

TWO
TWISTED
CROWNS

RACHEL
GILLIG

Digital Galley Edition

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Ravyn stepped forward, the cell's iron bars like icicles beneath his hands. "I know you can hear me."

Laughter echoed in the dark. The figure in the cell sat up slowly and turned. It took all of Ravyn not to wince. Elspeth's black eyes were gone. In their place, catlike irises, vivid and yellow, lit by a man five hundred years dead.

The Shepherd King did not move but for his eyes. "You're alone, Captain," he said. It was still Elspeth's voice. Only now, it sounded slick, oily. *Wrong*. "Is that wise?"

Ravyn stiffened. "Would you hurt me?"

His answer was a twisted, jagged smile. "I'd be a liar if I said I hadn't played with the idea."

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Praise for One Dark Window

“*One Dark Window* is an evocative tale of romance, mystery and alluring monsters, told in beautifully lush prose. Rachel Gillig has created a story which left me entranced.”

—Lyndall Clipstone, author of *Lakesedge*

“An enchanting tale with sharp claws and teeth—Gillig’s prose will pull you in and won’t let you sleep. Pulse-pounding, darkly whimsical, and aglow with treacherous magic, *One Dark Window* is everything I love in fantasy and more.”

—Allison Saft, author of *A Far Wilder Magic*

“A beautifully dark fairy tale of blood, rage and bitter choice, that whisked me away to mist-wreathed woods ripe with romance and menace.”

—Davinia Evans, author of *Notorious Sorcerer*

“*One Dark Window* is a page-turner. Gillig’s lush language is somewhat reminiscent of Alix E. Harrow’s excellent portal fantasy, *The Ten Thousand Doors of January*, as well as Robin McKinley’s redolent fairytale retellings such as *Spindle’s End*, *Beauty*, and *Deerskin*...a richly detailed and decadent world that at once feels familiar, distinctive, and wistful to the reader.”

—*Chicago Review of Books*

“Readers will be enthralled with Elspeth’s—and Nightmare’s—riveting adventure.”

—*Booklist*

“The steamy romance that emerges between Elspeth and Ravyn delights. Fans of Sarah J. Maas, Naomi Novak, and Hannah Whitten will want to check this out.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Elspeth’s slow-burn romance with a mysterious highwayman adds depth to the story....A finely detailed magical system enriches Gillig’s debut; fantasy readers will enjoy.”

—*Library Journal*

“Spooky, lush...Gillig executes familiar fantasy romance tropes with flair.”

—*Paste Magazine*

By Rachel Gillig

THE SHEPHERD KING

One Dark Window

Two Twisted Crowns

TWO
TWISTED
CROWNS

The Shepherd King: Book Two

RACHHEL
GILLIG



orbitbooks.net

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*To anyone who's ever felt lost in a wood. There is a strange sort of finding
in losing.*



The Twin Alders is hidden in a place with no time. A place of great sorrow and bloodshed and crime. Betwixt ancient trees, where the mist cuts bone-deep, the last Card remains, waiting, asleep. The wood knows no road—no path through the snare. Only I can find the Twin Alders...

For it was I who left it there.

Prologue

Elsbeth



The darkness bled into itself—no beginning, no end. I floated, buoyant on a tide of salt water. Above me, the night sky had blackened—moon and stars masked by heavy, water-laden clouds that never receded.

I jostled without pain, my muscles relaxed and my mind quiet. I did not know where my body ended and the water began. I merely yielded to the darkness, lost to the ebb and flow of the waves and the sound of water washing over me.

Time passed without mark. If there was a sun, it did not reach me at dawn. I passed minutes and hours and days afloat a tide of nothingness, my mind empty but for one thought.

Let me out.

More time passed. Still, the thought persisted. *Let me out.*

I was whole, swallowed by the water's comfort. No pain, no memory, no fear, no hope. I was the darkness and the darkness was me, and together we rolled with the tide, lulled toward a shore I could neither see nor hear. All was water—all was salt.

But the thought nagged on. *Let me out.*

I tested the words out loud. My voice sounded like tearing paper. "Let me out." I said it over and over, briny water filling my mouth. "Let me out."

Minutes. Hours. Days. *Let. Me. Out.*

Then, out of nothingness, a long black beach appeared. Upon it, something moved. I blinked, my eyes clouded by a film of salt.

A man, clad in golden armor, stood on the dark shore just beyond the

break in the tide, watching me.

The tide drew me in, closer and closer. The man was aged. He bore the weight of his armor without wavering, his strength deeply rooted—like an ancient tree.

I tried to call out to him, but I only knew the three words.

“Let me out!” I cried. I became aware of my wool dress, the heaviness of it. It pulled me down and I slipped beneath the surface, my words cutting off. “Let me—”

His hands were cold as he pulled me from the water.

He carried me onto black sand. When he tried to stand me up, my legs faltered like a newborn fawn’s.

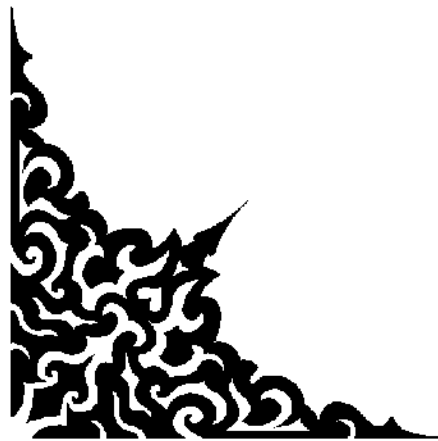
I did not know his face. But he knew mine.

