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THE
KNIGHT
AND THE
MOTH

The Stonewater Kingdom:
Book One

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Aisling Cathedral

You 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?

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



The 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.

"Incessant buzzing." 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. When he saw us upon the wall, his eyes went wide. *Diviners*, he mouthed, though no sound came out. Then, bolder, he called to the knights behind him. “Six maidens upon the wall. Diviners!”

There was a loud shuffle—whickering horses.

The knights rode into view. There were women as well as men within their ranks—all variant in appearance. Some had the distinguished pale hair of the Cliffs of Bellidine, or the sharp, angled features of those who lived near the Fervent Peaks. One knight, axe slung over her shoulder, had charcoal painted around her eyes, distinctive to the Chiming Wood.

“Diviner,” a knight called, raising the visor of his helmet. He was looking up at Four. “Beautiful mystic. I have slain sprites—defended the Omens and the faith. Pray, for my glad devotion, lend a kiss.”

More knights craned their necks, took off their helmets, to survey us better. Some said the knight’s creed in greeting, others threw gowan flowers and pleaded—oh, how they pleaded—for our attention, our words, our kisses, though the wall was too high and we were more satisfied to watch them beg than to offer up our lips.

I leaned forward and tried to see their eyes. The abbess and the five women with me upon the wall all wore shrouds. Besides visitors to the cathedral, the only eyes I regularly glimpsed belonged to the gargoyles. And they, fashioned of stone, were like looking upon the cathedral itself. Astounding to behold—and entirely lifeless.

The bells began to ring.

The king’s procession thinned, the last of the knights riding beneath us. The Diviners moved along the wall with practiced balance to follow, but I remained seated.

I opened my hand and let the broken pieces of the short straw dance away, caught by a fickle northern wind. The cathedral bells

kept ringing, insistent in their peals. I pushed to my feet to heed them, preparing myself for what came next—

A horse whickered from below.

Stalled on the road, a final knight remained. His horse had come to a full stop and was chewing noisily on something it had found in the greenery beside the road.

My apple.

The knight tried to spur the animal on, but the horse, grunting its contentedness, was having a love affair with the apple. It did not budge.

A muffled string of profanity sounded beneath an armored helmet. The knight shifted in his saddle at the din of the cathedral bells, tilting his head upward—affording me a view of the dark slit in his visor from which he surveyed the world.

There was no seeing his eyes. No way for him to glimpse mine through my shroud. Still, I felt it, somewhere between my stomach and throat, the instant he spotted me on the wall.

His shoulders went rigid. Slowly, he reached for his helmet. Removed it. There was a mess of black hair. He shoved it from his face, and I drew in a breath.

Sharp features. Dark brows. A prominent nose. His skin was olive, golden from sun, yet there was no warmth in his face. Light caught along three gold bands pierced into his right ear. Severe, rimmed in charcoal, his eyes were so brown they might easily be mistaken for black.

There was no warmth in them, either.

He watched me, his gaze wide—then immediately narrow. Slowly, his mouth twisted into a sneer, its meaning unmistakable.

What the hell are you looking at?

The other knights had all smiled at me, unchallenging and awe-struck and reverent. This one, it seemed, had no such compulsion. “Knight,” I called. “You lot make quite the spectacle. Is the king so fretful that he requires the company of his entire knighthood for a Divination?”

The knight's gaze remained tight. He said nothing.

"I asked if your king—"

"Between our two lots, mine is hardly the spectacle."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

He issued no clarification, his armor creaking as he continued to measure me with unfriendly eyes.

I straightened, looming over him like one of the cathedral's spires. "A respectable knight would just as soon bite off his own tongue than speak to a daughter of Aisling like that."

He pressed his lips together, like I'd told him a joke at my own expense.

A craggy voice called behind me. "Bartholomew!"

I whirled. In the orchard, touched by the looming shadow of the cathedral, was the same peculiar gargoyle I'd left in the ambulatory. He called to me again. "Get down at once, Bartholomew. We are needed inside."

I glanced back at the road. The knight had managed to spur his horse and was riding fast to catch up to the others.

I frowned at his receding figure.

"I say, Bartholomew, can you hear me?" The gargoyle brandished a chastising finger. "Climb down this instant—"

"I heard you, I heard you." I grasped the edge of the wall and lowered myself until my bare feet touched grass.

There were twenty-three gargoyles at Aisling Cathedral, and no two alike. Composed of limestone, they bore an unsettling combination of human and animal qualities, most fitted with wings and the gift of flight. This one had a protruding brow, fangs, claws, and wings like a bat carved behind his back, though I'd never seen him fly because, apparently, *the skies are feckless, and it would be an insult beyond recovery to be mistaken for a bird.*

But as much as they were distinct, the gargoyles were also all alike. They all bore a strange allegiance to Aisling Cathedral, dedicated to the tor and always minding the abbess, as if *of* the cathedral. They grunted, but rarely spoke.

Save this one.

I approached, my hands out in supplication. When it came to this particular gargoyle, who called everyone and everything *Bartholomew* for no discernable reason, it was better to be contrite. When he took to sulking, it lasted for days. “Apologies,” I said. When I stood next to him, his brow was at my shoulder. “I was chastising an idiot.”

“A happy pastime, as you’ve proven to me on many occasions. But, the king is upon us, with nary a warning. The utter gall of men.” He rolled his stone eyes. “Have you chosen among yourselves who will dream in the spring?”

“I will.”

“Very good.” He held out his claw-tipped hand. “Hurry.”

He led me back through the gnarled apple orchard. We hastened through the courtyard, past the statues, returning, as if reeled back by a lure, to the cathedral.

Day was succumbing to night when we reached the tall oaken doors. The abbess was there, waiting. I could not see her face, nor any of her skin. Her shroud, a pale curtain that stretched to her chin, covered her face entirely, and her hands were protected in white silken gloves. It was only the tightness of her fists at her side, the note of ice in her voice, that gave her dissatisfaction away.

“It seems the *king* has come for an unexpected Divination. Benedict Castor the Third.”

She said his name quickly, like something bitter she wished to spit out. Apparently the abbess did not think much of the new boy-king. Wind rippled over her shroud. “You will be dreaming, Six?”

“Yes.”

A low *bmm* of approval sounded in her throat, and I felt my chest swell. The abbess touched my cheek, stepped aside so that the gargoyle and I could pass into the narthex, then closed the cathedral doors behind us.

Aisling Cathedral was dark. Cold. Its stagnant air smelled of limestone and mahogany—but not enough to mask the sickly-sweet odor of rotting flowers that came from within.