

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in the USA in 2020 by Bloomsbury YA
This edition published in Great Britain in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-1844-3; PB: 978-1-4088-8508-6; eBook: 978-1-4088-8509-3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Cover design by Jeanette Levy
Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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CHAPTER ONE



HARPER

I miss knowing exactly what time it is.

It's one of the few things I regret leaving behind in Washington, DC, but when darkness has fallen, dinner feels like a distant memory, and Rhen has still not returned to his chambers, I want to know what time it is. I'm no stranger to waiting in the darkness, but when I was on the streets I had my brother's cell phone, and I'd count every minute.

Now I'm Princess Harper of Disi, and Emberfall hasn't advanced to the point of having electricity.

Rhen and I have separate chambers, befitting the crown prince and the lady he's to ally his kingdom with, but he always visits before retiring to his own room.

He's never been this late. Or—I don't think he has.

The heat of the day has bled off, leaving cool air to stream through my open windows, and my fire has fallen to glowing embers. Outside, torches flicker on the guard stands that surround Ironrose,

evenly spaced flares of light that keep the grounds from ever going truly dark. Such a difference from when Ironrose was cursed, when the guard stands stood cold and dark and empty, when the only people to inhabit the castle were Rhen, Grey, and me.

Now the castle is crowded with nobles and servants and guards, and we are never truly alone.

And Grey is gone. He's been gone for months.

I take the candle from my bedside, lighting it from the glowing embers on the hearth. It's a movement I make without thought anymore, the way I would have flipped a light switch back home. Zo, my personal guard and closest friend here, isn't on duty tonight, and she deserves time to sleep. Same with Freya, my lady-in-waiting. The lights in her room went dark hours ago, and I selfishly wish they hadn't. I could use a friend.

A soft knock raps at my door, and I hurry across the floor to open it.

It's not Rhen, though I wouldn't have expected him to knock. It's Jake.

When I was young, Jake was gentle and kind, the perfect older brother. Then we hit our teens, and while our mother was on her deathbed, our father drove our lives into the gutter. Jake is built like a linebacker, and to help make ends meet, he took jobs from the loan sharks who haunted our doorstep. To those outside our family, Jake quickly grew from someone lovable into someone to fear.

Being trapped in Emberfall, a country as beautiful as it is wild and dangerous, hasn't changed my brother's temperament. The day we arrived, he was out of place and unsure of himself, but he's grown into his fictional role as Prince Jacob of Disi. His dark hair has grown out a bit, and he wears a sword on his hip as if he were

born carrying it. No one messed with him in DC, and few people mess with him here either.

Tonight his expression is somber.

"Hey," I say softly. "Come in."

He does, and I ease the door closed behind him.

"I'm surprised you're still up," he says.

"I'm waiting for Rhen." I pause. "I'm surprised *you're* still up."

He hesitates. "Noah and I are packing."

Noah is his boyfriend, formerly a medical resident in a busy DC emergency room, and now the castle "healer."

I raise my eyebrows. "Packing?"

My brother's expression doesn't change. "We're leaving in the morning."

This is so unexpected that I stumble back a step.

Jake's lip quirks up. "Not forever, Harp. It's not that bad."

"But—what do you mean, you're *leaving*?"

He shrugs and fidgets and moves to the window. "We've been here for months now. I know you like playing the courtly princess, but I feel like I'm living in a cage." He pauses and glances back at me. "It's only for a few weeks. A month, tops."

I blow out a breath. "A month."

A lot can happen in a month. I know that better than anyone.

"I'd have no way to check on you," I say. "What if something happens? It takes days—*weeks*—to send word sometimes. We still don't know what's happening with Syhl Shallow or Rhen's coronation or—"

He gives me a look. "You don't need to check on me, Harper."

"I can still worry about you." I swallow. We were once separated after Grey snatched me off the streets of DC, and it was horrible

not knowing what might have become of Jake. I don't want to feel that way again. "Have you asked Rhen? He might not think it's a good idea."

