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THE KNIGHT AND THE MOTH

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RACHEL
GILLIG

THE
KNIGHT
AND THE
MOTH

The Stonewater Kingdom:
Book One

R A C H E L
G I L L I G



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*To the child in each of us, yearning to be special.
Take my hand, you strange little creature, and
together we shall walk beyond the wall.*

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Map by Tim Paul

Aisling Cathedral

ou know this story, Bartholomew, though you do not remember it. I'll tell it to you as best I can and promise to be honest in my talebearing. If I'm not, that's hardly my fault. To tell a story is in some part to tell a lie, isn't it?

Y Once, you came upon Traum's highest tor, where the wind whispered a minor tune. There, the gowan flowers were white and the stones were gray and both stole the warmth from your bare feet.

A cathedral was built there, and you tiptoed, small as an insect, through the narthex, into the nave, down the aisle. Blood stained your lips, and you fell into the spring that came from that ancient stone upon the chancel. When you looked up at the rose window, the light kissed stained glass. Your craft was obedience. You said the names of gods and how to read their signs. You learned how to dream—

And how to drown.

I'm sorry. I don't care to go back to this part of the story either, Bartholomew. But I so often wonder...

Could the rest exist without it?

CHAPTER ONE

SIX MAIDENS UPON A WALL



he peculiar gargoyle, who spoke mostly in broken parables, shuffled to the dim corner of the ambulatory. There, strung between iron candlesticks, a spider's web held a fly captive.

The gargoyle wagged a limestone finger at the fly, his craggy voice echoing through the cathedral. "Serves you right. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, watch where you are going. Now"—he leaned close and peered at the web—"hold still. I'm going to extract you from this snare."

He did not extract the fly. He went on, lecturing the poor insect on the dangers of flight. Had the fly been capable of reason, it might have concluded it was better to die in the clutches of a spider than be the subject of this particular gargoyle's attentions. But the fly could not speak, and thus uttered no complaint. It just kept on buzzing, and the gargoyle kept on talking—

And that was how I was able to slip from the pew I was dusting to watch the king ride up the hill.

Into the nave I ran, bare feet slapping against stone, then I was out of the cathedral, accosted by the sunset, its light filtering through the gossamer shroud I wore around my eyes.

The gravel courtyard was empty, visiting hours at an end. The only figures present were five limestone statues. Five faceless, hooded figures. They stood nigh ten spans high, their ancient arms held open in beckoning. All five were identical but for their left hands—each clasping a distinct stone object. One statue held a coin, another an inkwell. One bore an oar, another a chime, and the final a loom stone.

I wove between the statues on tiptoe, touched by the pervasive fear that I would anger them if I wandered too loudly. But they were mere stone, tendering neither ire nor love. Still, they watched me through the darkness of their hoods, predatory in their stillness. I felt them, just as I felt Aisling Cathedral's gaze—with its eyes of stained glass—silent and ancient and disapproving, upon my back.

I hurried on.

The courtyard gave way to grass, and stone was replaced by an orchard of gnarled fruit trees. It was late summer, and blood-red apples hung in clusters. I raised a hand above my head and ripped one from its branch without breaking my stride. When I broke through the orchard, a long stone wall stood ahead of me. Upon it—

Five maidens waited.

They wore the same pale fabric as I did, their eyes shrouded with identical gossamer. Perched high upon old stones, bathed in sunset light, their dresses caught the wind. They looked like five flags of surrender, there upon the wall.

As if sensing their last counterpart, the women turned as I approached. The tallest, who'd waved at me from the cathedral doors and hissed, *It's the bloody king!* cupped her hands around her mouth and hollered. "Hurry!"

I put the apple between my teeth and pressed calloused fingers onto old stones. Twelve spans high and fraught with lichen, the wall was difficult to scale. But nearly ten years can make a master out of anyone—the stones were a familiar adversary.

I hauled myself up. The women made room for me, and I swung a leg over and straddled the wall. "You're sure it's him?"

Two—I didn't know her name, only her number—tall and solemn, pointed a finger over the vista. "I saw purple banners beyond that bluff. Swear it on my mother."

"Might mean a bit more if you had a mother," Three muttered.

"Give it a moment," Two said, spine like a rod. "You'll see that I'm right."

Next to me, Five pushed her orange hair out of her face. The wind shoved it right back. "Are you going to share?" she said, nodding at my apple.

I offered the fruit up. "It's not very sweet."

