

Chapter 1

He wouldn't live to see the revolution. Kaspar tried to make his peace with that. He strode uphill into the wintry night, cheeks rosy and eyes narrow as knives. Snow swirled around the empty city. Yellow gas street lights flickered out. With his heart in his throat, he adjusted his dark bundle. Despite the care he took, there was an element of doubt, and the strength of his arms was draining away. He did not trust the raw incendium. A pebble of it dropped from table height could level a room. Beneath the swaddling of a spare winter coat, Kaspar carried a twenty-pound brick.

Now was no time to put his life above his fellows. He thought of charming Oskar and his smiles, of Ernest's gruff warmth, Hedwig's witty poetry. They were all in the bar now, safe from the storm. What would it mean to have one last night with them? One more round of drinks, one more game of cards. Their voices whispered an invitation on the icy wind. His will wavered until he thought of his own Bernhard, skull cracked by a baton.

No. His cause was just.

Festivity falsely warmed the Imperial City of Kronstadt. The white brick houses Kaspar passed had all closed out the cold. Hearths burned bright on the other side of arched windows, while Midwinter wreaths and silver garlands festooned doorways and porches. Little tokens to the gods sat outside on the windowsills—hand-carved idols for some, feathers and deer antlers for others. Trinkets of the guilty seeking absolution. Any cruel master who lived in the upper districts like Mariasdorf supped on stolen dinners. He stroked his bundled bomb. The blood of a few fat industrialists would not bring Bernhard back to him. He hungered for bigger game.

The ancient palace of Waltsburg drew ever nearer. Through the night storm, Kaspar could see its ten thousand windows burning like the doors of a well-fed furnace. The sound of music might have reached him, but a howling wind drowned it. Cruel gods. He passed the last of the homes. Waltsburg's winter gardens spread out in front of him, far into the dark. Across the grounds, the steps of the grand entrance glowed with dots of light.

Kaspar crossed the street and slipped into the shadow of the ornate wall surrounding the estate. He could not fail now, not so close. He walked faster. Meaningless to destroy the leaf horsemen of the gardens—he needed victims that would bleed. He needed the ballroom. A little farther along the wall and he would be there. A little more effort and he could join Bernhard,

taking every sybaritic master in Kronstadt with him. Let them choke on the fumes of their own engines! Oh, Hedwig would find the poetic humor in aristocrats dying to incendium.

His foot slipped and he went skittering over the slick sidewalk. His shoulder rammed into the wall and his scream flew into the night. His arms closed around the incendium like a vice, and for a moment, all stopped. Nothing moved but the snow.

Heart and hands trembling, he shuffled on. His arm brushed along the wall, guiding him closer and closer to the end. From the palace on the other side, a muffled burst of horns and strings challenged the singing storm. He had made it. He could not see over the wall, but nor was it terribly tall. He peeled away the blue-singed layers of his old coat, exposing the incendium. A smile parted his cold lips. The bundled crystals glowed a deepest blue and wept a strange, pale mist. He stared for a long moment. It would kill him even if he did nothing now, wouldn't it? Touching it was certain death—death for him and, should he succeed, every damnable soul in that ballroom. He had committed to this path, so what was happening to his body? Why did every little bone shake?

Light spilled down the street behind him. “You there! Thought I heard something. Who are you?”

Kaspar looked over his shoulder. His stomach roiled with hate. Even half-blinded by the man's swaying lantern, Kaspar knew the profile of a peaked cap. The policeman marched through the falling snow, baton in hand. “What are you doing out on a night like this? It's Midwinter's Eve, you—”

No more batons. Kaspar cried out in pain as the crystal's fiery cold attacked his hands, but he heaved the payload up to his shoulder. It crackled in his ear. “I'm sorry, Oskar,” he shouted into the storm. “But this is for the republic of our future!” The policeman came at a run. Kaspar summoned every sliver of strength his body had left—and hurled the incendium over the wall.

Beneath her golden cat mask, Matilda smiled so wide her cheeks went numb. The gilded ballroom of Waltsburg had exceeded her every expectation. Windows the size of small towers let in the moon. A thousand crystal colors danced on the walls. What was a winter storm to these glass chandeliers, opening like budding spring flowers and bloomed with summer light? On the

draped dais, an orchestra plied its trade. Fingers flew along strings, their notes punctuated by dashing cymbals; brass and woodwinds chased the spirit of the night. A broad-shouldered gentleman held her close as they glided across the floor. Sweet vanilla wafted off his cuffs and throat. She could feel his approving stare through his silver, hound-eared mask.

She had practiced every step and spin in her apartment for weeks. Now, she perfectly matched every other lady dancing at the Winter Waltz. Let them see that culture *could* be cultivated. Her hand slid through her partner's and they walked, then turned, parted, then neared. Never had she seen so many distinguished men and women from every corner of the empire. Well, she did not *see* most of them—masks of many miens kept their persons hidden. She had worked hard on hers. Paints and materials from the Academy, labor through long nights and early days. The result was simple, but dignified; it had won her many compliments already.