Jake's eyes turn flinty. "He's not my warden."

"I know, but—"

"He knows anyway. I already talked to him."

That draws me up short.

"I asked him not to say anything to you," Jake adds. "I wanted to tell you myself."

My mouth forms a line. "I guess you've arranged everything, then."

"No, Harp. I haven't." He pauses. "I want you to come with us."

"Jake. I can't. You know I can't."

"Yes, you can. You can get out of here just like I can." He leaves the window to stop in front of me, and when he speaks, his voice grows quiet. "He's not your warden either. You don't have to spend your nights waiting up for him."

"He's running a country," I say. "He's not out drinking with the guys."

"He's eighteen years old, and so are you." Jake pauses. "Do you want to marry him?"

The question catches my breath.

My brother is studying me. "Harp—you know that's at the end of this path if you stay here. He's set up this whole alliance with a fake country that's dependent on your marriage."

I know that. Of course I know that.

I'm quiet too long. Jake moves past me to the fireplace. "You didn't answer my question."

Marriage. "I don't—I don't know."

He throws a log onto the hearth and jabs at it with the poker.

"You shouldn't have to know. That's my point." The log begins to catch, and Jake looks at me over his shoulder. "You shouldn't be in a position where your boyfriend has to marry you to hold his country together."

I move to the couch and ease onto the cushion. "Gee, Jake, I'm so glad you came in."

He looks back at the fire, which is flickering in earnest now, making his brown hair glow with highlights of gold and red. "I know things weren't good in DC, but I don't feel like they're better here."

"We left Washington facing down a man with a gun," I say.

"I know, I know." He falls quiet, though, so I know this is not an acquiescence.

I don't know what to say to him. "I can't leave, Jake."

"You love him."

"Yes."

He sighs, then moves to sit beside me on the couch. I lean my head against his shoulder, and we stare at the fire together.

"The rumors are getting out of control," he finally says. "That he's not the rightful heir. That Karis Luran will attack again."

"Those rumors have been flying for months."

"People are beginning to talk about how forces from Disi have never arrived. That your alliance is a sham." Jake pauses, and now his eyes are sharp. "I'm not just leaving to get away from here. I want to find out what's really going on outside this castle."

"Rhen wouldn't lie to us."

Jake studies me for the longest time. "He's lying to his entire country," he finally says. "If you think he's not above lying to *us*, you need to pay attention."

I swallow. Rhen isn't like that. "You don't need to start something, Jake."

"I'm not. I'm just asking you to think." He shakes his head bitterly. "Noah said you wouldn't come. I thought you'd at least consider it."

I study him, my restless brother who did so many terrible things to keep me safe. At his core, there's kindness and compassion. I know there is. "I'm sorry."

He grits his teeth. "I wish we knew if Grey were alive or dead."

"Me too," I say, and sigh.

"Not for the same reasons you do." He looks down at me. "He's the one who trapped us here." Jake shakes his head and rubs a hand across his jaw. There's a tension in his body now. "If he ever turns up, I'm going to make him wish he never did."

It's barely a threat. Grey is likely dead—or trapped on the other side, which is equally bad. "What are you so angry about?"

Thunderclouds roll through his eyes. "I've spent months watching them use you, Harper."

"No one is *using* me—"

"Yes. They are. Grey brought you here to help break a curse you had no part of. And then when you escaped, he brought you back *again*."

"I *wanted* to come back." And I did. I don't regret the choice I made.

Until this moment, looking into Jake's eyes, I never realized that *he* regrets the choice I made. It might have saved his life, but now he's trapped here with no way to get home.

The latch at my door clicks, and I turn in surprise to find Rhen in the doorway.

The prince is still dressed in his formal clothes, a blue jacket buckled all the way to his throat and a sword in place at his hip. The firelight catches his hair and turns it gold, but his eyes are tired. He spots me and Jake by the fire and stops. The tension in the room has grown so thick that he can probably feel it.