"Blech." She made a face and threw the apple over the wall. It fell with a thud onto the side of the road—a red pinprick among greenery. "How can you eat that?"

"I suppose we'll never know."

On my other side, Four twisted a fistful of wild black curls. She rested an arm on my shoulder, and our gazes met. Or I assumed they did. It was impossible to tell, with the shroud that covered their faces from their brows to the bridge of their noses, where any of the women were truly looking. I did not know their names, and I did not know the color of their eyes.

I did not know the color of *my* eyes.

"I'll be damned." A smile crept over Four's lips. "Here he comes."

We turned. There, from the east, peeking out from knolls of green—
Purple banners.

I squinted. Seeing through my shroud was akin to peering through steam off a kettle. But the tor upon which the cathedral sat was so high and Traum's hills so sprawling and the air so clear that it was no trouble working out the details of King Castor's procession the moment the hills spat it into view.

There were nearly two dozen of them—bannermen and squires and knights. What a display they made. Daylight danced over their armor and the noise of them caught the wind, sounding over the tor in echoes, distorting their words into a false translation. Even at a distance I could see which one was King Benedict Castor. His armor was not the same silvery iron as his knights' but gilt, as if he were the sun and they a cluster of lesser

stars.

It was my first time, seeing the boy-king.

The procession dipped behind a roll in the tor. In ten minutes, it would pass directly beneath the wall where we, like expectant sparrows, perched.

One tapped her chin. "That's a lot of knights just for a Divination."

Four grinned. "Lucky for us."

"I hear this king is a child," Three said in her usual flat way, like she was reading the words instead of speaking them. "That he shakes at his own shadow. Perhaps he fancied protection in spooky old Aisling."

"Swords and armor mean nothing here," I whispered to the wind.

The others nodded.

"On that note—" One reached into the shapeless billows of her dress and extracted six stalks of straw. "Gather, shrews."

We let out a collective groan, then shifted on the wall. When we'd finished moving, Two stood directly in front of One and her fistful of straw. The game was simple.

Don't get the short straw.

Two examined the straws, plucking a long straw from the center of the bundle. One pulled from the edge—another long straw. They kept pulling until only a pair of straws remained. After a pause, One took her turn. Yanked her chosen straw free—

And grinned. "The short straw goes to you, Two."

Two's chin was high as she looked down the line of us. "Get over here, Three."

The rounds of the game continued. Two defeated Three and smugly went to stand next to One while the rest of us bit our nails and waited for our turns. Three defeated Four, and so did Five.

By the time Four faced me, her final opponent, she was as rigid as a tin soldier.

Shuffling to a dance only we knew, we rotated along the wall, the sounds from the king's procession growing louder. Four held the straws in a stranglehold and nodded at me. "You first."

I studied the frayed yellow edges and chose a long straw.

So did Four. Horses whickered and knights laughed in the near distance. I chose again, another long straw. Another for Four, too.

“The final straws.” Three let out a low whistle. “Worried you’ll be too sick to flirt, Four?”

“Shut up.” Four jerked her chin at me. “Go on.”

I knew what she was thinking. It’s what all of us were thinking. Why we’d played the same game a hundred times before.

I don’t want to be the one to dream.

Wind stirred my cropped silver-blond hair, but my eyes did not leave the straws. The distinct pattern in their tattered yellow tips. “This one.”

The women all leaned forward, and the straws were revealed. Two let out a laugh. “You’re a lucky bitch, Four.”

I’d chosen the short straw.

Four’s laugh was coated in relief. “Just as well, Six. You’re the *favorite*. You never thrash in the water.”

I took the straw into my toughened palm, the little thing ugly and brittle, then plopped to a seat on the wall just as the procession’s first riders came into view.

The first, riding a pale warhorse with nary a grass stain upon its flank, was the king.

Benedict Castor did not ride with an iron spine the way I’d seen his predecessor, King Augur—gray of eye, gray of hair, cold and disinterested—did. Indeed, King Castor seemed slightly bent in his saddle, creaking in his armor as if unaccustomed to its grip, like a squire playing dress-up. His cheeks were round and his jaw naked. I wondered if he even needed to shave.

“Imagine,” Five said, “seventeen and chosen by the knighthood to protect the faith. Seventeen, and already a king.”

“Everything in the world to prove,” One murmured, looking down at him.

King Castor passed beneath us and did not look up, unaware that he was being watched. But when Four sighed, the king’s bannerman lifted his gaze.