Not all could equal her effort. The pious had come in the plain faces of their gods. Most of those were little better than wooden bowls shaped into wrinkled old men or the occasional animal spirit. Others had aspired to art but created nonsense. Among the worst offenders, unfortunately, was her brother. She glimpsed Wolfgang standing far from the floor, a grim and lonely statue standing vigil by a window.

He wore only an unpainted visor, his flat-lined mouth naked underneath. A dress sword sat on his hip, making little mystery of his country or profession. Brute warrior of the north. He had not even bothered to find a proper suit! She had spent the entire year persuading him to attend this ball. How many telegrams had she fired off to Nordheim? How many nights had she wasted scheming up clever inducements? He had come all the way to the capital but hadn't bothered to bring anything better than a military mess jacket. Most of the men sported black or red suits, shed of their allegiances for but one night. Not mighty Wolfgang, proud in his second skin—the plain, boring white of the Nordheim Air Navy. Miserable fiend!

The dance neared its end. She pulled in air, spun into her partner's mock caress, then struggled not to laugh as she leaned into his arms. The applause from the spectators filled every pore in her skin. Magnificent to be an equal for a night. Her hound-masked partner eased her to a stand and they joined the other dancers in a synchronized bow. Wolfgang, she noted, was not clapping.

"Oh, please, my lady," her partner said. She startled and looked askance. "Can't we forget that curmudgeon for an hour?"

As dancers left the floor, her partner teased his mask away from his face. Now there was a familiar grin. She swatted Julian Richter's arm. The fair-faced young officer laughed at his own little mischief, curly silver locks bouncing above his bushy brows. How could she hope to keep from laughing too? "You varlet!" Her cheeks rosied. "I wondered why my brother was alone. I pray you are not looking for compliments. Your dancing was acceptably *fine*."

"Fine?" His smile turned into a humorous pout before he set his mask on. "Tilly, please. Wolfgang brought me only for my skill at legs. Who else could he trust with ensuring his dear sister had a dashing time?"

"He did *not*!" Matilda said, aghast.

"True," Julian admitted, and she all but scowled at how easily she'd bought it. "But now that I've been honest, *you* must be too. How was I? And hurry—the longer we linger here, the sooner Wolfgang will see me with you."

"I ought to let him, just to see him dress you down," she said. "You danced fine enough, Julian, and not a whit more. Honestly! I wondered why you were so shy about your mask..."

They had all come to the waltz in each others' company, though Matilda had made for the grand entrance whereas her brother and his lieutenant had opted for a more subtle side door. Julian had more trouble in him than a schoolboy.

"The *artiste* is a shy fellow at heart," he said. "Alas, I am scorned. Well, I'll go speak with Wolf and see how much longer he can tolerate all this. His spirits will be failing by now."

Matilda looked past Julian to the crowding refreshments table. Coffee and gin, pastries and cheeses. Her stomach murmured its interest. "Well, as your penitence, you can go restore those spirits. I intend to fetch a glass and refill *mine*." In curt dismissal she swept past him. Her mask hid her smile.

She joined the table's queue. Other dancers took the floor and the music started again. Some part of her could not understand how those two took the premier gala of the season so lightly. Life might have been different for them under warmer stars. An education in the capital had attuned her to the world, but those two were Nordheimers to the blood. Had that cold country frozen her brother and poor Julian out of good society? Gods cure the world of military men. She understood some of the prejudice now. Northerners cared for nothing but machines and munitions.

A gentleman in a full-faced bear mask acknowledged her with a smooth nod. She gave her face to a smile at the pleasure of mystery: was he a young courtier or a duke? Bear Mask took a step closer and offered her his glass. “A woman in so striking an outfit as yours should not wait any longer than it takes a man to notice,” he said, voice a matching southern growl for his visage. “Give me the honor of—”

A forking blue light flashed through the ballroom.

Wolfgang von Falkenberg tumbled across the floor. He ended in a curl against something firm. A cough cut his lungs and tore his back, forcing him to awareness. He heard nothing from his own throat. Dull ringing filled his ears, echoing and quiet in the same stroke—reminiscent of cannonfire.

He paused in morbid realization. A chunk of stone had shattered the tiled floor a few feet from his head. He dragged a wrist over his eyes, regretted it. He had only pushed in little fibers of debris. After blinking them out, he tried to make sense of his surrounds. The entire ballroom lay in peace and pieces. Cold and dark together crept into the ballroom; all the lights were out, and a whole section of the room was gone. Blue mist. Incendium. What cruel trick of the gods had brought it here? It slithered in through the void that had been the eastern wall. Snow followed it in, covering the cracked floor with a pall of purest white.

Matilda.