“Elspeth Spindle,” he said quietly, his eyes—so strange and yellow—ensnaring me. “I’ve been waiting for you.



PART ONE

To Bleed



Chapter One

Ravyn



Ravyn's hands were bleeding.

He hadn't noticed until he'd seen the blood fall. With three taps on the velvet edge of the Mirror, the purple Providence Card, Ravyn had erased himself. He was utterly invisible. His fingers, knuckles, the heels of his palms, dug at the hardened soil at the bottom of the ancient chamber at the edge of the meadow.

It hardly mattered. What was another cut, another scar? Ravyn's hands were but blunt tools. Not the instruments of a gentleman, but of a man-at-arms—Captain of the Destriers. Highwayman.

Traitor.

Mist seeped into the chamber through the window. It slipped through the cracks of the rotted-out ceiling, salt clawing at Ravyn's eyes. A warning, perhaps, that the thing he dug for at the base of the tall, broad stone did not wish to be found.

Ravyn paid the mist no mind. He, too, was of salt. Sweat, blood, and magic. Even so, his calloused hands were no match for the soil at the bottom of the chamber. It was unforgiving, hardened by time, ripping Ravyn's fingernails and tearing open the cracks in his hands. Still, he dug, enveloped in the Mirror Card's chill, the chamber he'd so often played in as a boy shifting before his eyes into something grotesque—a place of lore, of death.

Of monsters.

He'd woken hours ago, sleep punctuated by thrashing fits and the

memory of a piercing yellow gaze, Elspeth Spindle's voice an echoing dissonance in his mind.

It was his castle—the one in ruins, she'd told him, her charcoal eyes wet with tears as she spoke of the Shepherd King, the voice in her head. He's buried beneath the stone in the chamber at Castle Yew.

Ravyn had torn himself out of bed and ridden from Stone like a specter on the wind to get to the chamber. He was restless—frantic—for the truth. Because none of it seemed real. The Shepherd King, with yellow eyes and a slick, sinister voice, trapped in the mind of a maiden. The Shepherd King, who promised to help them find the lost Twin Alders Card.

The Shepherd King, five hundred years dead.

Ravyn knew death—had been its exactor. He'd watched light go out of men's eyes. Heard final, gasping breaths. There was nothing but ghosts on the other side of the veil, no life after death. Not for any man, cutpurse, or highwayman—not even for the Shepherd King.

And yet.

Not all the soil at the base of the stone was hard. Some was loose, upturned. Someone had been there before him—recently. Elspeth, perhaps, looking for answers, just as he was. There, at the base of the stone, hidden a hand below the hardened topsoil, was a carving. A single word made indecipherable with time. A grave marker.

Ravyn kept digging. When his fingernail ripped and the raw tip of his finger struck something cold, sharp, he swore and reared back. His body was invisible, but not his blood. It trickled, crimson red, appearing the moment it left his hand and scattering over the hole he'd dug, the ground thirsty for it.

Something was hidden in the earth, waiting. When Ravyn touched it, it was sharper than stone—colder than soil.

Steel.

Heart in his throat, he dug until he'd unearthed a sword. It lay crooked, caked in dirt. But there was no mistaking its make—forged steel—with an intricately designed hilt, too ornate to be a soldier's blade.

He reached for it, the salt in the air piercing his lungs as he took short,

fevered breaths. But before Ravyn could pry the sword free, he caught a glimpse at what was buried beneath it.

Resting perfectly, undisturbed for centuries. A pale, knobbed object. Human. Skeletal.

A spine.

Ravyn's muscles locked. His mouth went dry, and nausea rolled up from his stomach into his throat. Blood continued to drip from his hand. And with every drop he gave away, he earned a fragmented, biting clarity: Blunder was full of magic. Wonderful, terrible magic. This was the Shepherd King's body. He was truly dead.

But his soul carried on, buried deep in Elspeth Spindle, the only woman Ravyn had ever loved.

He tore from the chamber, taking the sword with him.

Bent over himself beneath the yew tree outside, Ravyn coughed, fighting the urge to be sick. The tree was old, its branches unkempt, its canopy vast enough to keep the morning rainfall off his brow. He stayed that way for some time, his heartbeat reluctant to steady.

“What business have you to dig, raven bird?”

Ravyn whirled, the ivory hilt of his dagger in hand. But he was alone. The meadow was empty but for dying grass, the slender path back to Castle Yew unmanned.

The voice called again, louder than before. “Did you hear me, bird?”

Perched in the yew tree above Ravyn's head, legs dangling over the edge of the aged branch, sat a girl. She was young—younger than his brother Emory—a child no older than twelve, he guessed. Her hair fell in dark plaits over her shoulders, a few stray curls framing her face. Her cloak was undyed, gray wool with an intricately hemmed collar. Ravyn searched for a family insignia, but there was none.

He didn't recognize her. Surely he'd recall such a striking face—such a distinct nose. Such vivid, yellow eyes.

Yellow.

“Who are you?” Ravyn said, his voice scraping his throat.

She watched him with those yellow eyes, tilting her head to the side. “I'm Tilly.”