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THE

KNAVE

AND THE

MOON

The Stonewater Kingdom:
Book Two

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



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The End of the Story

You know this story, Bartholomew, though you do not know all of it. I'll tell it to you as best I can and promise to be honest in my talebearing. If I'm not, that would be all right. A story is a kind of spectacle, I think. A strange, shimmering display. How you look at it determines its meaning—it is not for me to say if belief inspired by spectacle should be counted as honest.

Once, a creature lay naked upon fields of brome-grass, and the world grew around her. Her mind was full of knowledge, her limbs swollen with strength, her heart beating a contented rhythm. She looked up at the moon and the moon looked down at her and they were the same: ever-changing, always constant.

But the world shifted. She, who had never been truly known, was revered, then desired. Stories echoed, and suddenly folk of the land felt entitled to her life; it was not long before they took it. Her flesh was eaten, her bones chipped away, her blood swallowed in thirsty gulps. When she cried out, the song was a minor tune. It caught the wind and has ridden it ever since. There was naught for her to do but to lay still, to wait.

To dream.

I'm sorry. I don't care to go back to this part of the story either, Bartholomew, but I must. To know the world is, in some part, to mourn it, and what is the past, really, if not a portent? If I don't tell you what occurred exactly as I know it...

It could all happen again.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NIGHT AISLING FELL



I had no hammer, no chisel, just the bareness of my palms and the bloodstains upon them.

The knights put me on a horse and ripped me from the tor. We rode down the holloway road, that tunnel of trees and brambles, with a haste so thundering it sent owls screeching and darting from the branches above. Vines lashed my armor. The road was a dark throat, swallowing our party down until it spat us back out among fields speckled with brightly dyed tents.

Coulson Faire's pyres were not lit. Our horses clattered down the road, dirt and grass giving way to cobblestones, then the wooden slats of a drawbridge.

Ahead, a castle loomed.

Purple banners caught the wind. We crossed the drawbridge and dismounted in the bailey, and two knights took me by the arms. They did not have an easy time of it getting me off the horse.

Guards straightened their backs as we approached the castle doors. They wore helmets and chainmail, and bore spears with leaf-shaped blades—small enough to throw, short enough for close combat. "Diviner," they whispered as I approached.

"There's blood upon her," another said. "Should we call for

the surgeon, sire?"

"No." The king pressed forward, stripping his gauntlets and throwing them on the bailey stones. "It's not her blood."

He was just about to step into the castle when I called after him. "Benji."

He didn't turn.

"Benedict."

The king's golden head lowered. Still, he kept his eyes forward except to mutter to one of his knights. "Put her where we discussed."

Castle Luricht's doors banged open.

It did not take me long to lose myself in the labyrinthian space. There were too many turns, too many stairs, too many suits of armor and faded purple rugs—and the knights at my side walked too quickly. I lost sight of Benji, and three guards took up my watch, leading me up one, two, three more staircases, then a ladder, then through a trapdoor, down a long hall and—

My throat closed. We reached an iron door that stretched the entire height of the corridor. And I knew with raw assuredness, like I knew when I was going to vomit, where I was. "Here?"

"That's what His Majesty said," a guard answered. "Somewhere out of the way. Safe."

They unlocked the door and ushered me in. "We'll be outside, Diviner," another said. "Should you need anything."

I stared at him until he could no longer stand it. The door was shut. Locked.

The room was long, hollow, the air thick within it. Situated on the top floor of the castle, where dampness from baths and laundry came from below and rain seeped in from above, the space was clammy, the wood planks beneath my feet supple. Fleshlike.

There were no furnishings, just mottled stains upon the floor. Without hearth or torches, the only light that touched the room came from the single barred window on the south wall. Behind it, a bare finger of silver gleamed, the moon's aura smothered by clouds, its vibrancy choked.

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I stared out the window. When the clouds thickened and the moon was gone, I rolled my wrists. My shoulders.

And began to cough. “Guards.”

