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ONE
DARK

WINDOW

Book One of The Shepherd King

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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.

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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 busied, 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 white-beam tree.

On the north side of the courtyard stood the stables, and to the south, the armory. We ventured to neither, our path straight. When we reached the stone steps at the front of the house, I took a breath and fixed my expression once more, knocking three times on the great oak door.

My father's steward greeted us. "Good afternoon," Balian said, his brown eyes narrowing as they crossed mine. He, like

the other servants in my father's house, had learned long ago to be wary of the eldest Spindle child.

It had been a year since my last visit. Still, the dull colors of the house were familiar, the tapestries and rugs unchanged. Balian lit a candle, and Ione and I followed him past the dark cherry staircase with the long, winding banister. I did not reflect on how I had loved sliding down that banister as a girl, nor how the house had remained the same since then.

I did not reflect on much at all.

Balian opened the rounded door to the parlor. I could smell the hearth before I felt it, the rich scent of cedar tickling my nose. Inside, my stepmother, Nerium, and my twin half sisters, Nya and Dimia, rose from cushioned chairs.

The twins had the decency to smile, identical dimples carved into their rounded cheeks. I could see my father in their faces, particularly because their mother, Nerium, did not have a face made for easy smiles. My stepmother looked down her delicate nose at me, twisting the ends of her waist-length white hair around her thin, gnarled fingers.

She had all the appearance of a beautiful vulture, perched in her favorite chair. She sat, watching me with keen blue eyes, measuring whether I was worthy enough to consume.

Ione stepped into the room first, blocking Nerium's view of me.

I embraced Nya and Dimia, my half sisters careful not to press their bodies too close to mine. When Balian closed the door, Ione and I took our seats upon the richly upholstered chairs near the fire, my seat nearest to the hearth.

It was so routine it felt rehearsed.

A vase of deep violet irises sat on the small table beside my chair. I ran my fingers over the petals, careful not to bruise them. There were always irises in the parlor.

"Such a lackluster flower," Nerium said, watching me, her

eyes narrowing as they slid over the irises. "I can't understand what your father sees in them."

My insides knotted. Like most things Nerium said to me, there was an undertone of malice in her soft, well-chosen words. My father kept irises in the house for a simple reason.

Iris had been my mother's name.

"I think they're lovely," Ione said, offering me a smile, then shooting my stepmother a venomous glance.

Dimia, who often laughed when she had no idea what was happening, let out a nervous giggle. "You look well," she said, leaning close to Ione. "Is that a new dress?"

Across the hearth, I felt Nya's eyes on me, as if I were a book she had been instructed not to read. When I challenged her gaze, she turned away, her expression guarded.

My half sisters did not love me. Or, if they did, they were long out of practice. At thirteen, born seven years my junior, Dimia and Nya were identical in almost every way, indistinguishable but for the pale birthmark just below Nya's left ear. They'd watched me all my life with mirrored expressions of cautious curiosity, reserving kindness only for each other.

I exchanged empty words with Dimia, heat from the hearth hardly touching me. She told me they'd been invited to celebrate Equinox at Stone, the King's castle.

"I love Equinox," Dimia said, her voice louder than her mother's or sister's. She took a buttered biscuit from the end table, her blue eyes dreamy. When she spoke, crumbs flew from her lips. "The music—the dancing—the games!"

"Not all the games are enjoyable," Nya said, wiping a crumb from the corner of her twin's lip. "Remember what happened last year?"

Nerium's nostrils flared. Ione frowned. Dimia picked at the hem of her sleeve.

I stared blankly. I did not remember—I had not attended.

“High Prince Hauth likes to play games of truth with his Chalice Card,” Nerium explained, not bothering to look at me. “A fight broke out between him and one of the other Destriers—Jespyr Yew, I believe. Though why the King has a woman in his service, I cannot understand—”

Your father is coming.

So abrupt I jumped, the Nightmare’s voice slid from the darkness, moving directly behind my eyes—urgent. *Can’t you see it?*

I held completely still, letting my eyelids fall. There, in the darkness, growing brighter, a royal-blue light: a Providence Card—the Well Card. It looked like a sapphire beacon, floating above the ground, no doubt stowed in my father’s pocket. Like other Providence Cards, the Well was the size of any playing card, no bigger than my closed fist. It was hemmed by an ancient velvet.

It was the velvet that gave off the light, a light only I could see. Or rather, a light only the creature in my mind could see.

The Well Card had been my mother’s dowry, worth as much gold as all of Spindle House. It was one of twelve different Providence Cards that made up the Deck. Chronicled in our ancient text, *The Old Book of Alders*, Providence Cards were not only Blunder’s greatest treasures but also the only legal way of performing magic. Anyone could use them—all it took was touch and intention. Clear your mind, hold a Card in your hand, tap it three times, and the Card was yours to wield. Pocket the Card or place it elsewhere, the magic would still hold. Three more taps, or the touch of another person, and the flow of magic would halt.

But use a Card too long, and the consequences were dire.

They were exceptionally rare, Providence Cards, their number finite. As a child, I had been afforded only glimpses at them.

And I’d only ever touched one.

I shivered, the feel of velvet tickling my memory. The blue light from my father’s Well Card grew stronger. When the door opened, the light spilled into the parlor, a beacon glowing from the breast pocket of his doublet.