He deferred paying mind to his own hurts. That debt he could repay with bedrest later. For now, he could not be the last Falkenberg. With lead for limbs, he dragged himself eastward. His mind tortured him with flashing images of Matilda’s twisted corpse. She had been dancing. Then where? His head pounded and refused every effort to wring out memory. He had taken his eyes off her for just a few moments. What had he been looking at? Some fat boar of a man laughing. What had ever attracted her to the preening peacocks of Altmark? He would never understand, but he would attentively listen if she lived to tell him.

Rubble from the blast littered his path. With smoke and dust, the night grew strong as it shouldered into the previously blinding hall. But a few survivors swayed to and fro, trying to collect themselves in the darkness. Braced for pain, Wolfgang grabbed a block of stone and set his fingers like talons. He spiked a knee on the floor and rose, stone dredged from a river. No sooner had he regained his feet than he saw Julian Richter stumbling along.

“Richter!” Wolfgang said. He could barely hear himself. He screamed the name again. The unmasked lieutenant turned, wide-eyed, and hobbled over.

Wolfgang caught the man when he tripped, but it almost sent them both to the floor. Had Wolfgang’s foot not snagged on a piece of debris, it would have. Richter looked like a thousand eagles had harried him. Wolfgang doubted he looked any better.

Pointing, Richter said, “The drink table!” louder and louder until Wolfgang nodded.

With each other for support, they staggered across the room. Wolfgang marveled at the destruction. Death had lain up its scythe and opted for a combine. Hundreds of elites from every country in the empire, killed in one stroke. Masks and costumes had blown away to reveal the soft faces of southern excess. Yet he and Richter were not the only Nordheimers here. Almost, his darker mind lured him into thinking about that. There were some faces he would be pleased to see.

Matilda. Matilda.

Not a thousand lives would profitably trade for her one.

He drew his tattered collar over his mouth after spotting the incendium floating about. With prompting, Richter did the same. The orchestra had been almost on top of the explosion; now, music and makers were no more. Of the unfortunate, though, they were luckiest. Those not killed in the immediate blast—but still too near—writhed and wriggled on the floor. The blood loss was not the worst of their concerns; in truth, it might even save them. Those well-coated in the blue dust would die a wicked death no matter how many skilled doctors they summoned.

Wolfgang jarred to a halt when something caught his leg. Looking down revealed not rubble but a man, clinging with both hands and mouthing noiseless babble at him. Wolfgang delivered him a savage kick and pulled away.

What remained of the splintered refreshment table did not inspire confidence. Bodies lay all around it, mingled with stone and glass, blood and wine. Skipping rubble had enfiladed the attendees here. The scene did little for Wolfgang’s appetite. His breath bounced back from his collar and warmed his face, but a glacial fear arrested him. There, on the ground, lay the golden cat mask—split in two. A thousand fraying thoughts spun through his mind, the loom running free of its weaver.

Richter shook his shoulder. The lieutenant’s mouth moved, but Wolfgang heard nothing. He followed the man’s finger toward a spread of bent and broken bodies. A sweeping look

revealed an unmasked, but whole, Matilda among them. Wolfgang hobbled as he ran. He swooped down like a raven and swirled his coat over her bare arms.

She stirred, if only just. Moving her might worsen any injuries, but he felt helpless casting a shadow. The decision became a little easier when a terrible tremor shook the floor. On the eastern ceiling, chunks of loose were tumbling free. Matilda's eyes quivered open with fear plain in the pupils, and her questing fingers clutched the coat.

Her soft face looked battle-scarred, cut and striped with blood. Wide brown eyes looked through Wolfgang in a daze. He brushed some of the dirt away, swept her chestnut hair behind her head. A smile demanded too much of him. He looked around, saw others helping the fallen. They had to move her. The ballroom was doomed. What stone wouldn't soon entomb, the residual incendium would.

He decided to risk it. A couple of wild gestures brought Richter into his plot, and together they grabbed a broken piece of the refreshment table and dragged it over to Matilda. It would not make for a comfortable litter, but it *would* move her. Wolfgang hooked his arms under hers and pulled her onto the wood. She barely made a sound. When he made to hoist the litter up, though, Richter paled and waved him over.

His own face slackened when he saw it. A shard of glass had cut through Matilda's thigh and lodged in. Any night of peaceful rest would be her last. There was nothing else for it. They needed a hospital, and fast—ideally, before all these other potential patients.

Hobbling to the other side of the litter, he helped Richter lift Matilda from the floor. Some victims tried to get their attention, but Wolfgang shut them out. Should any Altmarker so much as touch him, they would feel the flat of his sword. Let them learn why Nordheimers still carried them, even in dress. Whatever plot had brought incendium to this dreadful palace, sweet Matilda was no target. He could not offer that same pardon to the bleeding beasts he stepped over. Let them burn. Had his sister not been ensnared, he might even have drank to the hunter's health.

The eastern ceiling shook again.