

EVERMORE: Snow Falls

According to legend, she sat by the window embroidering, and her mind began to wander. And as her mind wandered, she accidentally pricked her finger. Three very large, very dark, drops of blood fell on her immaculate white silk dress, and as she watched the red stain spread quickly across her beautiful white dress, she made three very powerful wishes.

The first wish was that she would have a daughter with skin as white as snow, the second: that the daughter would have lips as red as blood, and the third: that the child's hair be black as ebony.

Soon after that, Queen Allana of Rylak did indeed give birth to a beautiful baby girl with beautiful dark hair and eyes, pale skin and red buttercup lips. Now Queen Allana was a loving and beautiful queen, utterly adored by the entire country, and the papparazzi's absolute favorite subject; so naturally, much about her was often romanticised and exaggerated, but she did in fact name her one and only daughter Snow. An unusual name to be sure, and it lent a certain amount of credence to the oft repeated, now legendary tale. The nation ecstatically celebrated the birth for weeks, and Snow's birthday became a national holiday.

Five years later Queen Allana, the 'Fairest of them all', mysteriously died in her sleep, leaving a devastated husband, the dashing King Roland, a lost and confused little girl, and an entire continent to mourn.

The loss of the beautiful and vibrant Queen Allana, had been more than the country of Rylak could bare, and a terrible grief hung heavily around the hearts of the populace, but none as heavy as that which shrouded the hearts of King Roland and his sweet little Snow. Hallways that had once rang with laughter, fell heartbreakingly silent as Castle White, once a hub of joyful entertainment, became a dark and painful fortress; its gleaming white stone allowed to darken, and thorny vines threaded their way up the towers.

And then it happened that King Roland was saddled with a visit from King Leopold and Queen Sylvia of the neighboring kingdom of Lonstas. Under the guise of discussing trade routes and diplomatic placement, King Leopold had invited both himself and his warm and loving wife for an extended stay with his

old friend, in hopes of reviving Roland's despairing spirit. And of course there were to be Balls.

Great Balls, that had Roland, with Leopold and Sylvia's most heartfelt and constant encouragement, throw open the doors of cold and silent Castle White. Famous orchestras were employed, the wine ran freely and the tables were heaped with an immense and delicious feast every night. And the nobility came, from all across the vast land of Rylak they came, and the hallways rang with music and laughter once again.

And that was where he saw her. A tall, slender young woman, with a crown of thick, glossy black hair that flowed gloriously down to the small of her back, and a delightfully strong boned and beautiful face with very dark, arched brows, she caught and held Roland's attention from the first moment he caught sight of her dancing so gracefully in her deep burgundy satin gown. Her name was Rosalyn, and he fell in love instantly.

They were married within the year, Snow had a new stepmother that appeared to adore her, and Roland had a new lease on life. The nation, overjoyed by the turn of events, erected a statue of the beautiful new queen, depicting her abundant beauty and grace. This statue still stands in the capital city of Lyra

Now, nearly eleven years later, Princess Snow sat at the same window her mother had sat at all those years ago, and looked out the same window in to the opulent centre courtyard. Castle White's courtyard was beautifully populated with dazzling water fountains depicting dancing nyads and laughing sprites, smooth stone sculptures of dwarves, unicorns and other unusual land dwellers, and a small, beautiful maze that started at the fragrant rose garden and ended at the crystal fountain of rainbows. And then there was the majestic apple tree that Snow's stepmother, Rosalyn, had transplanted there soon after her marriage to King Roland. This magically inspired courtyard was a sad reminder of an earlier time, a time when creatures magical and otherwise, lived in peace with the humans; a time that had long since past for their world of Evermore.

As Snow sat in her mother's famous window seat, looking down in to the courtyard, she couldn't fight the nostalgic sadness that overcame her. The same sadness that she felt every time she gazed at that tree. The tree towered majestically over the sculptures and fountains in the enchanted garden, and now covered with a soft veil of white flowers, it was truly queen of the garden. That tree, and her love for it, was one of the many things she had shared with her stepmother, they both had an insatiable love for the apples it produced in such abundance each year. Some of her fondest memories with the new queen,

Rosalyn, were the times they spent harvesting those apples together. She had been perhaps seven or eight, the year Rosalyn had Gregor the huntsman, shake the tree for them as they both danced about collecting the falling apples, all the while laughing hysterically together. The army of cooks in Castle White had turned many of those apples in to sumptuous pies and cakes; and on more than one occasion Snow had tip-toed down to the kitchen in the dead of night, intent on scavenging just *one* more piece of apple pie, when she would find herself face to face with her stepmother, intent on the *very* same thing. Smiling conspiringly at one another, they would devour the first pastry they came across, and would both blush appropriately the next morning when the cooks smiled knowingly at them. Life had been good.

It couldn't have been easy for Rosalyn, marrying the popular King Roland and stepping in to the much beloved Queen Allana, the 'Fairest of them all's' sky high shoes, but Rosalyn had done so with apparent ease. Instead of trying to emulate the much beloved and now deceased queen, Rosalyn had quite simply been herself, which had proven more than effective enough. Whereas Allana had been graceful, delicate and blonde; Rosalyn was tall, dark and lively, bearing in fact a strong resemblance to both Roland and his small daughter. And although the two young queens were at opposite ends, with regards to beauty, they had two very important traits in common: they both adored King Roland and little Snow.

Not much was known about the beautiful Rosalyn before that fateful night King Roland had caught sight of her dancing at the ball, and when little Snow had innocently asked the young queen about her past one day, Rosalyn had simply replied "I came in to being the moment your father spoke to me." Snow had always found that incredibly romantic.

Snow sighed. It was the eve of her sixteenth birthday.

Years ago, turning sixteen typically meant a betrothal was to be announced, but that custom had been steadily losing steam. Sixteen was now considered far too young to seriously consider marriage, and although arranged marriages still occurred, especially amongst the Aristocracy and Royal families, they were no longer the rule. Which was quite welcomed knowledge, as Snow literally cringed at the mere thought of a betrothal; she fervently hoped her stepmother wasn't planning on springing something so unwanted on her. Besides, who could she marry?

