

MAIDEN. MONSTER. MARTYR.

ONE
DARK
WINDOW

“An enchanting tale with
sharp claws and teeth.”

—ALLISON SAFT, author
of *A Far Wilder Magic*

RACHEL
GILLIG

ONE
DARK
WINDOW

Book One of The Shepherd King

RACHEL
GILLIG



orbitbooks.net

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Orbit

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

orbitbooks.net

First Edition: September 2022

Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2022940802

ISBNs: 9780316312486 (trade paperback), 9780316312585 (ebook)

E3-20220716-JV-NF-ORI

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To their dreams—and their nightmares.*

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PART I

The Cards





Chapter One

The infection comes as a fever in the night. If you take ill, watch the veins—the tributary of blood traveling down the arms. If they remain as they ever did, you have nothing to fear. If the blood darkens to an inky black, the infection has taken hold.

The infection comes as a fever in the night.

I was nine the first time the Physicians came to the house.

My uncle and his men were away. My cousin Ione and her brothers played loudly in the kitchen, and my aunt did not hear the pounding at the door until the first man in white robes was already in the parlor.

She did not have time to hide me. I was asleep, resting like a cat in the window. When she shook me awake, her voice was thick with fear. “Go to the wood,” she whispered, unlatching the window and gently pushing me through the casement to the ground below.

I did not fall onto warm summer grass. My head struck stone and I blinked, dizzy nausea casting dark shapes across my vision, my head haloed in red, sticky warmth.

I heard them in the house, their steps heavy with sinister intent.

Get up, called the voice in my head. *Get up, Elspeth.*

I pulled myself to a rickety stance, desperate for the tree line just beyond the garden. Mist enveloped me, and even though I did not have my charm in

my pocket, I ran toward the trees.

But the pain in my head was too great.

I fell again, blood seeping down my neck. *They're going to catch me*, I cried, my mind lost to fear. *They're going to kill me*.

No one's going to hurt you, child, he snarled. *Now get up!*

I tried. Fiercely, I tried. But the damage to my head was too great, and after five desperate steps—the edge of the wood so close I could smell it—I fell onto the dirt in a cold, lifeless faint.

I know now what happened next was not a dream. It couldn't have been. People don't dream when they faint. I didn't dream at all. But I don't know what else to call it.

In the dream, the mist seeped into me, thick and dark. I was in my aunt's garden, just as I had been a moment ago. I could see and hear—smell the air, feel the dirt beneath my head—but I was frozen, unable to move.

Help, I cried, my voice tiny. *Help me*.

Footsteps sounded in my mind, heavy and urgent. Tears slid down my cheeks. I winced but could not see, my vision blurry, like trying to see beneath seawater.

A sharp, angry pain ripped through my arms, my veins suddenly black as ink.

I screamed. I screamed until the world around me disappeared—my vision tunneling until everything had gone dark.

I woke under an alder tree, shielded by the mist and deep greenery of the wood. The pain in my veins was gone. Somehow, my head split open, I'd managed to make it to the tree line. I'd escaped the Physicians.

I was going to live.

My lungs swelled and I let loose a happy sob, my mind still fighting the ebb of panic that had threatened to overcome me.

It wasn't until I sat up that I felt the pain in my hands. I looked down. My palms were scratched and tattered, blood soaking my fingers where my nails, now embedded with soil, had broken. Around me, the earth was upturned, the grass disturbed. Something, or someone, had flattened it.

Something, or someone, had helped me crawl to safety through the mist.

He never told me how he'd moved my body, how he'd managed to save me that day. It remains one of his many secrets, unspoken, resting listlessly in the darkness we shepherd.

Still, it was the first time I stopped fearing the Nightmare—the voice in my head, the creature with strange yellow eyes and an eerie, smooth voice. Eleven years later, and I don't fear him at all.

Even if I should.



That morning I walked the forest road to meet Ione in town.

Gray clouds darkened my way and the path was slippery—thick with moss. The wood held its water, heavy and moist, as if to challenge the inevitable shift of season. Only the occasional dogwood stood in contrast to the emerald sheen, its red-orange hues bright against the mist, fiery and proud.

Birds fluttered beneath a box shrub, startled by my graceless gait, and flew upward in a flurry, the mist so thick their wings seemed to stir it. I tugged my hood over my brow and whistled a tune. It was one of his songs, one of many he hummed in the dark corners of my mind. Old, mournful, soft in the quiet din. It rang pleasantly in my ears, and when the final notes trilled out my lips onto the path, I was sorry to hear them go.

I pushed into the back of my head—feeling in the dark. When nothing answered, I pattered on down the road.

When my route became too muddy, I stepped into the wood and was delayed by a bramble of berries—black and juicy. Before I ate them, I took my charm, a crow's foot, from my pocket and twisted it, the mist that lingered at the edge of the road clinging to me.

Ants became ensnared in the sticky juice along my fingers. I flicked them away, the sharp taste of acid burning my tongue where I'd accidentally

ingested a few. I wiped my fingers on my dress, the dark wool so black it swallowed the stains whole.

Ione was waiting for me at the end of the road, just beyond the trees. We embraced and she took my arm, searching my face beneath the shadow of my hood.

