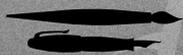


JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

THE
DECEIVER'S
HEART

• BOOK TWO •



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♦ O N E ♦

K E S T R A

Barely daring to breathe, I crept forward, hoping Lord Endrick wouldn't be aware of my presence until I was closer. He had summoned me here, so there was no chance of surprising him, but I didn't need him watching my every move as I trekked across the great hall toward the Scarlet Throne.

The throne itself was a grand display of rubies and garnets, occupied for the past thousand years by whichever Antoran family was currently in power. But never by an outsider. Never by anyone as evil as Lord Endrick.

Lord Endrick was a head taller than the average Antoran and thick in his build. Today he wore the black uniform of Dominion officers, highly decorated with medals he had never earned, and with green accents signifying his rank as king, a position he had seized from the Dallisor family. In public, he wore a mask to disguise his true nature, but he rarely wore it in his palace. I hated having to look upon him. Every murder he had committed against his own people had grayed his flesh and deepened the lines of his skin until he now resembled a monster more than a person.

Such thoughts made it easier to do what I had to do, but I continued walking forward. My heart ached just to think of what was about to happen.

Endrick sat in close conference with Sir Henry, his chief enforcer, confidant, and the man who had pretended to be my father for all of my sixteen years. Even now, he didn't know that I knew the truth, nor could I tell him until this was over.

If I was lucky, that would be within the next few minutes.

The Olden Blade was in its usual spot, tucked in a garter around my right thigh. But I'd deliberately worn a skirt with only a single sash around the waist today, so it wouldn't be hard to get to the weapon when I needed it. My pulse was racing and my body was much too tense. I needed to slow down, to breathe. I needed to keep thinking.

"Kestra, my daughter, you are late." Sir Henry never missed an opportunity to scold me, though I figured most of his disapproval would come after I killed Lord Endrick. *If I could do it. I had to do it.*

I gave the appropriate bow to the throne, subtly checking with my hand that the Olden Blade's handle was where I expected, and it was. Good.

"Forgive my delay." My tone was deliberately obstinate. Foolishly inciteful. "I'd rather not have come at all."

"Kestra!"

Lord Endrick held up his hand for silence, then gestured for me to rise, which I did.

"You've shown an unusual streak of defiance since returning from the Lava Fields," he said.

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I tilted my head. "You must know that defiance is not unusual for me. Wasn't that the reason I was sent to the Lava Fields in the first place?"

"In hopes it would tame you, not encourage you," Sir Henry said. "We—"

He stopped mid-sentence and immediately dipped his head, feeling the burn from Endrick's scathing glare, a reminder that the king did not appreciate being interrupted. I rather enjoyed that. Never in my life had I seen Sir Henry shrink to anyone.

Then Lord Endrick continued, "Some defiance can be tolerated in the young. It's natural to push against one's elders. But it ends here, Miss Dallisor. Before your disappearance several days ago, a wedding was planned for you. Sir Basil has expressed his willingness to continue with the wedding. I only need your promise that when you stand before the people, you will accept him."

I straightened my spine, hoping it would give me courage. "I will not."

Lord Endrick thrust out his hand, and with it came a force that hit me squarely in the chest, knocking the breath from my lungs and sending me sprawling backward. That had hurt far more than I'd expected, but it had to happen. I needed to draw Lord Endrick nearer to me, away from Sir Henry. And I needed to be in a position to quietly reach beneath my skirts.

"Get up, girl!" Sir Henry called to me. I wasn't sure if his order was meant to demand I show Endrick more respect, or to warn of what Endrick would do next if I didn't get up.

Either way, I couldn't obey him, not yet. "If I get up, he'll do that again!"

Endrick's tone darkened. "And if you don't, things will get worse until you agree to the marriage."

"As far as I can tell, marriage itself is far worse than anything you can do to me." Which may have sounded flippant, except in this case it was true. Endrick had already forced Basil to agree to kill me on our wedding night, something Basil himself had confirmed in our private conversations over the past few days.