Well, there were plenty of princes in the kingdom of Devon she supposed, but she had never met any of them, Devon had always seemed so far away...and lawless. Lonstas, magical and exciting Lonstas, had the two Charming princes, Leonardo

and Nickoli, both of which she had met years ago, but Sarrilia hadn't had a Royal Family in nearly 100 years. Snow sighed heavily, she didn't know what to think, Rosalyn had taken to staring so emotionlessly at her...often. It made Snow shiver just to think of it. Anything could be going on behind those large dark eyes; Snow was sure she would rather not know exactly what.

Their relationship hadn't always been like this. There had been a time when Snow had laughed and played with her beautiful young stepmother, before her father had fallen ill, before the rebellion in the west, before it became apparent that her stepmother was actually a very powerful sorceress. What had happened to destroy their relationship Snow would never know, but as her father had become weaker, his vitality deteriorating, so had her relationship with her stepmother, leaving Snow more alone than ever. Gregor, head huntsman for Castle White, had sensed the heartbreaking loneliness that had settled about the beautiful young princess, and had taken it upon himself to befriend the young girl. She began to tell him her secrets, not that she had many, and he made time to listen gravely. Sometimes, if she was lucky, and he was in a good mood, he would take her in to the forest with him, and she would pick big bouquets of wild flowers as he told her stories about the surrounding lands, especially stories about Lonstas. She always listened with rapt attention when his stories featured the magical kingdom next to them; anything could, and most often *did* happen there, home to werewolves, vampires, elves and much more, Lonstas had utterly captured her imagination. Not that werewolves, vampires and elves didn't live in Rylak, but no one ever saw them...especially not in the cities. At least not anymore. Those days spent wandering around with the kind hearted huntsman were her favorite days, but they didn't happen so often anymore. The old huntsman had hinted that it wasn't proper, now that she was becoming a young lady and all, for a dusty old huntsman to spend so much time alone with her. He still listened to her stories on occasion, and told her a few of his own, so he hadn't abandoned her completely, a fact that she was more than thankful for. But it wasn't the same.

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Tomorrow was Snow's birthday, and she hadn't even planned a party yet. sometimes she felt like she was losing it. The thought crept up unbidden, she cringed, and tried to refocus on the spell.

Much had changed for Rosalyn of Rylak, and not all of it for good. Yes, there had been many good times following her marriage to King Roland, a whirlwind of celebration, years of what should have been unforgettable happiness with her

new husband and beautiful stepdaughter, but for some reason those memories seemed so distant now, as if they had happened to someone else, or they had been simply a dream. Even though Rosalyn *knew* they had in fact happened to her, it grew harder and harder to believe it. Sometimes it was even hard to recognise her own face in the mirror. She regarded her large dark eyes, her sleek black hair with its prominent widows peak, her dark brows and her strong cheekbones, placed so perfectly in her face; the same face she had regarded her entire life, yet utterly unrecognisable at times. Sometimes it frightened her. Rubbing her temples in exhaustion she thought back to the day she had received her favorite mirror. Life had seemed so simple then.

She had been informed that she had a visitor, exhausted from weeks of celebrating with her vibrant husband and the Lonstasian royal family, such close friends of her husband, she had been looking forward to nothing more than a long luxurious bubble bath followed by some much needed, deep, uninterrupted sleep in her personal chambers. Still, she was curious as to who would demand a private meeting with her immediately upon her arrival home, so she told the Page that she would receive her guest in her private sitting room.

Her guest was already awaiting her. Surprised and slightly put out, the young queen of Rylak, made her way down the corridor and in to her private room.

Heavy, red velvet curtains framed floor length windows that looked out onto one of the splendid gardens that filled one Castle White's many courtyards. Deep, cushiony velvet couches arranged themselves across from the small fireplace that warmed the room in the cool winter evenings.

Standing by the centre window, gazing out at the summer garden was Maleficent.

Maleficent was an extremely powerful rogue fairy from the Republic of Sarrilia; she was also Rosalyn's peer, and sometimes...her friend. Rosalyn wasn't sure if this visit should be welcomed...or if she should run. A thousand different thoughts raced through her head in the space of a minute, a thousand different emotions, ranging from happiness at being reunited with her one friend, and fear...cold, loathsome fear. Having served under the same Master, the women often regarded each other as irritating siblings, so as such, Rosalyn knew she had to acknowledge the fairy. Maleficent had been known to enact...peculiar and dreadful punishments upon those that offended her. It was something to be avoided.

Maleficent hadn't bothered to respond to the wedding invitation Rosalyn had sent her, and that still stung somewhat. But Rosalyn was wise enough to put such petty accusations behind her when dealing with the capricious fairy.

As the heavy door closed behind Rosalyn, Queen of Rylak, the famous rogue fairy Maleficent swirled around, causing her satiny purple and black gown to float around her tall and beautiful form. Her thick, long, blonde hair trailed down her back, and her large and beautiful violet eyes glowed spectacularly from her classically perfect face. She pursed glossy lips and regarded the tall dark haired queen with one carefully arched eyebrow.

Rosalyn looked deep in to those deep purple eyes and held one hand up, as if to ward off all evil.

“I am done with magic.” Rosalyn had asserted before the fairy could say a word. “I am Queen of a vast and prosperous land, I have a handsome and loving husband, and a beautiful stepdaughter. Soon, I hope, I shall have a child of my own, I have no more need for magic; I have everything I want. I am done.”

“Honey, it doesn’t work like that. You might think you are done with magic, but magic is far from done with you.” The fairy laughed heartily. “Once a sorceress, always a sorceress, love. I have never known you to be so naive; ‘done with magic’ indeed.” She laughed again. “Really, wherever did he find you.”

“Mal, I’m serious. I’m out. I just want to be happy with my family. I have done everything asked of me, I have been hardworking and loyal, and now I am finished.”