Erik Spindle. Master of one of Blunder’s oldest houses. Tall, severe, fearsome. Most grievous of all, he had once been Captain of the very men called to hunt down those who carried magic—like myself.

Destrier, down to his very bones.

But he was more than a soldier to me. He was my father. Like Spindles before him, he was a man of few words. When he chose to speak, his voice was deep, sharp, like the jagged stones that lingered in shadow beneath a drawbridge. His hair was streaked with silver, fastened at his neck with a leather strip. Like Nerium, his jaw did not lend to easy smiles. But when he glanced my way, the sharp corners of his blue eyes softened.

“Elsbeth,” he said. He pulled his hand from behind his back. There, painfully delicate in his calloused fist, was a bouquet of wildflowers. Yarrow. “Happy nameday.”

Something in my chest tugged. Even after all these years—the death of my mother, my infection—he always gave me yarrow on my nameday. “The fairest of all yarrow”—that’s what he called me as a child.

I stood from the bench and approached him, the blue light in his pocket glaring at me. When he slipped the yarrow into my hand, the smell of the woods touched my nose. He must have picked it this morning.

I tried not to look him in the eye too long. It would only make us both uncomfortable. “Thank you.”

“We were going to meet you in the hall,” my stepmother said to my father, a pinch in her voice. “Is something the matter?”

My father's expression gave nothing away. "I came to say hello to my own daughter in my own house, Nerium. Is that all right with you?"

Nerium's jaw snapped shut. Ione covered her mouth to hide her snicker.

I almost smiled. It felt better than it should, hearing my father stick up for me. But stronger than the tug at the corner of my lips was a dull, aged pain, knotted deep in my chest, reminding me of the truth, ever present, between us.

He hadn't always stuck up for me.

Balian poked his balding head into the parlor. "Dinner is ready, my lord. Roasted duck."

My father gave a sharp nod. "Shall we go into the hall?"

My half sisters quit the parlor, followed by my father. Ione went next, and I a pace behind.

Nerium caught me at the door, her slim fingers digging into my arm. "Your father wishes you to attend Equinox with us this year," she whispered, her s coming out a hiss. "Which of course you will not."

My eyes lowered to her hand on my arm. "Why 'of course,' Nerium?"

Her blue eyes narrowed. "Last time you attended, as I recall, you made a fool of yourself with that boy, whose mother, I'll have you know, came calling more than once, hoping to meet you."

I grimaced. I'd almost forgotten about Alyx. It had been years. "You could have told her where I really lived."

"And have people asking why your father sent you away?" The wrinkles around her lips deepened. "We have a happy arrangement, Elspeth. You stay away from court, quiet and out of sight, and your father pays the Hawthorns—handsomely, I might add—to keep you."

Keep me. Like I was a horse at my uncle's stable. I ripped my arm out of her grasp. Whatever appetite I had was gone. I looked over my stepmother's shoulder for Ione, but she had already gone into the great hall.

"I suddenly don't have the stomach for duck," I said through my teeth. I pushed away from my stepmother, slamming the parlor door on my way out. "You'll give my excuses, I'm sure."

I could practically hear the smile in Nerium's soft, wicked voice. "I always do."

I kept my composure until I was out of Spindle House. Then, only once the great doors were closed behind me did I let myself cry.

I kept my head down, eyes hot with tears, and traveled on hurried step all the way to the old church on the cusp of town, granting respite to my ailing lungs only once I was alone on empty streets.

Bent over my knees, I coughed, anger and hurt banging loud discord across my chest.

The Nightmare twisted in the darkness, like a wolf stamping grass before lying down upon it. *Pity we had to go*, he said. *I was so enjoying the rousing conversation of beloved Nerium.*

I kept walking, kicking a stone with the toe of my boot until it was lost in the tall grass that grew along the ridge between the road and the river. *You'll see her again soon enough.*

And will you scurry off with your tail tucked beneath you once more? You'd have me stay after that? I bit back.

Yes. Because running, dear one, is exactly what she wants from you. It's easier this way—to avoid them. I heaved a breath. *To run. It's in my nature. Besides,* I added, my voice hollow, *my father wouldn't have abandoned me eleven years ago if he truly wished for my company. You know that—why bother taunting me?*

His laughter dripped like water down the walls of a cavern,

echoing, then fading into hollow silence. *Because that, my dear, is MY nature.*

I sat by the river, reveling in the smooth sound of rushing water. I picked at the yarrow, pinching the tiny yellow petals off one by one. I bought an apple and a wedge of sharp cheese from a peddler, and I stayed by the water until the light behind the mist was low in the sky. Some small hope told me Ione might leave my father's house early to follow me—that we might walk the forest road together—but the bell chimed seven times and she had not come.

I plaited my hair into a thick braid and brushed the dirt off my bottom, casting one last look up the road into town before clutching the crow's foot in my pocket and entering the wood.

Chapter Two



It began the night of the great storm. The wind blew the shutters of my casement open, sharp flashes of lightning casting grotesque shadows across my bedroom floor. The stairs creaked as my father climbed on tiptoe, my handmaid's cries still ripping through the corridors as she fled. When he came to my door, I was unmoving, delirious, my veins dark as tree roots. He pulled me from the narrow frame of my childhood bed and cast me into a carriage.

I awoke two days later in the wood, in the care of my aunt Opal.

When the fever broke, I woke every day at dawn to inspect my body for any new signs of magic. But the magic did not come. I