But Lord Endrick didn't take kindly to my words. He stood, threw his cloak off his shoulders, and marched down the stairs from the Scarlet Throne. "On your knees, girl."

By then, I'd already worked the Olden Blade free of the garter. It was now in my hand, with part of my skirt wrapped around the blade to hide it. I rolled to my knees.

This was it, the moment I would kill him. The timing had to be perfect. He could not see it, could not suspect, until the blade was piercing his gut.

Lord Endrick held out his right hand, and a servant ran forward with a grip glove, fastening it to the king's palm. The grip glove would intensify anything that Endrick's magic could already do. I'd experienced a lesser version of his punishments before, and it was awful.

Sir Henry had remained in his seat, which he rarely did. He was ordinarily the punisher, and if not, he usually relished the pleasure of being up close when Endrick did the job instead. But maybe somewhere, deep in his miserable, shriveled heart, he had tender feelings for me.

Either that, or he didn't want to bother himself with walking down the steps, only to climb them a minute or two later. That was probably it.

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I lowered my head and redoubled my grip on the Olden Blade. Endrick's footsteps were behind me and coming closer. It felt like he was deliberately walking slowly, drawing out the torture. Maybe he was.

Finally, I sensed his presence behind me, like a corporeal shadow, like he was death itself. He raised his hand to part my hair, seeking a solid grip on my neck, but as he did, I leapt to my feet, swinging around with the blade and leaving a deep cut in his side.

"No!" Now Sir Henry was rushing down the steps, his sword already out.

I swung back in the opposite direction, this time with a much better aim. I started to bring the blade down on Endrick's chest, but he grabbed my arm, using the grip glove to send a wave of pain through me. Had he not been injured, that pulse of magic probably would have stopped my heart.

I fell to the ground, gasping with breath. Endrick stood over me, clutching his wound and shouting, "A Dallisor child is the Infidante? Where did you find that blade?"

I couldn't speak, couldn't form words, but I stumbled to my feet, trying to put any distance between us. Sir Henry tried to dart forward, but Endrick raised a hand, motioning him back.

"It doesn't matter where I found it," I said. "It's mine, and I will kill you with it."

"You won't," Endrick said. "But if you give it to me now, I may let you live."

Only a fool would believe such lies. I raised the blade again, ready to thrust it at him if he took another step closer to me. Hoping he would, and that I would do better this time.

“Come and get it,” I said.

This time, when Lord Endrick shot magic at me, I instinctively put the blade forward and blocked it, something I hadn’t known was possible. It reflected back, knocking him off his feet, the mighty Lord of the Dominion reduced to sprawling backward across the marble floor. He was mortal after all, I understood that now. I started toward him, but he immediately sat up and hit me with a force so powerful it hurled me to the windows at the far end of the throne room. As black dots swarmed in my vision, I used the blade to smash the glass, and then I rolled backward over the edge.

It was a long fall into a frost-covered morning, and the hardened tree limbs below would have killed me, except this was the escape I’d already planned to use if anything went wrong. I landed on a web of rope in the upper branches, planted there last night by Basil and me.

While the fall didn’t kill me, Lord Endrick nearly had, and I was struggling to remain conscious. I didn’t have long. Above me, orders were being shouted to the Ironhearts to bring me in alive.

I rolled down the webbing to the ground, unable to get a grip on the rungs. Basil breathed out my name and darted from a hiding place to break my fall. Certain that we’d be celebrating at this point, I’d told him not to come. How relieved I was to see him now.

Dizzy, and with the world at a distinct angle, I wrapped the Olden Blade in the sash at my waist and pushed it into his hands.

“Take this.”

He did, but said, “Let me help you first!”

“I can’t get away in time, but you can protect the blade. If I don’t survive, it must go to the Coracks. Now go and hide it somewhere no one will suspect, not even me.” Especially not me.

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I wasn't awake long enough to know if he successfully escaped. All I knew was that I didn't. Ironhearts were shouting my name, surrounding me.

My eyes closed and, I feared, might never open again. I had failed.