“Oh sweetie, not one of us gets away that easy. Don’t waste your time fighting the inevitable...you belong to *him*.”

“I belong to my husband, my stepdaughter and my country now.” Rosalyn’s chest tightened as she fought to speak evenly.

“Silly girl.”

“Shhhh.” Rosalyn begged. “My husband doesn’t need to know everything about my past...there are things I... I only want to be his wife now. Can’t you understand? I don’t want that life anymore, I don’t need power, I don’t need revenge, I am happy now, there is nothing you can offer me. Please, just go away.”

She looked anxiously over her shoulder, as the soft tread of footsteps sounded through the hallway, she hands fluttered helplessly to her slender throat.

“You really do love him, don’t you.” Maleficent realised, with a tinge of sadness and surprise in her seductive voice.

“Yes, I do.” Rosalyn replied honestly. “ But listen Mal, Rylak isn’t Sarrilia; humans don’t associate with fairies or creatures here, non-humans are expected to register at the city gates. Although it would be disastrous for me if you did...the questions.” Rosalyn shook her head and began to nervously rub her temples.

“Don’t give it another thought, I materialised at the castle gate...I hate paperwork.” The fairy yawned slightly in to her perfectly manicured hand, before running her hand down the thick and opulent curtain. “You must give me the address of your decorator...I’m getting bored with the current decor in my lair.” She smiled devilishly at the nervous young Queen.

“Your lair?” Rosalyn responded, somewhat sarcastically.

“It’s hidden, secret and protected by a dragon...it’s a lair.” Snapped the fairy. “Oh, don’t look so worried. It annoys me. I don’t understand why you’re always so uptight. Really. You’re hurting my feelings.”

“Well, you have done a terrible job of impersonating a human!” Rosalyn snapped back, irritated by her friend’s lack of concern.

“Whatever gave you the impression that I was trying?” Maleficent answered smugly as she plopped a fresh chocolate covered strawberry in to her mouth. “Why on earth would I even want to.” She shuddered for effect, suppressing a small smile.

“You’re in Rylak now. Here, humans are at the top.” Rosalyn reminded.

“Hmmm. For now.” Quickly Maleficent spun around causing her purple and black gown to float around her again and she caught both of Rosalyn’s hands in her own. “But let’s not spoil this little reunion with such unpleasantness. I have been sent here with a wedding gift for you.”

Rosalyn eyed her friend warily. “I got married over two years ago, Mal. You didn’t come.” She couldn’t help but get just one little dig in.

“I know, I was just so terribly busy. *Where* does the time go? Forgive me? Congratulations on that though.” She chuckled throatily to herself before turning serious and releasing her friend’s hands. “This gift isn’t from me...it’s from *him*.”

Instantly Rosalyn stood up straighter. Shivers, equal parts exhilaration and apprehension with a healthy dose of fear, rippled down her spine.

Maleficent snapped long elegant fingers and two Pages walked in carrying a large oval shaped object, wrapped in black velvet between them. The fairy pointed to a spot, and the terrified Pages obediently placed it against the wall before scurrying

in terror out of the room. Rosalyn wondered what Maleficent could have done in such a short span of time to elicit such a reaction, she dreaded finding out.

Waving her hand, Maleficent sent the door crashing shut behind them, a small smile playing across her lips.

Curiously Rosalyn approached the velvet wrapped gift, her heart pounded out a riotous beat. Maleficent studied the young queen intently.

“It can’t be, he would never...” She whispered to herself as she cautiously began to remove the velvet wrapping. Slowly she unwound the sheets of velvet that protected a large beautiful mirror. She gasped, her hands fluttering to her throat again. This was the mirror.

The mirror, his mirror.

Her fingers carefully and reverently skimmed over the engravings that decorated the opulent frame. Ornate and beautiful, the mirror seemed to pulse with a life of its own. She forced herself to breathe evenly as she gazed upon it.

“He did.” She whispered in awe, unable to take neither her eyes nor her trembling hands off the magic mirror.

“Hmmm.” Maleficent said with a tight, somewhat fake smile which didn’t quite make it to her large violet eyes.

“What an extraordinary gift!” Rosalyn breathed, falling under the spell of the mirror as she gazed at her reflection in its depths. It hummed softly back at her.

“Everything comes with a price Roz, ask yourself what you are willing to pay; you can still refuse to accept this. Don’t use the mirror! Never open your door to me again.” Maleficent advised in an unusually urgent voice. “Do you understand what the price is?”

“Sour grapes! You’re just jealous that our Master chose to give his prize mirror to me, a human, and not to you!” Rosalyn snapped with genuine irritation as the mirror whispered sweet assurances to her. *Yes, it was she, she was the one, this mirror had always been meant for her.*

The rogue fairy had sighed, it wasn’t really any of her business anyway, she was merely the messenger. “Perhaps you’re right sweetie, you just go on and enjoy yourself now; I can find my own way out. Or better yet, maybe one of those delicious guards I noticed in your foyer would...help me. Hmmm?” Maleficent smiled her most predatory smile as she tossed her shiny blonde tresses over her shoulder.

Rosalyn had hardly even heard her leave, and she certainly hadn't noticed the last pitying look the beautiful purple fairy had given her before slinking out of the room.

She hadn't laid eyes on Maleficent since.

But the mirror, the mirror was addictive. Bound to the truth it would answer any question put to it...but there was one small catch. It would answer in rhyme or riddle only, and sometimes those riddles could be difficult to decipher. Rosalyn found herself relying on the mirror more and more each day, and with it, the magic she had tried so hard to run from.

As her beloved husband Roland fell prey to a mysterious illness, the young queen found herself seeking assistance from darker, more powerful magic, so determined was she to acquire a cure for him. And as she trafficked with this powerful, dark and malevolent magic, it consumed more and more of the desperate queen, and still she watched helplessly as her love withered away.

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Snow looked up sharply as the sound of boots marching down the hall startled her out of her thoughts. The sound of military boots, marching purposefully down any hallway was a sound Snow found particularly disturbing. She supposed it was due to the lingering nightmares about the rebellion that still plagued her from time to time....