"Forgive me," Rhen says carefully. "The hour is late. I thought you would be alone."

Jake sighs. "You *should* be alone. I'll get out." He leans forward to kiss me on the forehead. "Take care of yourself, Harper. I mean it."

That softens the edge all his other words carried. "Thanks, big brother."

Jake stops by Rhen before grabbing hold of the door handle. "I'm still leaving tomorrow," he says.

"Today, in fact," says Rhen, matching Jake's even tone. "It is well after midnight." He glances at the dark window. "Dustan will accompany you, along with a small contingent of guards. You may leave after daybreak if you wish."

That throws Jake for a moment, but he recovers quickly. "Good."

Rhen raises an eyebrow. "You thought I would go back on my word?"

"I thought you'd find other things more important."

"Indeed. I do." Rhen opens the door and holds it there. A clear dismissal.

Jake opens his mouth to argue.

Rhen can be patient when he wants to be, but I sense that now isn't one of those times. "Jake," I say. "You got what you wanted."

"Nowhere near." But it's enough to draw the fight out of my brother, and he goes through the door.

Once he's gone, Rhen crosses the room to where I'm standing. Every day seems to add new shadows beneath his eyes, a dark and guarded wariness that never seems to ease anymore.

"Are you all right?" I say as he approaches. He's always so buttoned up after he comes out of meetings with his advisors, but today feels like a new level. He's distant. So severe that if I didn't know him, I might back away from him. "What's going on? It's late. I thought—"

His hands catch my waist, and I gasp. Then his mouth is on mine.

Rhen is so strong, so capable, that he still surprises me when he's gentle. He stalked across the room like he wanted to wage war, but he kisses me like I'm the most delicate thing in the castle. His hands are full of warmth that I can feel through my sleeping shift, soft against my waist. I put my hands against his jacket and breathe him in, letting his closeness erase some of the worry Jake stoked.

When Rhen pulls back, it's barely far enough to speak against my lips. His eyes bore into mine. "I could feel your worry on the other side of the castle," he says. He brushes a thumb across my cheek. "I can feel it now."

I blush and look down. My fingers fidget with the buckles of his jacket, as if they need straightening, but of course they don't. "I'm okay."

"Harper," he says softly. He puts a hand over mine, forcing mine still.

I love the way he says my name, the way his accent lends weight to the *Rs* to make it a purr. He's always so formal that my name feels like a secret just between us.

He puts a finger to my chin and lifts my gaze. "Tell me your fears."

“Jake just told me he’s leaving.”

“Ah.” Rhen sighs. “Your brother is impatient and reckless, and the timing could be better—but it could also be worse. I would rather send him with my blessing than learn he’s caused havoc somewhere in the kingdom. Dustan will not allow him to get into much trouble.”

I’m surprised by that. “You’re sending your guard commander?”

“I would rather not, but I have few guards I can trust on such an assignment. The Royal Guard still feels untested, but your brother is insistent he will leave whether I like it or not.”

Well, that definitely sounds like Jake.

Rhen studies me. “Would you rather I send Zo?”

“No.” If Jake’s leaving, I can’t bear the thought of losing my friend, too. “Did Jake tell you he wants me to go with him?”

That forces Rhen still. “No. And your decision?”

This is one of my favorite things about him. He’s commanding and decisive and never falters—but he never takes a choice away from *me*. “I said no.”

He lets out a breath, then kisses me again. “I spent so long waiting to find you that I worried fate might take you away.”

I press my forehead against his neck and inhale the warmth of his scent. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He holds me quietly for a moment, but I can tell his worry has not eased.

I bite at my lip, not wanting to add to his tension. “Jake said the rumors about another heir have grown.”

“They have.”

I press a hand against his chest, thinking about everything Jake said. “Talk to me, Rhen.”

He sighs, and it sounds aggravated. "The heir exists. There are royal records with my father's seal. I wanted to accelerate the coronation, but many nobles have already made it known that they want proof that the line of succession is solid, and so I shall do my very best to provide it."

