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BY RACHEL GILLIG

The Shepherd King

One Dark Window

Two Twisted Crowns

TWO
TWISTED
CROWNS

Book two of The Shepherd King

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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 knew only 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.

"Elsbeth Spindle," he said quietly, his eyes—so strange and yellow—ensnaring me. "I've been waiting for you."

PART I

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 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."

"What are you doing here, Tilly?"

"What I've always done." For the briefest moment, she reminded him of Jespyr as a girl. "I'm waiting."

Rain fell in earnest, carried on a swift wind. Droplets pelted the side of Ravyn's face, and the wind caught his hood, pulling it off his brow. He raised a hand, shielding his eyes from the sting.

But the girl in the tree remained unmoving, though the branch beneath her trembled and the yew tree's leaves whistled in the wind. Her cloak did not shift, nor did a single strand of her hair. Water and wind seemed to pass entirely through her, as if she was made of mist, of smoke.

Of nothingness.

Only then did Ravyn recall he was still using the Mirror.

This had been his purpose—why he'd forsaken sleep and come to the chamber. He'd dug with blunt fingers, met bone with blood, and found the Shepherd King's body. But the Mirror Card held the answers he truly sought.

He'd used the Mirror a thousand times before to be invisible. But Ravyn had always been careful never to use it too long. He'd had no desire to incur the Card's negative effects—to see beyond the veil into a world of spirits. He'd never wanted to speak to a ghost.

Until now.

Ravyn cleared his throat. He knew nothing of spirits or their temperaments. Were they as they were in life? Or had the after-life...remade them?

He raised his voice against the wind. "Who do you wait for, Tilly?"

The girl's eyes shifted to the sword in his hand, then back to the chamber.

"Do you know the man who is buried there?" Ravyn asked.

She laughed, her voice sharp. "As well as I know this glen, bird. As well as I know this tree, and all the faces that have tarried beneath it." She twisted her finger in the tail of her plait. "You've heard of him, I suppose." Her lips curled in a smile. "He's a strange man, my father. Wary. Clever. Good."

Ravyn's breath faltered. "The Shepherd King is your father?"

Her smile faded, her yellow eyes growing distant. "They did not give him a King's burial. Perhaps that is why he does not..." Her gaze returned to Ravyn. "You haven't seen him with your Mirror Card, have you? He promised he would find us when he passed through the veil. But he has not come."

"Us?"

The girl turned, her eyes tracing the woods on the other side of the meadow. "Mother is over there, somewhere. She does not

come as often as she did. Ilyc and Afton linger near the statuary. Fenly and Lenor keep to your castle." Her brow furrowed. "Bennett is often somewhere else. He did not die here. Not like the rest of us."

Die. Ravyn's throat tightened. "They are... your family? The Shepherd King's family?"

"We're waiting," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "For Father."

"Why does he not return?"

The girl did not answer. Her gaze fluttered across the meadow to the ruins. "I thought I heard his voice," she murmured. "Night had fallen. I was alone, here in my favorite tree." Her eyes flashed to Ravyn. "I saw you, raven bird. You came as you always do, in your black cloak, your gray eyes clever, your face practiced. Only this time, you were not alone. A woman came with you. A strange woman, with eyes that flashed yellow gold, like mine. Like Father's."

Ravyn's insides twisted.

"I watched you both leave, but the maiden returned." Tilly held out a finger, pointing to the chamber's window. "She went inside. That's when I heard it—the songs my father used to hum as he wrote his book. But when I entered, he was not there. It was the woman who hummed as she raked her hands through the soil above Father's grave."

"Elspeth," Ravyn whispered, the name stealing something from him. "Her name is Elspeth."

Tilly didn't seem to hear him. "Twice the maiden visited and dug at his headstone. She wandered through the meadow, the ruins." Her lips drew into a tight line. "But when dawn came, her yellow eyes shifted to a charcoal color. So I came back here, to his grave. To watch. To wait."

Ravyn said nothing, his mind searching for answers it did

not have. He remembered that night he'd brought Elspeth to the chamber. He could still smell her hair—feel her cheek against his palm. He'd kissed her deeply and she'd kissed him back. Every part of him had wanted every part of her.

But she'd torn herself away, her eyes wide, a tremble in her voice. She'd been afraid of something in the chamber. At the time, Ravyn had been certain it was him. But he knew now it was something else—something far greater than him—something she carried with her, always.

His eyes snapped back to the girl in the yew tree. "What happened to your father?"

Tilly did not answer.

Ravyn tried again: "How did he die?"

She looked away, her fingers dancing a silent rhythm on the yew branch. "I don't know. They caught me first." Her voice quieted. "I passed through the veil before my father and brothers."

It wasn't the Mirror's chill that was seeping into Ravyn. It was something else. A question that, in the dark corner of his mind, he already knew the answer to. "Who killed you?"

Those yellow eyes flared. They landed on Ravyn. "You know his name." Her voice went low, a deep, scraping whisper. "Rowan."