It started during the spring just before Snow's twelfth year. A faction of dissatisfied people on the far west coast of Rylak, upon hearing of Roland's debilitating illness, had began to question the White's right to rule. It had started as a dissatisfied rumble, fairly harmless and mostly talk, but by the time it made it upland, it was a full blown rebellion.

These ale emboldened rebels, more accurately labeled 'thugs', systematically marched through every town across Rylak, preaching their propaganda, and beating and threatening all those still loyal to King Roland and the White's. With growing numbers, they made their way to the to the capital city of Lyra, intent on storming Castle White nestled deep within.

Snow would always remember that day. Rumors of the rebel's march had finally met Snow's young ears, fearsome, gruesome stories of what was to befall the royal family had frightened the young girl to her very core, and she headed

straight for Rosalyn. Bravely, she tried to keep her fear in check as she hurried across the castle to the Throne room.

She stopped short as she neared the Throne room's gold inlaid doors, her stepmother and the White family Royal Advisor's voices wafted out from the partially closed doors. She stood silently in the doorway; no one noticed her, her stepmother was slumped on her tall jeweled throne, holding her head, while the Royal Advisor, Theodore paced agitatedly in front of her.

Suddenly Snow was afraid.

"What would Roland do in this situation? He always knew what to do." Rosalyn asked quietly.

"King Roland would have met with them and began the necessary negotiations, months ago." Theodore replied simply as he adjusted the lace on his fancy cuffs.

"Roland has not uttered a single word for two months!" Rosalyn snapped, despair heavily coloring her voice and she quickly covered her mouth with her own hand. She had not meant to snap at this kind man. Roland's loss of speech was a blow she was still reeling from, although his body had betrayed him early on, he had until recently, still possessed a sharp and witty mind, a mind which which Rosalyn desperately loved and relied on heavily.

"Perhaps if I met with them..." She trailed off, shaking her lovely head in silent bewilderment, her eyes wide and hopeful. For anyone to threaten such violence against Roland, against Snow...against herself, it seemed unimaginable. Roland had always been a warm, and caring sovereign, his reign was among the most prosperous and happy in recorded history. There was not, and had never been a cruel bone in his body. She didn't know what to do.

"Begging your pardon, your Highness, they do not want to meet with you." The Advisor gently replied.

"Well then what do they want?" The queen asked in confusion.

"Your head." He said simply, with a defeated shrug of his shoulders.

"My head." She repeated dully. Suddenly she felt cold all over.

"Your Highness, if we leave now, we may have just enough time to get King Roland, Princess Snow and yourself safely across the border. I can send our fastest horse to Crystallise and ask for asylum from the Charming family, they will not deny you." He pleaded, placing his hands on the arm of her Royal Throne.

The queen slowly got up from her chair and crossed the room to gaze out of her window down at the courtyard, her dark gold gown rustling with each step, the diamonds in her simple crown glistening in the morning sun. Dozens of people scurried about, going about their daily business in the gleaming city of Lyra, completely unaware that the rebel army was at that very moment, marching steadily towards them.

Mothers chased after happy tots, and teens scampered through the streets playing tag. A meat vendor chased a mischievous puppy away from his hanging sausages, and two young girls giggled nervously, fluttering their fans as a handsome young man passed them by. Lyra was a happy city, it always had been, even the sun shone proudly in the morning sky, as if in direct defiance to the evil awaiting this glorious city. Rosalyn watched through her window as the day to day life of Lyra played out.

“Your Majesty, they will tear this city apart to get to you and your family. They will leave no trace of you, of any of you...”

Rosalyn swallowed hard.

“What if we formally abdicate, will that spare Lyra and her people?” She asked tonelessly.

“I don’t know your Majesty; they will claim the throne whether they have to slice through you or not, but if we are going to leave, I suggest we leave quickly. They are but a few hours from the gate.”

She took a deep breath, taking one last look at the scene playing out below her, she turned to Theodore. “Ready the King and Princess Snow. Take them to Crystallise immediately. I want to speak to the people of Lyra myself.”

“What could you possibly say?” He asked.

“I’m not sure Theodore, but I feel we must say *something*. Roland would never have left with them thinking he had simply abandoned them, that he ran away. I can’t leave cowardice as Roland’s legacy. They have to understand, they have to know we love them, they have to be brave.” She turned back to the window, signifying that the meeting was now over. “I am so sorry Roland...” She whispered, barely audible, as she rubbed her forearms quickly, as if impossibly chilled.

But Snow had heard, and she had understood. She understood now, that the rumors were true. The rebels were on their way to her city. And once they got here, they were going to kill her father, Rosalyn and herself...in very nasty ways,

the rumours had been much, much too descriptive. So they were going into exile, or they were going to die.

Theodore slowly walked out of the throne room, his shoulders slumped and his head hung low, Rosalyn collapsed back on to her chair and covered her beautiful face with her hands. Neither of them had even noticed the terrified young girl standing in the doorway. Snow silently came up behind him.

“You attend to my father’s packing, I will get the assistance of one of my maids. Fear not as you are coming with us. My father would not leave you behind. Nor would he leave Gregor. Gregor! I must find him!” Snow quickly embraced the heart broken advisor before running off to save her friend.

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Out of the castle she ran, the two guards that stood sentry at the tall and imposing black iron gates that served as the main entrance to the famous castle, leapt into action as their young Crown Princess raced past them, her long black hair flowing behind her, her royal blue dress with the intricate lace flapping in the breeze as she ran.

Immediately they caught up to her. Strong arms enveloped her, and she struggled vainly against them, before she realised how shocking and crazed her actions must appear.

“There now, Princess, you are safe.” One of the guards whispered in to her ear, as the other unsheathed his sword, awaiting her unseen assailant.

“That’s right, your Highness, no one will touch you on our watch!” The other whispered fiercely.

“You don’t understand, I must find Gregor!” She whispered back equally fiercely.