“You didn’t step off the path, did you, Bess?”

“Only for a moment,” I said, facing the streets beyond.

We stood at the lip of Blunder, the web of cobbled streets and shops more fearsome to me than any dark forest. Folk bustled, human and animal noises loud in my ears after so many weeks at home in the wood. Ahead of us, a carriage hurried by, the sound of clacking hooves sharp against ancient street stones. A man three flights above splashed dirty water out his window, and some of it sprayed onto the hem of my black dress. Children cried. Women shouted and fretted. Merchants hollered their stock, and somewhere a bell chimed, Blunder’s crier chronicling the arrest of three highwaymen.

I sucked in a breath and followed Ione up the street. We slowed our pace to peer into merchant stalls—to run our fingers across new fabrics pulled out from behind shop windows. Ione paid a copper for a bundle of pink ribbon and smiled at the clerk, revealing the small gap between her front teeth. The sight of her warmed me. I felt great affection for Ione, my yellow-haired cousin.

We were so different, my cousin and I. She was honest—real. Her emotions were mapped on her face while mine hid behind carefully practiced composure. She was alive in every way, proclaiming her wants and fears and anything in between out loud, like a spell of gratitude. She carried an ease with her wherever she went, attracting people and animals. Even the trees seemed to sway in accordance with her step. Everyone loved her. And she loved them back. Even to her own detriment.

She didn’t pretend, Ione. She simply *was*.

I envied her that. I was a spooked animal, so rarely calm. I needed Ione—her shield of warmth and ease—especially on days like this, my nameday, when I visited my father’s house.

Far away, in the recesses of my mind, the sound of clicking teeth echoed, slow to stir. I ground my own teeth and clenched my fists, but it was no use—there was no controlling his comings and goings. A boy pushed past me, his eyes lingering a bit too long on my face. I gave him a false smile and turned away, running my hand over the taut muscles of my brow until I felt my expression go blank. It was a trick I had spent years perfecting in the looking glass—molding my face like clay until it bore the vague, demure look of someone who had nothing to hide.

I felt him watching Ione through my eyes. When he spoke, his voice was slick with oil. *Yellow girl, soft and clean. Yellow girl, plain—unseen. Yellow girl, overlooked. Yellow girl, won't be Queen.*

Hush, I said, turning my back to my cousin.

Ione did not know what the infection had done to me. At least, not the extent of it. No one did. Not even my aunt Opal, who'd taken me in when I was delirious with fever. At night, when my fever had burned, she'd muffled the doorjamb with wool and kept the windows shut lest I wake the other children with my cries. She'd given me sleeping drafts and covered my stinging veins with a poultice. She'd read to me from the books she'd once shared with my mother. She'd loved me, despite what it meant to harbor a child who'd caught the fever.

When I'd finally emerged from my chamber, my uncle and cousins had stared, searching me for any sign of magic—anything that might betray me.

But my aunt had been firm. I had indeed caught the fever so feared in Blunder, but that was an end to it—the infection had not granted me magic. Neither the Hawthorns nor my father's new family would be found guilty of associating with me so long as my infection remained a secret.

And I would keep my life.

That's how the best lies are told—with just enough truth to be convincing. For a time, I even found myself believing the lie—believing I had no magic. After all, I bore none of the obvious magical symptoms that so often accompanied the infection—no new abilities, no strange sensations. I grew giddy with delusion, thinking myself the only child to survive the infection

unscathed by magic.

But that was a time I tried not to remember—a time of innocence, before Providence Cards.

Before the Nightmare.

His voice faded to nothingness, the quiet shadow of his presence slipping back into darkness. My mind was my own again, the clamor of town swelling once more in my ears as I followed Ione past merchant shops onto Market Street.

Sharp echoes met us at the next bend. Someone was screaming. My neck snapped up. Ione reached for me. “Destriers,” she said.

“Or Orithe Willow and his Physicians,” I said, quickening our pace, scanning the street for white robes.

Another scream sounded, its shrill notes clinging to the hairs along the back of my neck. I turned my head toward the crowded cobbled square, but Ione pulled me away. The only thing I saw before we turned another corner was a woman, her mouth opened in a wordless wail, the sleeve of her cloak pulled back to reveal her veins, dark as ink.

A moment later she disappeared behind four men in black cloaks—Destriers, the King’s elite soldiers. The screams followed us as we hurried up Blunder’s twisting streets. By the time we reached the gate at Spindle House, Ione and I were both out of breath.

My father’s house was the tallest on the street. I stood at the gate, the screams still rattling through my mind. Ione, pink in her cheeks from the steep walk, smiled at the guard.

The great wooden gate pushed open, revealing a wide brick courtyard.

We entered, Ione ahead of me. At the center of the courtyard, crowded by sandstone, grew an ancient spindle tree planted by my grandfather’s grandfather. Unlike our crimson Spindle banner, the courtyard tree still clung to its deep green color, its narrow branches heavy with waxy leaves. I reached out to touch a leaf, careful of the row of small teeth around its edges. It was not a tall, regal tree, but it was old—gallant.

Next to the spindle tree, still small, unmaturing, was a whitebeam tree.