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books

THE
NIGHT
PRINCE

LAUREN PALPHREYMAN



PROLOGUE

Blake

His footsteps echo as he walks down the endless prison corridor.

Shadows coil around his arms and legs, almost as if they are alive. They slink around his ankles like cats.

His nostrils flare as a sweet, familiar scent hits them.

She's peering through the barred window of one of the cells ahead, her back to him.

He tilts his head to one side. Is this his dream, or hers? Has he merely imagined her? Or is this a consequence of the bond between them?

Her red hair cascades down her back, almost the colour of blood in the gloom. It's as if she's been plucked from her bed and dropped here. She's wearing his shirt, the one he gave Callum for her to put on after James bit her. It's too big for her. It caresses the soft curve of her behind and strokes her thighs. Her calves and feet are bare. He swallows.

She stiffens like prey, and he wonders if she senses him

watching. Then he follows her gaze. A writhing mass of shadow surges towards her. The jailer of this prison is coming.

Blake prowls towards her as she edges back. She bumps into his chest, and he hooks an arm around her waist – clamping a hand over her mouth before she can scream.

He brings his lips to her ear. ‘You shouldn’t be here, little rabbit.’

She stills in his arms.

And how he loathes her. He loathes the way her scent washes over him – even here. She smells like the slither of moonlight that would drift through the grate of the cell beneath the palace. Freedom, taunting him. The broken promise of something he cannot have.

He loathes how soft and warm she feels, how his cock stirs at her proximity. He loathes how the wolf he keeps on such a tight leash longs to sink his teeth into her.

Footsteps approach.

He drags her through an open cell door. It clicks shut behind them. Her attention shifts to the emblem carved in the obsidian beneath the barred window: a key with two crescent moons in the bow. He wonders if she knows what it means. Most wolves would – it’s a remnant of when the acolytes rose a century ago, but this symbol is not common in the Southlands. They don’t worship the darker gods there.

Her elevated pulse drums in his ears. His arm tenses against her torso. ‘Shh.’

The temperature drops, and Blake’s breath mists in front of his face. Aurora inches back, as if desperate for warmth, even from him. He holds her tighter.

The footsteps fade, and Blake exhales. He removes his

hand from her mouth. She twists in his grasp to look up at him, and the soft swell of her breasts presses against his chest. A crease forms between her eyes. ‘What—’

Her attention jerks back to the door.

The figure stalks back. Thick, unnatural darkness bleeds through the barred windows.

‘Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.’ She’s muttering under her breath. ‘It’s just a dream. Wake up.’

It’s not just a dream.

He shuts his eyes. He wrenches her back. He doesn’t hit the wall – instead, it dissolves. The cell door bursts open in front of them, but they’re already falling through endless darkness.

He lands on his feet in the cell beneath the palace, and he knows they’re inhabiting his dream now. A memory. He doesn’t like it here, but it’s not as dangerous as the place before.

There’s a cot against one wall, the mattress stained brown with old blood. A bucket of waste sits in the corner. There are books piled against one wall, a candle flickering beside them. The scent of lemons mixes with iron and the cloying odour of bodily fluids.

Aurora stands in the centre of the space. She’s perfectly poised, her back straight, her chin slightly raised so she can look down her nose at her surroundings. Only her elevated pulse and the fact that he can *feel* that whisper of her inside him through their bond – like a small thread of light – tells him she is not as unfazed as she seems.

He loathes that about her, too. She’s always so well put together, but he’s been able to sense the violence that simmers

beneath her skin since he first set eyes on her. It makes him want to provoke her.

When he was a child, some of the older boys from the village used to throw stones at the ducks in the river. He didn't understand why they did it – even at six years old it had seemed juvenile to him – until he met her.

He'd do anything to ruffle her feathers. He wants to see what happens when she unleashes herself.

Perhaps he loathes her so much because he knows, deep down, he's the same. He wears many masks, too. He hasn't been given the luxury of losing control. He knows what dark secrets lurk within his soul, but he doesn't know what lies behind the mask she wears. He thinks it might be magnificent.

She faces him, and he steps closer to her. He studies her face, her cheekbones, her blue eyes that peer up at him through thick eyelashes. Fuck, she's beautiful.

'Are you really here?' he asks.