“The huntsman?” The first guard questioned, still holding carefully to Snow’s small arm, his partner scanned the area, alert for any threat, his sword still drawn..

“Yes, Gregor the huntsman. Can you tell me where I will find him?”

The guards exchanged sad looks. The dark haired guard that had been holding Snow’s arm so carefully knelt down beside her, while the other looked sadly away. Dark times had fallen upon their city.

“Princess Snow,” He began haltingly. “There has been some trouble outside the city gates, and Huntsman Gregor has volunteered to help secure the city.”

“The rebellion. I know. I must find him, immediately. Please let me go.” She pleaded quietly.

The guards exchanged unsure looks.

“I can’t let you run through the streets, your Highness, it is unsafe. There are those who would....” his voice trailed away in disgust.

“Then take me to him.”

He looked at his partner, who nodded simply in return.

Quickly he helped the small princess back to her feet and began leading her through the crowded streets of Lyra with haste. Her stepmother’s words playing through her mind as she raced by. *“What if we formally abdicate, will that spare Lyra and her people?”* and Theodore’s less than satisfactory response. *“I don’t know your Majesty; they will claim the throne whether they have to slice through you or not, but if we are going to leave, I suggest we leave quickly. They are but a few hours from the gate.”*

But she was far too young to comprehend such ugliness, she looked up at the guard who swiftly led her through the streets, over to the young woman with a small child opening a door, who watched them pass with large sad eyes. She wanted to save them all, she couldn’t imagine anyone hurting them, she couldn’t imagine why anyone would. It made her angry.

The Outer Gates of Lyra were alive with activity, men, both civilians and soldiers alike, men of all ages from old, old grandfathers to young men just barely starting to shave. They had armed themselves with whatever weapon was available, and they all wore the same look of fear and disbelief. With half of the royal soldiers scouting the country for these insidious rebels...they had timed their assault perfectly. By the time the soldiers doubled back to Lyra, the city would be taken, the family destroyed. The air was thick with apprehension.

And then she spotted him. Gregor, beloved huntsman of Castle White. Wearing a dark work shirt and trousers, his sword and bow strapped to his strong back, how the rough assembly of brave men, deferred to him as he outlined his plan, his face set in grim lines.

“Gregor!” Snow shouted as she saw the familiar strong shoulders of the White’s huntsman.

Running up to him full speed, she catapulted herself in to his strong arms; something she hadn’t done since she was a child, and he caught her...as he

always had. With concern, the huntsman carefully cradled the frightened princess.

“Sweetheart! What are you still doing here!” He held her close, alarm settling in across his rugged features, the shadow of a beard just about to appear, dark circles outlined his tired eyes.

Snow wiped a stray tear from her face, she hadn’t realised when they started flowing and pulled back slightly to speak.

“Gregor, you have to hurry and pack, the rebels are headed for the castle. We are fleeing to Lonstas within the hour, you have to come with us!” She whispered intensely.

He closed his eyes soft blue eyes and hugged her close again.

“Sweet child, the rebels already have us surrounded. I have stationed myself here, to stand with the citizens of our fair city of Lyra. I am, and always will be loyal to Castle White. Princess Snow, it is far too dangerous for you to be here.”

He swept her up in his arms and headed back towards the castle, taking long, strong strides. The guard that had accompanied her stepped in behind.

“They should have taken the family away hours ago. I don’t understand...I sent the message myself.” He muttered. “You were to have left immediately, we were wrong, Gads we were so wrong...the rebels were much closer than we had assumed.”

The guard paled. “We received no such message, huntsman.”

Snow lost all colour. “Gregor, what will happen?” She asked breathlessly, her eyes wide as she searched his face for answers.

The kind huntsman stopped short and looked down at the trembling child. “We will hide you. That is what, we will hide you and we will tell the rebels that you had already left. Don’t be afraid child, I will fight for you. We all will.” He said, the guard beside them nodded solemnly.

“But I don’t want you to fight! Any of you!” She felt the tears streak down her face again, but this time she didn’t care.

“War has little to do with what most people want, dear.” He took her hand again. “Now hurry, we must warn your parents...they will need to hide too.”

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“How could this have happened?” Rosalyn asked incredulously, her eyes wide with disbelief as Gregor outlined the situation.

“I do not know your Majesty.” Gregor answered, his head hung low. “I fear we may have traitors within the gates. The rebels have surrounded the city.”

“If Snow hadn’t found you, we would have left the security of Lyra, began our journey to Crystallise, and been set upon immediately.” She realised with growing horror. “Murdered not a hundred yards from the city walls.”

He nodded unhappily. He hated to think that any of his men, or any of the many guards within the city could have betrayed the family so bitterly. But betrayed they had been. How many pieces of gold, jewels, promises of preference, how much had it taken to sell the lives of their king, his queen and this little princess. The rebel army lay just outside the city walls, laying in wait for cover of darkness, then they would storm the city, leaving a trail of blood behind them as they slaughtered their way to the castle. The odds were against anyone’s survival.

Snow looked around the room, Theodore in his fancy silk robes, trembling ever so slightly, his graying hair perfectly coiffed, his only thought was to get them to safety. Gregor, in his dusty black shirt and trousers, shadows around his eyes, a calm and steady resignation radiating from him as he related the heartbreaking news. And Rosalyn, so beautiful and slender in her dark gold satin dress, her hands and neck bejeweled with diamonds and topaz, her hair pulled softly back by her delicate crown, her eyes so dark and lost.

“Come your Majesty, if the huntsman has a secure hiding place, I suggest we take it immediately.” Theodore interjected urgently, his hands moving nervously. “The city is lost.”

The queen shook her head slowly, a deep anger began to play across her beautiful features and blaze from her eyes. “Hide Roland and Snow, I will find out who betrayed us in this fashion, and I will extract payment. No one is to know their location, save yourself and Gregor. Tell the army...tell the army that we are going to meet these rebels at the gate. Tell them that this city shall fight.”

