughter to the house who kept her niece a beaten prisoner?”

“Seems so,” Niklas said. “The queen has overruled her son. To keep the alliance intact, Ivar has made a declaration that the Guild of Kryv and the Falkyn Guild are to be killed upon sight. Penge is being offered for our heads.” Niklas pointed his attention at Luca. Von snored softly against Luca’s shoulder, and my friend kept a soothing hand on the boy’s back as if fathering littles had always been his life. “Luc, Niall has called for your head too.”

“Well, he can’t have it,” Luca said. “It is prettier than his, and I plan to

take his first.”

“Be careful,” Niklas admonished. “You are well known.”

Dagny squeezed Luca’s hand. “Don’t be foolish.”

He kissed her knuckles. “I won’t be. Keep me holed away in here for all I care. I can project from underground. But should anyone corner Niall, you must promise to let me have him.”

Niklas seemed amused and gave Luca a nod. “As for the Malevolent, Ivar has washed his hands of you. You’re too much trouble. He’s called for your execution.”

“Ivar is dying. Should I see him again, I will not be the one executed, but I will hurry his end along,” I said.

“True, but Niall will hold the order when he vows with another kingdom and takes the bleeding throne. Which brings me to our hidden queen.” Niklas drummed his fingers, eyes on Malin. “Ivar put out a decree that anyone who captures Malin Strom, the Memory Thief, will be granted lordship with their own estate at the Black Palace.”

My body stiffened. With such a prize, how would Malin ever show her face in sunlight again? Across every region folk would be hunting her.

Malin cleared her throat. “So, what do we do? We’re all targeted everywhere we go.”

“This is when you will want to find and take the ring.”

We all turned to the wispy voice. Eryka stepped into the space with Gunnar. The fae princess was odd. Always speaking about things yet to come.

“How do you know so much about the queen’s ring?” Niklas asked.

Eryka smiled at the Falkyn. “I saw it.”

“Yes, but how?”

Junie snickered. “Niklas enjoys understanding new mesmer.”

“I enjoy it too,” Eryka said, taking a place at the table. She was young looking, but likely older than I thought. Oftentimes fae kept a youthful look until they were dead. The princess smiled as Gunnar took a seat beside her. “I see events that have not happened.”

“The future then?” Niklas asked.

“In a way. The future is always shifting. But the one time I stood before your ruler he called me an oracle.”

Malin leaned over the table, eyes wide. “It was said queens of old could see a bit of the future like an oracle.”

“I know nothing of that, but I saw a great deal that led me here. The silver arrow in the darkness.” She glanced at Gunnar. “It was you. I needed to meet you. Somehow, you will help me unite three kingdoms.”

“I’m not sure I’m the best man for the task,” Gunnar said. “I have little desire for peace right now.”

“Even still,” Eryka said softly, “it is you.”

Hagen stood in the back of the room. He whispered something to his brother next to him. Bard chuckled and nodded.

“But once I saw you,” Eryka said to Malin, “several moments in time came to me clearly—there are choices you must make. I have seen the possible strength that can come when you claim what is yours.”

Malin scoffed. “Possible.”

“As I said, the future is always changing based on our choices,” the princess said. “And we must be willing to accept the consequences.”

Niklas let out a long sigh. “I tire of fighting, of risk, of death. But Fae Princess here might have a point. We have the whole of the East breathing down our necks, looking for ways to slaughter us or enslave us. We have a few choices the way I see it.” Niklas held up a finger for each idea. “We run and leave the East gain too much power from an alliance with the South. We stay hidden and become underground folk who live on roots and dirt. Or we fight back. We steal that damn ring and give the throne to the true heir.”

Malin shifted in her seat. “And if I do not want to rule?”

“We have Luca,” Niklas said. “He would be a fair king.”

Luca blew out his lips. “I would be a feckless king.”

“Malin, you have the power,” Junius said. “I have seen what can become of lands when the fates’ chosen heir takes that power and accepts their destiny.”

She spoke of the North. I knew some about her time spent with the cursed king of the land. From Junie’s mouth, he had resisted the path of taking the crown. But when he did, a new dawn rose over the North, and they won back their freedom.

I did not want to fight wars and battles here. I did not want to see Malin in the heart of it. Hells, all my life I’d been trying to keep her from that damn ring. But how could she ever be safe or truly free when so many hunted her?

Eero had made one true statement. Ivar knew how to kill the royal bloodlines. He’d done it many times to keep his power. Niall would be worse.

I took Malin's hand and kissed her fingertips.

She looked to me and whispered, "I don't know what move to make."

"We do not need to decide right now," I said. "We plan, like always, then make the choice."

Malin scanned the room, her eyes paused on Fiske at the end of the table. "A change would begin if we went to Hemlig."

"What?"

"Fiske mentioned a change. Our guild has changed with the loss of Vali." She spoke his name with a delicate reverence. "But what if this is part of the change too? A new kingdom." She hesitated, then shook her head. "But how? We won't stand a chance fighting the skydguard if they have the armies of the South."