The King's insignia flashed in Ravyn's mind. His uncle's flag—the unyielding rowan tree. Red Scythe Card, green eyes. Hunters, brutes.

Family.

Ravyn's bleeding hands shook.

"We've waited a long time for Father," Tilly said, her gaze turning upward, as if she were speaking now to only the yew tree. Her voice grew firm, her fingers curling like talons in her lap. "We will keep waiting, until his task is done."

A chill clawed up Ravyn's neck. He thought of the creature

in Elspeth Spindle's body—of yellow eyes and twisting, silken words spoken in the dungeon. A promise to help find the lost Twin Alders Card.

But Ravyn knew better. No promise comes without payment. Blunder was a place of magic—barter and bargains. Nothing was free. "What does the Shepherd King want?" he asked the girl-spirit. "What is he after?"

"Balance," she answered, head tilting like a bird of prey. "To right terrible wrongs. To free Blunder from the Rowans." Her yellow eyes narrowed, wicked and absolute. "To collect his due."

Chapter Two

Elm



The Prince rode faster than the other two Destriers. When he dismounted at the old brick house, Elm Rowan was struck by how still the world seemed when he was not on horseback. It unnerved him.

A mourning dove cooed. Elm took off his gloves, dipping his hand into his tunic pocket, the feel of velvet at the edges of his Scythe Card a familiar comfort.

He came to the front door, his gloves stretching at the knuckles as he wrapped his fingers in a fist. The door was aged, traces of lichen sheltering in the crags. The whole north side of the estate was covered in moss and ivy, as if the forest was dragging Hawthorn House deeper into its depths, vines thick as a man's arm wrapping around the chimney, serpentine.

No one was inside the house. The warning had come days ago. Still, Elm pressed his ear to the door and listened.

Nothing. No muffled shouts of children, no ring of iron pots from the kitchen. Not even a dog barking. The house was still, as if kept that way by the tendrils of greenery reaching in from the mist.

The Destriers arrived behind him and dropped from their horses. "Sire?" Wicker said.

Elm opened his eyes and exhaled. He had no mind to command them. But Ravyn had made himself scarce, and Jespyr had remained at Stone to keep an eye on Emory, leaving Elm—petulant to his bones—to do the King’s bidding and look for Elspeth Spindle’s missing kin.

“It’s empty,” he muttered through his teeth. “Opal Hawthorn is no fool. She and her children would not have come back to this place.”

“Her husband seemed to think they’d be here,” the second Destrier—Gorse—muttered.

Elm twisted the brass handle and pulled Hawthorn House’s door open, the rusted hinges shrieking. “Tyrn Hawthorn would say anything to be free of the dungeon.”

“He’s got Cards,” Wicker said pointedly. “To hear him boast, you’d think old Tyrn had collected the Deck himself.”

“Then the least we can do is relieve him of his greatest treasures. Search the house.” Elm cast an eye over his shoulder to the sky. “Quickly. I’d like to outride those clouds.”

They took to the library first, emptying shelves, shaking old tomes until the house smelled of leather and dust. “I found a Prophet!” Gorse hollered through a row of mahogany shelves.

Elm drew his finger across the uneven mantel. The stones were cracked, but the mortar held firm—no hidden space to hide a Card. He stepped out of the library and started up the stairs. Oval niches held worn-down candles, every stone in the wall housing a shadow.

The first room off the stairwell was upturned, clothes and blankets and an odd sock strewn about. Two narrow beds, two wooden swords. The room of Elspeth’s young cousins, Elm guessed.

The next room was markedly more feminine. Elm lingered at the threshold, drawing cold air into his nose—the scents of wool and lavender. A quilt lay on the bed, the linens

unwrinkled, neatly tucked. A small table with chipped green paint held a candle, and next to it, an oval looking glass. Just below the looking glass sat a fine-toothed comb.

Trapped in the wooden teeth were several strands of long black hair.

“There is nothing left of her here,” a voice called from behind Elm’s shoulder. “Whatever Elspeth took from this place, she carries with her.”

Elm jumped, his hand dropping to his belt. A ring of steel cut through the hallway and he pivoted, slicing his knife toward the voice.

He stopped the blade just before it grazed Ione Hawthorn’s throat.

She stood before him, clad in white like a bride. Long and flowing, her dress fell to the floor. Her yellow hair caught the hallway draft, and when she stared at Elm, her pink lips pursed, forming a question she did not speak.

Her gaze dropped to his knife. “Prince Renelm.”

His mind was racing, a rhythmic discord against the heaving of his chest. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s my home. Why shouldn’t I be here?”

Elm’s jaw seized. He jerked the knife away, slipping it back into place on his belt. “Trees, Hawthorn, I might have killed you.”

Her voice held a fine point, like the tip of a needle. “I doubt that.”

Elm dug at his pocket for the familiar comfort of his Scythe. He had not used his red Card in four days—not since that night at Spindle House.

After the Destriers had been called and Hauth, broken and bloody, carried away, Ravyn had put Erik Spindle and Tyrn Hawthorn in chains. Jespyr had ridden to Hawthorn House to