Footsteps rattled outside my door. I clambered forward, lowering my hands to my knees as I peered like a thief through the door’s keyhole. Beyond, three shadows moved.

I coughed louder. Wet, choking sounds. “Please. I’m—sick. Need water.”

Iron grated against iron, and a key slid into the lock. When the door opened, revealing the three guards with spears, I swayed on my feet. Took a tumbling step forward.

And hit the first guard on the chin with the heel of my palm, knocking his head back.

He gasped—tottered—tripped on his own feet and fell. The second guard began to shout. A knee to the groin, an elbow to the jaw, and he joined his companion on the floor, wheezing and groaning.

The third guard managed to raise his spear—but not before my hand was a shackle upon his wrist. I twisted it, and he cried out. “Please. Don’t hurt me.”

“Drop your weapon.”

He did. When I asked the guard for his key, it didn’t matter that his spear was on the ground—he gave me what I asked for as if I’d held its tip to his throat.

“Go into the room,” I said. “Take your friends with you.”

By the arms, the ankles, the guard brought his groaning comrades into the room in turn, muttering what sounded like prayers to the Artful Brigand. When I laughed, putting the key into the lock, he looked up, eyes full of fear. “Diviner?”

“This room was his haunt. The Artful Brigand’s.” My laugh edged away, lost in a chill that took hold of my entire body. “He can’t hear you now.”

I slammed the door shut. Locked it.

And ran.

Once, in Aisling Cathedral, I’d walked on tiptoe, afraid to make the barest echo upon the cold stone floors. Now my boots pounded

and my armor rattled, the sound of me immense, the mightiness of my body my final companion.

On into darkness I went, treading the same floor that the Artful Brigand, that wretched beast—that *Omen*—had once walked. Now a new kind of false god walked the path, and, if tonight went to plan, a far worse beast.

Me.



I didn't know where to go, only that it must be *down*.

I raised the trapdoor and climbed down the ladder beneath it, then two flights of stairs, and suddenly I was in the heart of the castle, where the air was colder, the torchlight stronger, the walls decorated and the carpets intricately woven. I was indifferent to it all, my sights swinging from wall to wall—not for their adornments, but for a sign of something.

Of someone.

One flight, then another, I descended. Below, voices echoed, the castle full of verve despite the hour. Then, four flights below the Artful Brigand's room, I came upon a corridor. There the curtains were wider, thicker, finer: a richer shade of purple. Even the air smelled better—aromatic, like citrus paired with herbs and meat fat. Those things alone might have told me I was in the right place.

That and the guards.

There were two of them, armed and pacing near the gilt door at the end of the corridor. Unfocused, slouched and playing with the straps of their leathers, they did not see me. Not at first. Then I came forward, my steps so heavy they rattled the walls, making the torches jump and the portraits quiver.

The guards snapped to attention, knuckles white on their spears. "Who is it?" said the one on the left.

"Where is the king?" I asked back.

"Abed. He aims to rest—Oh. Diviner."

Their eyes went wide, the first guard's jaw so loose I glimpsed

dark holes where he'd lost several teeth. The second guard, who seemed equally incapable of forming words, stared fervently into my eyes until his own began to water.

"Open the door," I told them.

"You should not be about," said the second guard. "The king bade us to keep you secure atop the castle; it is not safe for you to wander unprotected. Let us take you back—"

"Open. The. Door."

The first of the two fumbled with the latch, his hands useless as hooves, until the door opened as meekly as the lid to a music box. The guards cowered back into shadow, watching me as folk always watched Diviners in the Stonewater Kingdom: awestruck and afraid.

I slipped behind the door.

There was a wide hearth, a dark mantel, and dying embers—I could barely make out the shapes in the room. Carved furnishings. Walls with carefully crafted molding. There was a mirror, as tall and twice as wide as my body. When I passed it, my silver hair and armor looked like the moon had in the sky—a smudge of light in a despotic, infinite darkness.

No sound came but the beat of my heart. Then, in the center of the room, from a bed so huge it looked like a slumbering bear, I heard little snores. Fitful breathing.

