



KATE EMILIE MULLIGAN

Kate grew up in the United States and has been traveling the world since before she can remember. With a keen interest in the people, places, and cultures that the world has to offer, Kate never lost her love of travel. It is this attitude that inspired the concept of realms – that, taken with a pinch of magic.

Kate received a first-class degree in Marketing from the University of Greenwich and works in digital marketing... when she isn't dreaming up realms and writing about the adventures that take place in them. She blogs at katemulligan.me.

About Realm Jumpers & The Lonely Prisoner

Fifteen-year-old Jo has spent her whole life in a small village in the Goshenite Kingdom, repairing shoes and dreaming of adventure. Yet, after a string of murders culminate in an attack on Jo's life, her only hope is to trust Ash, a mysterious boy who tells her she is not who she thinks she is. Jo learns she is one of the last remaining Balancers – magical beings tasked with maintaining order across the realms – and, before long, she finds herself hunting those who murdered her family and discovering the war that destroyed the Balancers' realm is far from over.

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REALM JUMPERS & THE LONELY PRISONER

Chapter One

THE GONG OF SORROWS

The sun was sinking into the shadows of the night, purple dusk following in its wake. All the shops in the West Village were closing for the day, except for one. Jo stood in the front room of the cobbler shop and watched as the last of the villagers headed home. Their footsteps were replaced with the clinking of metal as the knights took their post.

'You don't have to stay,' said Mrs Schumacher. She held the shop's key in her hand while Mr Schumacher stood behind her, tapping his foot.

'I don't mind,' said Jo. 'I'm nearly done, anyways.' She thought of the pile of shoes waiting for her in the back room. There were more repairs to be done than there was night-time to complete them in, but if she could finish even one more it would be worth it. She got paid by the repair and she needed the extra money for Nan.

'It makes me nervous,' said Mrs Schumacher, rolling the key over in her hand. 'With everything that's been happening. It doesn't seem safe. Don't you want to go home? After all, you have lessons tomorrow. Won't your grandmother mind?'

'She said she wants to stay,' said Mr Schumacher, tugging at his wife's elbow. 'If the girl wants to work, let her work. It's already past closing and I'm hungry.'

'Really, I'll be fine,' said Jo, waving them away. 'Go home.'

'I suppose,' said Mrs Schumacher reluctantly. 'But I'm locking you in. When you're done, use your spare key to get out and lock up

behind yourself.’

‘I will,’ said Jo, trying not to roll her eyes.

‘Okay,’ said Mrs Schumacher. ‘See you tomorrow, then.’

It got quiet when they left, but Jo liked it. She was most productive when she was alone, and she knew it would be hours before she got tired, so she may as well work. It wasn’t that late, but fear sent people home before dark, these days.

Jo’s lantern lit up the back room where she got to work. ‘Which one of you wants to be repaired next?’ Jo rubbed her hands together and compared her options. There were pink slippers, scuffed with the adventures of a child and in need of re-stitching. A pair of gardening shoes with worn out heels. School shoes with torn laces and a hole in the cap, and dozens more shoes to pick from. Jo decided to go for the slippers.

Her workstation was covered in polish and scrap leather. Spindles of string in every colour lined the wall above and well-worn tools hung next to them. Mrs Schumacher had offered to replace some of the older tools, but Jo had refused. They were still perfectly functional. Besides, they’d seen a lot of repairs together, Jo and her tools, and it felt like a betrayal to part ways with them. She pulled a knife off the wall now and sang out loud as she got to work.

*‘She calls for me, a lady so sweet
From deep inside the meadows...’*

She wasn’t much of a singer, but they tended to get stuck in her head, the songs Nan would sing. It also helped the time go by when she had a lot of work ahead.

Jo enjoyed working at the cobbler shop. She was good with her hands and it was nice to feel like she belonged. Jo didn’t have many friends – well, only one, Mia – but the Schumachers liked having her around. At least, they wanted a daughter of their own.

*‘She waits for me, a lady so pure
Just follow the trail of primrose...’*

Jo sang through the night as she worked. She finished the pink

slippers and continued on to the next, and then another. She must have lost track of time because the counter bell from the front of the shop dinged as she was finishing her fifth repair.

Jo stopped singing and held her breath as she stood up. She thought maybe she’d imagined it when the counter bell dinged again. Her back went rigid and she dropped the shoes from her hands. The fresh coat of polish made her dizzy, but fear focused her senses.