A somber quiet filled the room. We were too few in numbers. True, we had formidable mesmer Talent, but enough to bring an evenly matched battle to the gates of the Black Palace? It would be a bloody end of the guilds.

"So, if we had armies, you feel the path to the throne is right, Mal?" Gunnar asked.

"I don't know, but . . . something keeps me here. Almost as if something is calling to me to stay," she admitted. "To flee did not feel right. And I'm afraid we would all kill each other if we stayed underground."

A few cautious chuckles rippled around the table.

Malin sighed. "But we are no army."

"We do not shy away from the impossible," Raum muttered.

Every eye turned to him. He'd said few words since losing Vali. He locked his gaze on Malin. "The Kryv, the Falkyns, we do not shy away from the impossible. We plan, we thief, we scheme until we know what steps to take."

Malin sniffed and nodded. "Right."

"So, our new scheme is finding an army and a hidden ring," Fiske said. "Sounds simple enough."

It was a hopeless plan. One I did not see a way to threaten and bribe our way through. If there was no way to get Malin through this breathing, then I would whisk her away to the far corners of the world and keep her safe until our final days.



NEARLY TEN DAYS LATER, the pressure to hunt the guilds had only grown. Sightings of fae joining with skydguard left Eryka uneasy. She'd sent word to her cousin and explained what had become of her. She'd yet to hear his response.

Even the underbelly, the folk who once worshiped the Kryv or asked for wicked deals had become turncoats. Two Falkyns had narrowly escaped an ambush in a trade square gathering food for the guilds.

I was beginning to believe the only way out would be to abandon the East for good. Take refuge somewhere in the North perhaps. But every time the idea was mentioned, Malin's nose would wrinkle like a rancid smell entered the room, and she'd softly insist we should keep searching for the ring a little longer.

Truth be told, I almost believed Ivar had destroyed it. Eryka seemed to think that was impossible. Gunnar sided with the princess over me, and I nearly tossed him out of the guild for it.

When nerves settled and tempers soothed, I hid away with Malin in the room Niklas had given to us. I held her close, tracing the lines on her face as the sun faded over the Howl above ground.

She nestled against my chest. "You don't want me to find the ring, do you?"

I closed my eyes and pressed a kiss to her nose. "All I have ever wanted was for you to be safe."

"I know. But I keep thinking of my mother's memory," she said. "She told Jens when it called to me, he should help me rise. Kase, I want to flee. I know I am a coward to admit it, but I want to leave. I have you, we have our broken, wounded family. I want to find a life somewhere else, but there is something that speaks to me. A feeling deep inside that tells me to stay. I can't explain it."

I hugged her tighter against my side. "I do not understand the Norns, or destiny, but whatever choice is made, I will be beside you. They will never be able to take that choice from me."

She studied my face for a long pause. "What do you fear right now?"

"That I have failed." My thumb tugged on her bottom lip. "No matter what we choose, I fear there is no way for me to keep you truly safe."

"You do know I have the same fear, but for you, right?"

I drew her closer against my body. Her leg wrapped around my waist so there was no space between us.

“I don’t know how to be a queen, Kase. I am a memory thief, not a royal.”

I sighed and rested my cheek on her forehead. “Have you ever read the tale of the four queens?”

Malin lifted her head. “In my mother’s memory she mentioned such a tale. What is it?”

I winced. If her dying mother had said the same thing, I could not avoid the truth I’d been running from all these turns. “The saga goes that four queens will be blessed with gifts to heal a broken land. Choice, devotion, honor, and cunning.”

“Odd gifts.”

“The Norns are odd.” I chuckled and wrapped her closer in my arms. “I hate the story. I always have because I knew of your bloodline, and I know of you. Your devotion to those you care for is unmatched.”

“So, I do not have the gift of choice or cunning,” she said in a playful tone.

“If the tale is true, I’m afraid choice was already taken. Though, you are rather cunning.”

“The gift of choice is taken?” Malin propped onto her elbow. “You speak of the North?”

I shrugged. “All I know is the queen of the Night Folk fae had many choices to make. She chose to love a beast and a killer who became her king. She chose to be a queen. As for you, you have been nothing but devoted to me. A gift I do not deserve most days.”

“So, if I am devotion, then there is hope. After all, it worked in the favor of the Northern queen.”

I forced a smile. “Through a great deal of blood and loss, yes.”

Malin closed her eyes, then kissed me. Hard. Needy. Her tongue was warm against mine, and she clung to my face like I might slip away should she let go.

When her tears dripped onto my cheeks, she sniffled and pulled back. “I need you to know that I have loved you for as long as I can remember, and there has never been a day—even when you were rather petulant once we found each other again—that you have not deserved it.”

“I have a confession,” I said. “I, too, do not know what move to make. If this tale of queens is true, I do not want to face it. I don’t want the risk for you, but I swear I will not stop until we find a way to live the lives we once

dreamed of, Mallie.”

“In faraway kingdoms where we are not hunted and not afraid.”

I smiled, brushing my lips to hers. “Tales where heroes never die, and pain does not exist.”

