

♦ ONE ♦



K E S T R A

Winter had come, bringing harsh winds that cut like knives through my cloak, the land frozen beneath my feet each morning and continuing to chill, even when the sun rose. Not that we saw much sun in such a forsaken place.

Loelle had taken me here, to All Spirits Forest, forcing me away from Simon, away from every reality I had ever known. For the first few days, I refused to speak to her, refused to acknowledge that she even existed. I was utterly miserable.

How could I be otherwise in such a place?

A generation ago, in the War of Desolation, Lord Endrick had cursed these woods. The trees and bushes had lost their leaves, lost their life. Now they were mere blackened posts in a dead earth, unable to renew and offer hope to the land, unable to return to their former glory.

Winter had brought cold to the forest, but no snow, no hope of springtime. Only more eternal decay.

Every morning, I tried to leave the forest. And every morning, I was blocked by some invisible barrier I eventually came to understand. The half-lives who existed here, who had once fought against

me entering the forest, were now working to keep me trapped within these same borders.

Lord Endrick's curse wasn't targeted at the woods but, instead, at those whom he had corralled here at the time of the cursing: thousands of Halderians, his enemies. For nearly twenty years, they had been trapped here, in a midway point between life and death, like the trees themselves, unable to die, with no hope of living.

"You can save them."

It wasn't the first time Loelle had said this to me, though every time she did, she revealed a little more of her plans and purposes. This morning, she stood behind me as I combed my fingers through my brown hair, weaving it into a long braid. When I looked up, she repeated, "You can save these people, Kestra."

"Why would I care to save Halderians?" This was always my answer. Much of my life's misery was a direct result of their actions against me.

"My people are here too," Loelle said. "We call ourselves the Navan. Help us, and we will help you."

That part was new. I had known that Loelle came from a people foreign to Antora, and that some of them were here in the forest, but this was the first time she had spoken their name, and certainly the first time she had openly confirmed that I was here to help them. I wasn't here as a prisoner; she had brought me to be a servant. My temper warmed. "How can they possibly help me?"

"It's the reason I brought you here." Loelle put her hands on my shoulders, but I brushed them off. "Kestra, they are your only chance to defeat Lord Endrick."

"That isn't true." I stood, pushing back my chair. "I have no

chance to defeat him from here, nor can I leave, thanks to *your* people!"

She stood as well. "Then help them leave."

"You want me to restore thousands of people to life? That'd take years."

"No. I want you to bring the forest back." I began to walk away but Loelle called after me, "Nature is less complex, and the curse is in the people more than in the land. Bring the forest back, and at least my people won't be trapped."

I stopped and looked back at her. She had my interest. "They'll still be half-lives."

Loelle smiled, in a way that told me her plan was far deeper than she had let on so far. "Yes, they will remain as they are."

I considered that a moment, then said, "Let me heal Darrow. I know my father is here. Let me heal him, and then I'll do what you want."

Loelle's eyes were sympathetic but unflinching. "Do as I ask first, then I'll send your father to you." When I didn't respond, she added, "Give me this one day, Kestra. If you don't wish to continue afterward, then I'll ask nothing more of you."

"And if I don't continue, these half-lives will let me leave?"

"No."

I grunted and marched over to the door. My cloak hung there from a hook, and I tossed it over my shoulders, shuddering against the wind when I walked outside.

Loelle followed, pointing out a blackened stump very near her small wooden hut. Whatever it had been once, I couldn't tell. "If you can pull strength from a person, I believe you can pull a curse from this tree."

“When I pull strength, I become stronger.” My eyes darted to the tree. “What happens when I pull in a curse?”

Loelle sighed. “I think we both know. I’m so sorry, but there’s no other way.”

At first, I wanted to ask what she meant, but then I realized that I did know the answers to all my questions. All of them . . . except for the one I knew she would not answer: No other way to do what?

My only hope to find out was to move forward.

Loelle set my hands on the trunk of the dead, blackened tree, whispering into my ear, “Take the curse.”

It wasn’t about giving strength to the tree. I needed to pull the curse from its roots and stems and branches, drawing it into myself. As I focused on my task, Endrick’s curse immediately flooded through my veins, expanding into every hollow of my body. I felt its ugliness, all its hate and desire to control life and love and hope, and especially its will to control me. To consume me.

I tried to let go. Every instinct within me rebelled against what I was drawing to myself, but I’d become bound to the tree, trapped in place until the tree had emptied itself of its curse.

When it was over, I collapsed to the ground, Loelle at my side, waiting until I had recovered enough to open my eyes. Hoping to quell the pain, I curled into a ball and whispered, “No more of that, Loelle. Whatever Endrick did to that tree, that curse, it’s burning inside me.”

“Let it pass,” she replied. And slowly it did, the sharp burn fading into a small pit inside my chest, something cold and dead. As Loelle promised, after a few deep breaths, I began to feel strong again. Not just strong, but powerful in a way I had never experienced before,

that perhaps no one had ever experienced. When I nodded at her that I felt well enough to move on, she smiled and said, "Look up."

I did and was surprised to find the tree was changing, its withered black trunk becoming brown, bark forming around perfect, new wood. The branches were spreading, even regaining the leaves it must have once had at the time it was cursed. They fell to the ground beside me, as winter leaves must, but new leaves would return to this tree with the coming spring.

It was so beautiful, so hopeful, and so tangible in its healing that I suddenly realized I wanted to continue on in the work, despite its effects. After so much fighting, so much destruction caused by my powers, finally I could heal something, and add peace and promise to this land. And so I began, working for nearly a month to heal the forest.

Every day, moving from one area to another, I'd work for as long as my strength endured, emptying and refilling myself over and over. It never seemed like enough before I had to quit, but gradually, the pockets connected and the forest began to come to life. Birds could be heard in the distance, the ground softened, and snow began to fall again.

Sometime in those weeks, I also became more aware of the half-lives who lived here, the target of Lord Endrick's curse.

"Let me heal them too," I begged Loelle, every single day. "Darrow."

"We cannot, not yet" was her daily reply, with no further explanation.

Still, I continued, so focused on my work that I was becoming immune to the cold. I felt the chill in the air, but it no longer bothered

me. Rather, it was the heat from Loelle's evening fires that made me uncomfortable, so I began to sit near the door, leaving it cracked open enough that I could rest.

The evenings were most difficult. That was when my thoughts drifted toward Simon, wondering if he was still the Halderian king, wondering if he was now married to Harlyn Mindall. Wondering if he had ever tried to find me.

Then, one morning, I said to Loelle, "Simon was wrong about me getting magic."

Loelle looked up from a book she had been reading. "Oh? In what way?"

"He thought it would corrupt me, but consider all the good I've been able to do for these woods."

Loelle's smile saddened. "Yes, you've done what no one else could."

"Let me heal Darrow," I said. "I've earned that much."

"You have," Loelle said. "Soon, Kestra. I promise."

Soon. I would see my father again soon.

Until then, I had work to do.