~*~

Quickly Snow grabbed her bag off of her bed. Taking one last look at her room, she spared a moment to wonder if she would ever set eyes upon it again. This soft blue room, the one she had lived in her entire life. Instantly she was shamed, war was coming to her beloved home city and here she was fretting over a simple

room like a spoiled child. Straightening her shoulders she marched resolutely out in to the hallway.

Theodore was waiting patiently there to escort her to Gregor's, hopefully, secure location. Silently she handed him her bag.

"Is it true that my stepmother is going to fight." She asked, looking straight in to his eyes.

"Yes." he answered truthfully, his hands trembling again.

"She is going to die, isn't she." Snow said slowly.

Theodore looked away, unwilling to lie to the child but unable to admit that he too believed that Rosalyn would perish quite quickly. As would they all, he believed.

"I want to see her before I leave." Snow announced.

"Princess, she left explicit orders that you and your father were to go in to hiding immediately. You know that."

"Then you should lead me to her all the more quickly." She responded in a strong voice. Snow was determined to say goodbye to Rosalyn, she wouldn't leave without one last hug, one last goodbye. Her entire world was falling apart around her, she struggled for composure, she was barely twelve.

Nodding, the broken Advisor led the girl to Rosalyn's personal chambers.

~*~

Once outside the tall double doors that led to Rosalyn's personal chambers, Theodore gestured for Snow to go in, indicating he would wait outside. With a heavy heart, Snow cautiously opened the door to her stepmother's receiving room.

Rosalyn was nowhere to be seen.

Then she heard Rosalyn's voice from behind a small door to the left, a door that Snow had never noticed before. She entered the room curiously. The sitting room was as it always had been, only this time the floor length red velvet curtains had been pulled tightly shut, and no fire crackled at the fireplace.

Cautiously Snow moved towards the small door, but she stopped as Rosalyn's voice emerged once again. Who could she be talking too, Snow wondered.

“They know Roland is all but dead, and Snow is only a child. Me, they disregard entirely. They will move against us and destroy everything Roland has worked so hard to hold on to. They will murder us, if we are lucky. They will destroy everyone and everything in this city. Please, I have nowhere else to turn. They are almost here. Help me.” Rosalyn’s voice sounded choked and desperate.

Snow pressed herself against the wall, afraid to leave, afraid to even breathe. To whom were these desperate pleas directed? Who could possibly help them now?

Rosalyn began to weep...to beg...to promise.

The air around Snow began to feel, thick...oppressive. A rising, all consuming fear enveloped young Snow, and her head roared as her dinner rose in her stomach. Something terrible was in that room with Rosalyn, and Snow felt the sudden urge to run, yet somehow she found she couldn’t move her feet. Panic assaulted her and she pressed tight against the wall, forcing herself to breathe. The sense of malice continued, getting stronger with each passing moment and Rosalyn’s cries increased in volume and intensity, as if tortured beyond endurance; Snow fought the urge to scream herself, biting her lip to keep her silence.

And just when Snow thought she could endure no more, it ended, the presence was gone. Rosalyn opened the door, white faced and trembling, she staggered out toward her private bath without ever noticing Snow pressed against the wall in the shadows.

Cautiously Snow inched forward to take a look in the hidden room, almost against her will she opened the door to view who or what could have done this to her beautiful stepmother.

But the room was empty, save for a beautiful ornate mirror placed high on the wall.

~*~

Snow crept out of the room, a sick feeling growing deep in her stomach, again. Instantly Theodore was on his feet.

“Princess! Are you ill?” He asked in great concern, wrapping his arm around the young princess.

Numbly she shook her head and swallowed hard against the rising vomit. There was no way to describe the horror of what had transpired in that room, she had no idea exactly what she had witnessed. But the feeling of panic and horror

enveloped her each time she thought about it. She banished it from her mind out of necessity, some things are too horrible to ever think on again. She hugged him back tightly.

“I think I will wait until she leaves with the army.” Snow mumbled, her tongue feeling thick and alien in her mouth.

Theodore, very unhappily took her to wait by the main hallway. They didn't have to wait long. Within minutes the army had been assembled and they began their march towards the great castle doors. Snow realised, that from that moment on, she would always hate the sound of marching. The sound of military boots striking the hard stone floors in unison, echoing off the high ceilings of Castle White, that sound would always remind her of this very day. And this was a day to that should be forgotten...if she lived through it. Snow watched as they made their brave way down the hall, a piece of her heart breaking with every step.

Rosalyn, clad from head to toe in black leather, stopped suddenly as she noticed Snow clinging to the door frame, silent in her fear, her dark eyes brimming with tears. Spinning on her heel she strode over to the terrified child, and took both of Snow's hands in her own. Snow looked up at her cautiously, rumor predicted the castle would fall within the day, she had a pretty good idea what the rebels would do to them when it fell, and they were found.

“I will not let your father's kingdom fall. Trust in that.” Rosalyn whispered. “They will not breach these walls. They will touch neither yourself nor your father.”

Snow saw fear, not quite concealed behind the queen's mask of calm confidence.

“But where are you going?” Snow whispered back, a chill creeping up her spine as she took in her stepmother's black leather outfit, a long, black sword was strapped to her side, her luxurious, mane of black hair pulled severely back from her face. Skin tight, the black leather made her beautiful stepmother look cruel...and evil.

“To battle.” Rosalyn had whispered back, hugging her stepdaughter close to her fiercely

“Aren't you afraid?” Snow couldn't help but ask as she hugged her stepmother back equally fiercely.

“I'm terrified.” The queen had answered.

“Promise me you will come back.” Snow whispered.

“I promise.” Rosalyn whispered back, she kissed Snow softly on the forehead, and then she let go and rejoined the army.

Snow watched as they marched resolutely through the castle, the sound of their boots striking the stone floor in unison, soldiers, soldiers and more soldiers...all wearing the grim face of battle, all ready to die for her protection, for their country, with her beautiful, terrified stepmother at the head.

That had been the last time Snow could remember seeing the Rosalyn she knew looking back at her from those dark eyes.

