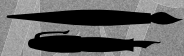


JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

THE
TRAITOR'S
GAME

• BOOK ONE •



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♦ ONE ♦

KESTRA

The truth of where I'd been for the past three years wasn't what anyone believed.

It wasn't exile, as my father claimed. The Lava Fields were barren and unforgiving, and charming in the way that discovering a thorn with one's bare foot might be charming. But I'd gladly choose to live there before sacrificing my happiness for my father's political demands.

Nor was I hiding, as most people in my country suspected. While it was true that I'd been sent to the Fields on the same day I escaped a kidnapping, I had Darrow to protect me now. Thanks to him, I was stronger than before.

And I wasn't away learning to become a proper young lady. If anything, the opposite was true. My handmaiden, Celia, had tried her best, encouraging me to put down the swords and disk bows Darrow liked to train me with and pick up a hairbrush or sewing needle instead. But so far, I'd done more damage to my fingers with the needles than had ever been done to me by the edge of a blade.

The truth about the Lava Fields was that very few people knew my whereabouts, making it the first place I'd ever felt truly free. Free to explore the knifelike maze of sharp, black rocks. Free to sit in the

stone cottage near Unknown Lake and eat at the rickety wooden table with Darrow, Cook, and Celia. Free to run and sing and let my hair tangle in the wind.

Free, that is, until last night, when a garrison of six Dominion soldiers had unexpectedly arrived with a summons from my father to return home to Woodcourt.

Why? Nothing on my end had changed, and he would certainly never back down. Yet here I was tonight, boxed inside a cramped security carriage, unable to block out the incessant noise of gravel grinding beneath our track wheels. I felt trapped.

No, I *was* trapped, a thought that choked my breath. Everything had been fine in the Lava Fields. Aside from the occasional rumblings of an ancient volcano and a relentless odor of sulfur, we'd enjoyed a simple life there, one with few rules and even fewer people to tell me how I'd disappointed them that day. Why should I have to go home?

"Are you all right, Kestra? You look worried." Sitting across from me in the carriage, Celia had spent the past hour knotting and unknotting her fingers. She was nervous, which was no great surprise. So was I. My first meeting with my father in three years could end poorly.

Celia was a wisp of cloud, a crocus flower in bloom, far too delicate for a life in my service. Her hair was much lighter than mine, and naturally curly, which gave me a fierce amount of jealousy, though because I belonged to the Dallisor family, I could never admit to feeling inferior.

"I'm fine," I told Celia. "I just want this ride to end." How long had we been stuck inside this carriage? Hours at least, though it

wouldn't surprise me if the world had shifted into a new century since we'd left the cottage. Cook was probably an old woman by now. Or an *older* woman.

"Another hour, and we'll reach the inn." Celia seemed to believe if she always spoke with patience, the trait would inevitably rub off on me. I doubted that.

To her credit, although she was only two years older, Celia had been patient with me for a year, a record for any lady in my service. My former lady-in-waiting, Ibbi, had lasted less than three months. Ibbi had been prone to "frantic episodes" that Darrow insisted were brought on by the suffocating Lava Fields, and not by my difficult behavior. I rather doubted that too. Her last episode came on after I stitched her into her bed one night as she slept. It wasn't my fault. I was bored.

That was nothing compared to my boredom now, and an aching restlessness to escape this coffin on wheels. As a protection against attacks, security carriages had metal sides, a single narrow window with thick glass, and steel track wheels that could crush anything in its path, preferably the attacker. A clearstone hung in one corner of our carriage, though if I warmed it with my hands to freshen the glow, I'd only be reminded again of how tight our space was.

This carriage was also a symbol for what my life might become now. Maybe everything I knew and wanted—everything I *was*—would soon be compacted into some safe, proper world.

Unbearable.

Darrow would understand.

With a grin my poor handmaiden had too often seen before, I sat forward, unbolted the door, and reached for the handle.

“My lady, the carriage is moving.” No details escaped Celia’s sharp attention.

“Then I’d better not fall.” I pushed open the heavy metal door and a crisp evening wind awakened my senses. It smelled like rain, though the dirt road beneath us was dry. A half-moon did little to cut through the dark night, but tall trees lined the road, and I thought I heard a river nearby. That could put us practically anywhere between the edge of the Lava Fields and the outskirts of Highwyn.

Celia put a hand on my arm. “The garrison won’t like this—”

“Well, I don’t like them either.” The garrison served Endrick, our Lord of the Dominion, because even the title of king was not grand enough for him. Part of service to Lord Endrick required that a piece of the soldier’s heart be replaced with a magical ball of iron that Endrick could control when necessary. Hence our nickname for them: Ironhearts. Never a compliment.

Before Celia could protest again, which she undoubtedly would, I found a solid grip on the carriage frame and put a foot on the step.

“Darrow!” I called up toward the driver’s box.

Darrow was almost thirty years my senior, but had the energy and spirit of a person half his age. He had dark hair that was rarely combed, a beard always in need of a trim, and, I believed, an infatuation with Cook. It wasn’t fair that she had been dismissed upon my leaving the Lava Fields.

He shook his head when he saw me. “You’re in a security carriage for a reason, Kestra!”

“I’m not in it now for other reasons. Give me a hand up!”

He chuckled, then shifted the reins into one hand and scooted