She frowns. 'Of course I'm here.' Her forehead only reaches his chin, yet she manages to speak to him as if he's smaller. She frowns, looking dazed. 'Are you?'

Footsteps approach the cell door behind her, and he sighs. 'You should go. I'd rather you didn't see this next bit.'

She glances over her shoulder. When she turns her attention to him once more, his damned subconscious has dressed him in a blood-drenched shirt. His feet are bare and dirty, and his breeches are torn.

'Are you hurt?' There's a hint of concern in her voice, and he adds another thing to the list of things he loathes about her: she sounds like she might actually give a shit.

'Time to wake up, little rabbit.'

‘Where are we?’ Her eyebrows knit together. ‘Where were we?’

‘If you remember this in the morning, I’ll tell you.’

He grabs her arms, and shuts his eyes. He needs to wake up. He pushes her into the wall.

They fall into endless darkness once more.

Blake’s eyes jolt open.

He’s in his bed at Lowfell, and the crescent moon shines through his window. His heart is pounding. He’s not sure what is more disturbing: the location of his dreams, or Aurora’s presence.

He slides out of the sheets, grabs the breeches and shirt that are folded on his armchair and pulls them on. He puts on his boots, not bothering to fasten them, and slips out of his chambers.

He pads through his castle. The darkness is almost as thick as it was in the prison. He passes the room he put Aurora and Callum in. Callum is talking in hushed tones, and he feels a twinge of her panic. She has woken as unsettled as him.

When he’s outside, he crosses the small courtyard to the land outside the castle walls. The loch that surrounds Lowfell is as black as the sky, and the mountains on either side of it are shrouded with shadow.

Cold wind ruffling his hair, he delves into woodland and wanders through the ash trees until a chapel comes into view.

He enters. The gloom is thick within. Fragments of glass crunch beneath his boots as he passes the rotting pews and makes his way down the aisle. The stained-glass windows once showed the story of Night's triumph over the Moon Goddess, and how he trapped her within his prison.

He tenses when a flapping sound echoes around the space, but it's just a bird nesting in the rafters. He pulls himself on to the altar. He lies back on the hard stone, his knees raised, and clasps his hands behind his head.

He stares up at the emblem carved into the stone arch that supports the ceiling.

The door creaks open.

'I thought I heard you walking around.' Jack's low voice rumbles around the small chapel as he strolls towards him. Blake's second in command drops on to one of the pews at the front, stretching his legs out and crossing them at the ankles. 'Trouble sleeping?'

Blake makes a noncommittal sound before turning his head. Jack's dreadlocks are tied back from his face, revealing fading bruising around one of his eyes. Callum's handiwork, no doubt. Jack was responsible for keeping Callum out of the way while Blake persuaded James – the Wolf King – to ask for Aurora's hand in marriage. His sleeves are rolled up so Blake can see the tattoos curling around his corded forearms. Blake knows what that ink hides.

'She was in my dream.'

Jack releases a soft chuckle. 'You shouldn't have done it, you know.'

Blake sighs. 'Probably not.'

Jack runs a hand over his mouth. 'There are reports

that Night's Acolytes are gathering. Whispers that the Night Prince is creating an army in the Northlands for him to command.'

Blake pulls a face. 'The Night Prince? Fenrir, perhaps?'

'Still in the Snowlands. Last I heard, he killed an alpha and married his wife. Ingrid, I think her name was.'

'Alex, then.'

'Probably. I'll send someone to monitor the Grey Keep. He could make things difficult for us.'

The thread of light that Aurora gave Blake wraps around his soul and pulses inside him. He shifts on the stone, stretching one of his legs and arching his back slightly.

Jack frowns. 'What's wrong with you?'

'I can feel her.'

Jack's nostrils flare, then he chuckles. 'Luckily for you, she's not a half-wolf who's just about to go through the transition . . . oh, wait . . .'

'Piss off, Jack.'

'I remember when I was first bitten. I didn't leave my bed for a week.'

'Spend some quality time with your right hand, did you?'

Jack laughs as he stands. 'And the left.' He walks over to Blake and clasps his shoulder. Concern flickers across his expression. 'Learn to block it out or it'll drive you insane.'

Blake grunts, and Jack strolls to the door of the chapel.

'Get some rest,' says Jack.