Something happened during the course of that war. Everyone knew it, but no one spoke of it. Something happened that changed the young queen, where a scared but determined young woman led thousands of brave soldiers to battle against all odds, a dark and powerful Warrior Queen led them home in victory. But that queen wasn't Rosalyn, at least not the Rosalyn Snow knew and loved.

Queen Rosalyn of Rylak had led them to victory in a matter of days, and it was a bloody, messy, violent victory, that played itself out right outside the city gates. True to her word, not one rebel made it through those gates and in to the capital city, not alive that was, except for the few that Rosalyn herself dragged through. Rosalyn had captured several of the rebellion's leaders and beheaded them publicly in Lyra's town square. It was said that she laughed as each head, sightless eyes wide with fear, rolled across the ground towards her feet. The bodies were burned in a fire right there in the square, the heads she kept for herself.

She had made an example that would never be forgotten. No one dared question the House of White's right to rule again.

~*~

And then one day it happened. Rosalyn would never forget that day.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall”

“Who's the fairest of them all?”

She lazily asked, as she ran the gold and jewel encrusted brush through her long silky black hair. It had become habit now, each night she sat in front of her mirror and asked for reaffirmation of her stunning beauty. Each night the mirror obliged her.

But this time it answered:

“Oh lovely Queen”

“Your beauty is true”

“But young Snow White now surpasses you”

Rosalyn put down her brush, stunned by the admission. Her heart stopped and she suddenly felt cold; the mirror was incapable of lying. Throwing back her chair she stalked out of her room and flung open the doors to Princess Snow’s sleeping chambers. There had to be some mistake.

Laying in her huge canopied bed, the gauzy canopy curtains floating ever so slightly in the midnight breeze, soft blue blankets pulled up around her head, was Snow. Her thick shiny black hair spread across the satin pillow like wings, her dark lashes caressed the top of her high cheeks and her perfectly sculpted rosebud lips made a sharp contrast to her creamy pale complexion. She was beautiful....very, very beautiful.

Rosalyn regarded her with sharp eyes, when had this happened? Just last week she had been a child. A pretty child to be sure, but a child just the same. Certainly not the “fairest of them all”.

“No, please. Anyone but her.” The Queen whispered in horror. Pain crept up her spine and gripped her heart, she wrapped both of her arms around herself to contain her agony.

The mirror had prophesied this years ago. It was an end to her pain, finally the answer to her prayers, but instead of elation, Rosalyn felt only horror. She had never felt so powerless. There had to be another way....

She began her search in earnest.

~*~

Hidden deep in the bowels of Castle White and warded by the strongest of magic, was a small, but terrifying room. No one entered this room without the approval of Rosalyn, the sorceress queen of Rylak.

The room was dimly lit by strategically placed candles, ancient and terrible symbols decorated both the ceiling and floor, a floor stained by horrors and events never spoken of. Horrors that *should* never be spoken of.

The Queen of Rylak spent much, much time in this dank and sinister room. Much more than she had ever envisioned she would when she had first commissioned it. Much more than she had ever wanted to.

And so, on the eve of Snow's sixteenth birthday, Rosalyn made one more trek down to this most secret room....

She took a deep breath upon entering the room and went straight to the stone table, just left of centre in the room.

She gripped the knife that was placed conveniently on the table with her right hand and made a neat slice down the wrist of her left. Carefully she replaced the knife on the table beside her and held her weeping wrist over the cauldron, chanting ominous sounding words in a soft, low voice.

Closing her eyes, she began the chant from the beginning again, only faster and with more passion and intensity. And still, her wrist wept its life blood into the cauldron that sat on the table.

Alaric, her Stepmother's newest body guard stepped out from the shadows. Where ever Rosalyn went, he was surely no more than ten paces behind...even here in this small corner of hell. He was tall, and well built with thick, very blonde hair and equally dark eyes, eyes that now held more than a small dose of apprehension. He watched his sovereign bleed uncontrollably into the strangely sinister looking cauldron, his handsome mouth strained and tight. He reached for a towel to staunch the blood that flowed so freely, how he hated all of this.

Her voice rose and he stepped forward in alarm.

She screamed and her breathing became erratic. From the four corners of the room, great shadows joined together monstrosly, taking on the hideous shape of a beast, it loomed over the beautiful queen, as if preparing to consume her whole. Involuntarily she shuddered.

"Alaric" She gasped. "Get the hell out out of here or it will kill us both!"

He drew his sword quickly and stepped forward, determined to place himself between the hideous shadow beast and his queen.

"You can't help me, you can only assure both of our deaths! Go!" She cried, her face pasty white from blood loss.

He threw the towel at her to staunch the blood, and was horrified to watch the shadow beast knock over the cauldron, sending the contents flowing all over the cold stone floor. Valiantly Rosalyn struggled to remain standing as the shadow beast consumed the blood offering from the floor, floating all over the terrified queen's form. She flinched and gasped as if burned with every caress.

Hating himself, but knowing that she spoke the truth...he left. Outside the room he softly swore to himself, how many times would they have to do this. How many times could she stand it? Strong as his queen was, in the end she was still, only human. Would she ever find another way? In his heart, he hated the mirror...it always came back to the mirror. If he ever he had the opportunity...he would smash it to slivers. He hated the dark magic she trafficked in, yet he understood why, and still he blamed the mirror. He struggled to block out the sound of her screams, wanting to burst in and slaughter the shadow beast, yet knowing his sword was laughably ineffective when dealing with something so formless and evil.

And then she stopped screaming. He cautiously opened the door.

Rosalyn lay in a heap in the centre of the room, her silver gown ripped and stained with her own blood, her face and arms covered in small burns and bruises. He rushed to her side and cradled her head, she was still breathing...and she was crying. He didn't have to ask, it was another failure.

“Find Gregor for me. Bring my huntsman here.” She rasped through dry and cracked lips.

He closed his eyes, torn between relief and sorrow. She had finally given in.