Benedict Castor the Third rested on the bed. His golden hair was dark, freshly washed, and his eyes tightly shut. He lay like I imagined he would, curled in on himself as if to protect his vital organs. Shirtless, his bare shoulder peeked from beneath several thick quilts, and his skin was covered in gooseflesh. For a moment I thought about pulling the quilts up and covering him.

I ripped them away instead.

The king shuddered, holding tighter to himself, his eyes shooting open. "Who's there?"

I leaned over him like a serpent over a nest of delicate blue eggs. "Who do you think, Benji?"

For the briefest moment, Benji's muscles eased. A second later they were taut. "You startled me. Your eyes. I thought you were—"

“An Omen?”

He sat up. Held the blankets close. “How did you get in here?”

“I walked.”

Slowly, Benji’s left hand slipped beneath his pillow. “Did you kill the guards?”

“They cowed well enough.”

There was no more light in the room. The last ember in the king’s fire had died. “What do you—” Benji’s voice trembled. “What do you want, Diviner?”

“For you to look me in the eye. One last time.”

When he did, I saw a world in vivid blue waiting behind Benedict Castor’s eyes. I had no hammer, no chisel, to put to that world, only my sorrow, my fury, and so with bloodstained hands, inevitable as the serpent over the nest—

I struck.

The king shouted, but I already had him by the throat. Benji grasped my wrist. Twisted it. When that did not work, he withdrew his hand and struck me over the arm. “Please don’t,” came his choked entreaty. His voice was desperate, a frayed piece of string. “*Please*.”

My grip on his neck tightened. But then—his eyes. Gods. Those eyes.

The king had begun to cry. He looked up at me, searching for pity, for more wrath—I didn’t know—but it was as if I was peering through time at the boy who’d come to Aisling Cathedral, small and afraid. Who’d sat me down and told me the truth of Traum, of the Omens. Who’d put power in my hands and harnessed it.

The king, the boy, who always seemed to look up to me, was looking up to me still.

But then he struck me again, his fist finding the crook of my arm. Benji hit me once, twice, thrice, until my conviction fell away. I let go of his throat, and for a moment neither of us did anything but struggle to breathe.

“You should have killed me, too.” Despair pressed itself upon me with bruising force. “You should have *killed* me.”

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"You're already dead, Six," Benji whispered. "That's what makes you so special."

The king pulled a stone coin from beneath his pillow. Tossed it into the air—

And vanished.

The door burst open.

The guards from my room and the two from outside shoved their way into the chambers. Behind them, armor glistening, stood a pair of knights. A woman with a pinched face and dark eyes, and a man with sand-colored hair and perfect teeth.

Tory Bassett and Hamelin Fischer took in the room, then turned their gazes on me. Tory's dark eyes narrowed, and Hamelin held out his arm, the guards around him cowering. "Lost, Diviner?"

The two of them returned me to the top of the castle. Tory did not touch me, but Hamelin reached out every ten or so steps to softly graze my elbow. A reminder that he was there. A threat.

They led me up the final stairs to the highest floor. "You were as docile as a lamb all the way here." Hamelin's laugh rumbled behind me. "A ruse, I see."

I stepped into the Artful Brigand's room, keeping my back to him. Hamelin slammed the door shut, closing the three of us in together.

"That was foolish," Tory said, clipped. "Waltzing around the castle. You're an important woman—what if something had happened to you?"

I gave them nothing but my rigid spine.

"Benedict gathered the knights and told them everything a few hours ago." Hamelin's voice was close to my ear. "He told us that *sprites* attacked the cathedral, killing its abbess, its gargoyles, its Diviners. He said, before she died, the abbess gifted him five magical objects, all different in variety; tokens of gods that he used to reduce the sprites to pieces."

His voice went low. "He also said that with Aisling gone, the spring buried, the only way to reach the Omens now is to look into your stone eyes."

My stillness must have aggravated him, because Hamelin's tone