Someone was inside the shop. But the shop was locked.

Quietly, Jo paced the back room. She could hide. There were endless stacks of shoes she could bury herself in. It could be a thief, or worse.

When the bell dinged again though, she didn’t go for a pile of shoes or hide underneath the desk. She picked up the hammer and spun it in her hand.

Tiptoeing against the wall, she approached the door. The floorboards creaked underneath her. She could hear someone on the other side. Kicking the door to the front of the shop open, Jo sprung forward with the hammer outstretched. ‘I’m armed!’ She yelled, her heart pounding.

A boy stumbled backwards, his eyes bulging. ‘Whoa, there,’ he said, holding up a hand between his face and the hammer. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’

Jo approached him carefully. He looked to be her age, but she didn’t recognize him. She glanced at the door and windows behind him. Nothing was broken. She kept the hammer raised. He had curly, midnight-black hair to his shoulders, a strand of it falling over his ear as he stepped backwards.

‘What are you doing here?’ Jo demanded.

‘I’m here for a repair,’ he said, raising a pair of boots.

She took another step towards him. ‘How did you get in?’

‘The front door,’ he said with a nervous laugh. Then nodding to the hammer, ‘Please don’t use that on me.’

Unbelievable. All that fuss, and Mrs Schumacher didn’t even lock the door.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Jo lowered the hammer.

'Is this how you greet all your customers?' The boy ran his hand through his hair, tucking back the fallen strand.

'Sorry, I thought the door was locked.'

'I'm kidding,' he smiled and Jo realized he had an accent. 'I saw the light on and I assumed you were open.'

'We're not supposed to be,' said Jo, her pulse slowing. 'But you're here now. What do you need?' Jo stepped back behind the counter, still keeping an eye on the boy. As she did, he met her at the counter and placed the boots between them.

'I came quite a distance for this shop,' he said. 'I heard you're the best in the Goshenite Kingdom.' He leaned in closer and with a sideways grin added, 'Maybe even the best in the whole Union.'

Up this close, Jo could see his eyes were green, almost yellow. He stared at her intently and it made her nervous. She picked up one of the boots. They were sturdy and heavy, black with golden-brown stitching. She hadn't seen anything like them before. But they clearly weren't his. They were too small. The soles of the boots were run down and the laces could do with replacing, but they were otherwise in decent shape. She could feel him staring at her as she examined the boots, but when she glanced up again, he was looking at her arm.

'I like your bracelet,' he said. 'Does it mean anything?'

Jo wrapped her hand around her wrist. It was her baby bracelet. A thin, silver band with two charms engraved on it: a plant and a clock. It was the only thing she had from her parents, and it was personal. 'No,' she said. 'It doesn't.'

He nodded, looking disappointed that she didn't have a better story to tell. 'I have to say, I didn't expect the Kingdom's finest cobbler to be—'

'A girl?' She knew what people said about her, that she was doing a man's job, that she wasn't enough of a lady, that she spent more time with shoes than people, that she'd go crazy like her Nan. She was used to it, but that didn't mean she was going to take it.

'I was going to say so young,' said the boy.

'Oh.'

'I mean, not that you're *too* young, like a kid or anything,' he stammered. 'Just younger than I expected... so, can you fix them? The sooner the better.'

'Rush jobs will cost extra.' Jo crossed her arms. 'Earliest I can do is two days.' Actually, she could probably do them in a few hours, but her stack of repair jobs was already big enough.

'That's fine.'

'What's your name?' Jo sighed and pulled out a piece of paper and a quill. 'For the pick-up.'

'Ash.' He smiled.

'And your—'

But her words got drowned out by the banging of a gong. It rang loudly and repeatedly. Knights ran past the shop, the clinking of their armour barely audible. Jo dropped her quill.

'What was that?' Ash asked.

But Jo was already with someone else in her mind: Nan. She had to get back home. 'It was the Gong.' He stared at her blankly. How did he not know what the Gong was? 'The Gong of Sorrows,' said Jo, shoving the paper under the counter.

'What does it mean?'

'It means you need to leave.' Jo picked up the boots and pushed through the back door. Wasting no time, she swiped the key and her lantern from the workstation and dropped the boots in their place.

When she returned to the front room, a stack of coins had been left on the counter and the boy was gone. Jo ran for the door, arms outstretched to leave, when she smacked into it hard. She jiggled the handle. It was locked.

The Gong struck a final time and Jo's ears rang as she stared at the door.

Another body must have been found.