"How will you find him?"

"It may be impossible. In truth, he may not live. We have very little to go on for our search. If his mother was a magesmith, as records indicate, he should have magic like the enchantress Lilith. She once told me that the web of magic did not end with her, that she could feel another's existence. Magic has been banned from Emberfall for years, but if we spread word that someone has this power, it may not be so easy to hide."

Lilith. Just her name is enough to cause me to shudder. "What will you do if you find him?"

"If he bears magic, he will be destroyed."

I jerk back. "Rhen!"

Rhen says nothing. He doesn't need to. The look in his eyes says enough.

I take another step back. "This man is your *brother*."

"No. He is a stranger." There's no give in his voice. "I spent a near eternity trapped by one magesmith, and it almost drove my country to ruin. I will not risk Emberfall being destroyed by another."

I'm rooted in place, filled with ice despite the fire at my side. I don't know what to say. I've seen him order a man's death before, but that was a man who'd killed one of our guards, a man who would have killed us if he'd gotten the chance.

This is different. This is calculated. Premeditated.

Rhen takes a step forward and reaches a hand to touch my face.

I flinch away, and his expression goes still. "I did not intend to upset you," he says quietly, and I know he means that. "I did not realize this would be a surprise. You saw with your own eyes the damage Lilith caused."

I swallow. Yes. I did. I saw her torture Rhen time and again. He was powerless to stop her.

"I'm sure you're right," I say, even though I'm not sure at all. I draw a shaking breath and have to press a hand to my stomach.

Rhen has proven that he'll do what he needs to do to hold Emberfall together. He's proving it now.

"Do not draw away from me," he says softly, and there is a new note in his voice. Not vulnerability—never that—but something close. "Please. I cannot bear it."

He looks so tired. His body is so tense. I wonder when he last slept. I take a deep breath and chase the trembling out of my fingers, then move forward to put my arms around him.

"Tell me *your* fears," I say quietly.

"We do not even know if Lilith is dead," Rhen says. "If she were to find this heir—if they were to work together against me—"

"It's been months. She's either trapped on the other side or Grey is."

"Or he's sworn to her, as we saw, and she is biding her time."

Grey swore himself into her service to save me—just before putting his sword to Lilith's throat and disappearing to the other side. To Washington, DC.

"He wouldn't help her," I say. "Rhen. He wouldn't."

"I have to protect my people, Harper."

He leans against me, and I listen to the pattern of his breathing as it slows. I lay a hand against his cheek, and his eyes close. There was a moment, months ago, when he was the monster, and he pressed his face against my hand and settled, just like this. I could feel his fear then. I can feel it now.

"You're not a monster anymore," I whisper.

"I sent guards to Grey's mother's home in Wildthorne Valley," Rhen says carefully.

My hand goes still on his cheek. "What? When?"

"Last week," he says. "To be thorough." He pauses. "They returned today."

Grey once told me that Lilith killed his whole family, leaving only his mother alive. "What did they find?"

"His mother was gone. The townspeople said she sold off her livestock and moved away months ago. No one knew where she'd gone." Another pause. "Rumor said a wounded man stayed with her for a short while, but no one saw him."

I hold my breath for a moment. "Grey could be alive," I whisper.

"Yes." Rhen's voice is hard, but I feel the worry and uncertainty behind it. "Given what they reported, I suspect Grey is very much alive."

I look up at him. "Grey wouldn't be sworn to her, Rhen."

"If he was not, why would he not return to Ironrose?"

I try to think of an answer and fail.

"Karis Luran could attack at any time," Rhen says. "The heir could appear at any time." He pauses. "And Lilith could be waiting for the perfect moment to strike."

I lean my head against Rhen's chest and look to the window

again, gazing out at the stars spanning the sky. “Oh, Grey,” I say. “Where are you?”

“Indeed,” says Rhen. He sighs, and in the sound, I hear the longing and sadness and worry wrapped up in the word. He brushes a kiss against my hair. “Indeed.”