Malin threaded her fingers through my hair. “My faraway kingdom is anywhere you are, Kase Eriksson. I say we do as Raum said. We mark, we scheme, we see if we stand a chance before we decide. Who knows, perhaps Fate will send us a sign.”

I smirked. Fate had a wretched sense of humor, but if the Norns had marked us, there would be no escaping their tricks.

I kissed her. My hands touched her. I got lost in her body, her heat, her passion until sleep took us. For a moment, there was no worry of war, of rings, or schemes.

There was only us. The way it always had been.

I didn’t know how long we’d been asleep when a horn blew through the corridors of the Falkyn nest. I jolted up in bed. Malin clutched her chest, catching her bearings. I slipped out of the furs and hurried to dress.

Out in the corridor, Falkyns and Kryv rushed past, dressing as they ran, weapons out.

I grabbed hold of Lynx’s arm. “What is it?”

“Night watch saw something on the Howl. They think it’s Ivar.”

My fists clenched at my sides as darkness wrapped around my arms and shoulders. Malin clutched my arm, and her bright eyes gave away her fear before mesmer had a chance to taste it. I fought the urge to demand she stay put. She wouldn’t listen anyway.

Taking her hand tightly, we followed the rush to the surface.

The nest was not far from the shore, but my lungs burned from exertion by the time the sea air struck my face. Raum stood at the water’s edge, squinting in the night. What looked like hundreds of flickering lights on the sea were approaching. And swiftly.

“Longships,” Raum said. “Dozens and dozens of them.”

“Ivar?”

“Can’t see just yet. It’s bleeding dark.”

A horn bellowed from the distance. One used in war to announce approaching armies. If it was an army of skydguard, why would they announce it?

“No doubt the guard here has heard all this,” Niklas said as he came to

my side. He tugged on his leather jacket and studied the approaching lights. “But if they’re rallying, they won’t get far. Turns out Bard Strom is fairly clever at setting traps. He helped my men set some surprises for the Skítkast skydguard.”

I gave Bard a quick glance. “Still setting traps?”

He didn’t look at me and stared ahead. “Never stopped. You and Mal were merely my first victims.”

Malin snorted at the memories of the hayloft torment her older brother often caused for the two littles, but the way her fingernails dug into my arm, fear was still growing.

“This isn’t right,” I said. “Ivar wouldn’t announce an attack this way.”

“Then who would?” Malin whispered.

Gunnar stood a pace away. I studied the young Kryv. He was the only one who seemed wholly composed. Truth be told, he was rather calm.

“Gunnar—”

“You said you needed an army,” Gunnar whispered, glancing at Malin.

Hagen came up behind his son. “Gunnar, what did you do?”

“What should have been done long ago.” Gunnar didn’t expound more.

My blood pounded in my head when another horn roared into the night.

“By the gods!” Raum said. “It isn’t Ivar!”

“Who the hells is it?” Niklas snapped.

Raum turned around, his first true smile since Vali’s death. “It’s the bleeding North! The cursed king and his queen are at the lead.”

My throat grew sticky. An entire kingdom was bounding toward the shore.

“You sent word to the North?” Hagen’s voice was low, almost desperate when he looked to Gunnar.

“I did. I won’t run any longer, Daj. I won’t watch the people I love live in hiding. Eryka sees something, a change in this kingdom, and they are meant to be part of it.” He pointed to the sea. “It might just mean we can win it back. I fought beside Maj and my uncles once before. I will do it again.”

“*Herja*.” Hagen blinked to the sea. “She’s there?”

“She is a warrior,” Gunnar said. “I have no doubt she stands at the front.”

I did not miss the grin spreading over Hagen’s face.

My eyes turned to Malin. Her face was pale, but her back was straight.

“We have an army,” I whispered.

She held out her hand, waiting for me to take it. At our touch, my

shadows surrounded the both of us.

“Then, I suppose,” she said in a soft, steady voice, “we are going to war.”

I tugged her against my side as the lights came closer, dancing shadows on the people guiding the ships. The lead ship was large, a flag with the symbol of ravens and thorns and blossoms of the Ferus line.

A woman had propped a foot on the stempost, hugging the curved sea snake to her side. Her icy pale hair blew in the wind.

The Northern queen.

When another horn blew her voice followed. “I see you, Nightrender! We’ve come all this way, so you better put on a damn smile!”

All the turns spent avoiding this moment, of keeping Malin Strom away from the curse of her bloodline, and I began it with a curl to my mouth, a thrill in my blood.

A new battle was beginning, and I could not deny the feeling that it was exactly where we needed to be.



Hello Wicked Darling. It’s Malin. We almost didn’t make it out with our heads, and unfortunately, some of us didn’t. War is brewing. A war I never wanted, yet feels like it is the path fate is leading us toward.

Now the Northern Kingdom is joining our battle and the tables are about to turn. I don’t know how it will end, but I hope you’ll continue fighting with us in [DANCE OF KINGS AND THIEVES](#)



Want more? Check out a sexy bonus scene with the Nightrender and his Memory Thief [HERE](#)



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