He steps outside and the door swings shut, sealing Blake and the darkness within. Blake rubs his face with both hands. He imagines a cage around his soul, so that Aurora's thread of light cannot touch the rawest parts of him. The

worst of the feeling eases, though his blood still runs hotter than usual.

Exhaling, he stares at the carving in the stone above his head – the key with two crescent moons within. The symbol for Night’s prison.

The Northlands wind slips through the caved-in roof, stirring the scent of old blood. He wonders how many people were sacrificed on this altar. It was known that the former alpha of Lowfell secretly worshipped the God of Night. The fool thought he could offer up innocent blood in exchange for power.

Night doesn’t want blood, though. He wants souls.

More than anything, he wants the key to his prison so he can escape it and unleash his violence upon the world.

Night wants the Heart of the Moon.

He would offer unimaginable power to whoever brought it to him.



I jerk upright, gasping for air.

I'm tangled in the bedsheets. The shirt I'm wearing – oversized – is slick with sweat. I'm cold. So cold. Ice pumps through my veins, and I wonder if I'll ever be warm again. The world is dark. Grey. As if I'm seeing it through a veil of shadow.

A floorboard creaks. The mattress dips by my bare feet. A wave of heat washes over me, along with the scent of male and the mountains.

'Look at me.' The words are gentle but authoritative. A hand cups my cheek – callused and strong, yet careful. 'Look at me.' More demanding. This is the voice of someone who is used to people doing as they say.

Helpless, I bring my gaze up.

'That's it. Eyes on me. Now breathe.'

I suck in air, letting it fill my lungs, letting it clear away the darkness.

'Good lass. Come on. Breathe with me. In . . . and out . . .'

My heartbeat stops its cacophony in my ears. We've done this before, I think – in the kennels beneath Sebastian's castle.

Sebastian. Goddess. I killed Sebastian.

A fresh wave of panic cascades over me.

'Princess.' The word is sharp and commanding. 'Breathe. In . . . and out . . .'

A half-burned candle flickers on the bedside table next to a cup and a pile of books. A decanter of whisky sits on the mantelpiece where Blake left it. There's a throbbing pain in my side. James bit me – only hours ago.

Rain patters against the window.

'That's it. Come back to me, princess.'

Warmth radiates from the figure before me. The tight grip around my lungs eases, and my breaths come easier. 'Callum?'

'Aye. I'm here.'

Callum's expression is gentle, at odds with the tension in his body and the hard biceps straining against his shirt. His hair, the colour of dark sand, is brushed back from his forehead, and his green eyes gleam with concern.

'Are you in pain?' His forehead creases. 'Do I need to get Blake?'

'No . . . I . . . it was just a nightmare, I think.' I release a breath.

'What did you dream about?'

I shake my head as I try to remember. 'I was in a prison, and Blake was there, and something was pursuing me. And . . .' I tense as our conversation earlier this evening comes back to me. I bring my knees to my chest. 'Goddess, I need to tell you something about Blake. He's plotting against you.'

Callum frowns. 'What?'

'Everything he did . . . that bond he created that links my life to his . . . It was all part of a plan to steal the Wolf Throne. He's going to help you become the Wolf King, then he's going to challenge you. He knows he'll win, because our lives are linked. You won't kill him, because if you do, I'll die too.'

Callum tenses. 'He told you this?'

'Yes.'

Callum stares at me for a moment, his biceps like steel. A soft laugh escapes him and warms the cool air.

'This doesn't concern you?' I ask.

'Oh, it concerns me. It's just . . . I couldn't understand it, before. Why he'd done it. He threw everything away that he'd spent years working for. He set me free, he fought James, and when he saw you dying . . . His face . . .' He swallows. 'He saved your life. I've been searching for the reason for it since we got here, and I could find none. I started to think . . .' He shakes his head. 'I don't know what I thought. But this . . . *this* . . . makes sense. I find comfort in that, I suppose. Even if it complicates things somewhat.'

'We need to break the connection between Blake and me.'

'We do. But he won't try to kill me until I've won the throne.'

My pulse quickens. 'You think he'll try and kill you.'

'I'm certain of it. I forfeited to James, and for years, people have speculated about what would have happened if we'd fought. It weakens his claim. Blake won't allow himself to be seen as weak.' I grip Callum's wrist like I'm scared he's going to be ripped away, and Callum smiles. 'He will not defeat me. We have time. Until then, he could be useful. Get some rest,