

Bonus Epilogue: “Kidnapping a Queen”

Percy

The sunshine was warm on her head and shoulders, and Percy closed her eyes and tilted her head and leaned back on the stone bench, allowing as much of her face to bask in the delicious rays as she could. A bee buzzed somewhere near, its happy song harmonizing with the music of the flowers as the magic sang in their roots. She inhaled deeply, savoring the sweet smells of fresh blooms and the dark, loamy scent of freshly turned earth. After a long week dealing with perturbed nobles who suddenly found themselves much further down the line of succession than they once were and thus determined to test the limits of both her magic and her patience, she was thankful for a moment of silence in her favorite corner of the garden.

Now if I could only get Hayes away from the Restoration Committee for more than five minutes, I would be happy. We might be married, but I've seen Bede more than I've seen him this last week.

The sunlight filtering through her eyelids was all at once blocked out by something dark and soft. Percy yelped in surprise as the blindfold was tied behind her head, though the fingers that brushed her hair aside were gentle and familiar.

“Hayes?” She was suddenly weightless, being scooped off the bench and over a strong set of shoulders. “*Hayes!*” she shrieked, a mixture of surprise and laughter in her voice. “What are you doing?”

“Kidnapping you.” His steps were sure and confident beneath them, and Percy could hear his magic as it raced under the surface of the earth, dancing and twirling around the root of every flower and tree and flirting with her own.

The Realm of Duinn, rather than rejecting him completely when she became queen, simply made room for more. Under the combined influence of both their magics, Duinn not only recovered but flourished, responding to its new king and queen with joy.

Percy pounded lightly against his back. “That’s a very serious offense, you know—kidnapping a queen.”

“You know what else is a serious offense? The fact that if I want to have a moment to spend with my wife, I have to resort to premeditated crime.”

She laughed. “I get the impression that ruling a live realm involves a lot more meetings and committees than ruling a dead one.”

“*So many meetings,*” he groaned.

She bumped her fist against his back again. "You can put me down."

"No." He stopped and shifted his hold on her so that he was carrying her bridal-style instead of like a bag of potting soil. "The biggest benefit to kidnapping you was that it gave me a chance to hold you in my arms."

"Well, in that case." She looped her arms around his neck and laid her head against his shoulder. "Where are we going?"

"I thought the blindfold would have been a dead giveaway that it's a surprise."

"How on earth have you had time to put together a surprise with everything that's been going on?"

"You forget that I've been doing this ruling thing much longer than you have. I know how to delegate."

She giggled. "You have a Herman, is what you mean."

They came to a stop and Hayes let her drop slowly to the ground, keeping one hand at her waist. He gently turned her so that her back was flush with his chest, and she felt his fingers working at the knot at the back of her head.

"Ready?" he whispered into her ear, causing a delicious shiver to run all the way down her spine.

Her response was a breathless, "Yes."

The blindfold fell away and Percy blinked in the sudden brightness. They stood in a grassy area, separated from the palace gardens by a barrier of new trees, making it feel secluded and private. Piles of overgrown rocks were scattered about, indicating that they were standing in some of the ruins of the old palace. A light breeze blew, moving the tall grass like waves of water and rustling the leaves of the nearby trees.

But it was the long stalks with bright color that bloomed between the crevices of the rocks and blanketed the ground with a rainbow. Percy's eyes filled with happy tears. "Snapdragons!"

She turned and threw her arms around Hayes's neck.

He kissed the top of her head. "I couldn't help but notice that, though the gardens at the palace are, by all accounts, the most beautiful that anyone has ever seen, there seems to be a decided lack of snapdragons."

Percy stood back and wiped her eyes, looking around her once more with a wide, happy smile. "I wanted to make the gardens a place that *everyone* can enjoy. I'm the only person I know that likes snapdragons, so it seemed selfish of me to take up space when there were so many other blooms that deserved a space."

"You're a queen now, not a florist. You have to take up space if you're going to bloom, Snapdragon."

"I know. But now I have these all to myself." She studied the area closely. "Where are we, anyway?"

Hayes's arms tightened around her, drawing her back to him. "The place where it all began. This is where your nursery used to be. I used to hide here with Kharon when the days were too hard, and it was here that I first saw you as my princess." He kept one hand at her waist and traced the other up her side, to her shoulder, her neck, and finally her face. He cupped his hand around her jaw, sliding his fingers into her hair and tilting her head up to his. "And now it's here that I see you as my queen."

Her heart was fluttering with anticipation, but she couldn't help one last joke. "Except you can't see me."

His lips curled into a roguish smile that made her toes curl. "I have better ways of seeing you than with my eyes, Persephina."

And then he kissed her.