



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.”

—Davina 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

T W O
T W I S T E D
C R O W N S

The Shepherd King: Book Two

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



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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

Elspeth



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