~*~

And so Snow sat in her mother's famous window seat, gazing at the courtyard below her. It was the eve of her sixteenth birthday, she assumed there was to be some sort of a party planned, her birth date was after all, a national holiday. But she had heard nothing.

Rosalyn, distant for years, had recently become eerily silent. Always busy with something, something magical Snow had come to realise after her encounter with the mirror all those years before. She hated the mirror, although she knew it was ridiculous, she held the mirror responsible for stealing Rosalyn from her.

Sighing deeply, she rose from her seat and decided to check in on her father. Roland, weaker than ever, hadn't spoken a word in nearly four years. Four very, very lonely years for Snow. Regardless, every day Snow checked in with him, sitting by his bedside and chattering about whatever came to mind. And every night, when he was wheeled out to his balcony to breathe in the fresh evening air, Snow came with him and pointed out the constellations, just as he had taught

her. Even though he couldn't outwardly acknowledge her, Snow had the distinct feeling that he was aware of, and appreciated her company.

The hallways between Snow's bedroom chamber and Roland's sick room weren't very long, but they were beautiful. Eye catching tapestries and beautiful White family portraits hung on the walls, a family crest, impossibly luminous chandeliers and an abundance of fresh flowers, followed the young princess as she walked.

Carefully she opened the door to her father's sick room. As far as sick rooms went, this one was magnificent, which is as it should be considering Roland was still king. The walls were covered in rich cream, satiny paper, family portraits adorned every wall, the ever present fresh flowers filled sparkling crystal vases, and the floor length dark green curtains were pulled wide open to let the early morning sun fill the room.

Roland lay in a velvet bed jacket, in the exact same shade of rich emerald green as his curtains, on his large, comfortable bed. A cream coloured throw blanket across his knees, his crown placed carefully on his regal head, and a distant look in his eye as he stared blindly at the wall. He had not changed expression in years.

Alda, his nurse smiled warmly at the princess, and she put down her embroidering. Robust, with a kind, wrinkled face, the nurse radiated an inner serenity, the kind of serenity Snow hoped one day to achieve.

Bedridden for years, Roland's thick head of dark waves had grown to his shoulders, Snow was saddened to notice the streaks of white on either side of his head, that seemed to have appeared over night.

Apparently Alda the nurse, noticed Snow's distress over the streaks as well. "Now, now, there dearie, those streaks just make him distinguished looking, you know."

Snow smiled wryly. "Yes, yes they do."

"Now, I'll be going to make myself a cup of tea, would you care for one as well?"

"No thank you, Alda. I'm just visiting with my father for a few minutes." Snow replied warmly.

The nurse curtsied and left the room. Snow bent down and kissed her father on the cheek.

Throwing herself in to the chair beside his bedside, she let out a long teen age girl's sigh.

“So, I'm hoping there are going to be some good looking boys at my party tomorrow. Now don't get all upset, I'm not planning on *dating* any of them, it's just that I am going to be sixteen tomorrow and it would be nice to dance with a real boy. I have been taking those horrid lessons with Madame Bagoda, yeesh....she is a pill, and she always smells funny too. Just between you and me, I think she has been hitting the sauce. Anyway, I have been taking those lessons with her for six years now, six long, long years and the last time I danced with a real live partner was...you.”

She fell silent for a moment as a memory washed over her.

“I miss you Dad.” She whispered.

Snow leaned over and held her father's hand. His hand felt so warm and vibrant in hers, it was hard to believe that he was all but dead. *Find a cure Rosalyn, find a cure.* She thought hard, she knew, as did the entire nation, that Rosalyn had been searching endlessly for a cure for this mysterious, and completely debilitating disease. Snow also had a strong feeling that Rosalyn had been searching on paths less often followed, magical paths in other words, that would explain her stepmother's strange silence, at least.

“So, it's my birthday tomorrow. I'm going to be sixteen Dad, I don't feel any different, but sixteen sounds a lot older than fifteen.” She laughed a little at herself. “I wish, I wish that you could be at my party so we could waltz together like we used to. I really liked that. But I promise to think of you all night long, and come in here when the party is over and tell you everything.”

There was a sudden knock on the door.

“Come in.” Snow asked curiously, no one ever disturbed her when she was in with her father, unless it was a true emergency.

Gregor, the huntsman stuck his head in the door way.

“Princess Snow? I was on my way out to the Grey Forest, and I thought you might like to join me?” He asked, a sad and distracted look on his face.

Snow smiled widely, it had been months since she had been allowed to leave the grounds of Castle White, and years since Gregor had taken her on an adventure.

“I would love to!” She sprang out of her chair in excitement. She leaned over to kiss her father again quickly. “I will be back in time for star gazing Dad!”

“Let me just grab a coat!” She sang over her shoulder as she raced down the hallway to her room where she grabbed a long red coat. Pulling it on quickly, she looked down to examine her outfit, bright yellow tights, a soft blue sweater and her equally bright red coat...what an outfit. She laughed at herself again, oh well, the forest didn’t care what she wore. Pulling her long dark hair off of her forehead with a blue headband, she danced her way back to the huntsman.

“I’m ready.” She announced with a smile.

“I see.” He replied with a shake of his head. “Then let us make haste.” He smiled back at the young princess.

And so they went.

Snow was as happy as she had ever been. She had always, and would always love the long walks with her one best friend, Gregor. She wondered when the tales of lands far away would begin, she could hardly wait. The kindly huntsman had never disappointed her, and he seemed to know everything. The fresh forest air was enchanting, the birds warbled snippets of joyous tunes, rabbits scampered by, and Snow even thought she caught sight of a magnificent stag, gazing at her from the distance.

“Really, Gregor, I love the forest. If you can’t take me out, why can’t we get someone else, although, of course I prefer you. I understand all about the danger, and how I shouldn’t travel alone. But I am getting so bored in the castle...it’s lessons and books, then even more lessons. I feel like I never have any fun anymore.”

She turned to look at her friend.

“Gregor, what’s wrong?” She asked, he looked so distracted, she had never seen him look that way before, it worried her.

“Sorry, Princess?” He asked absently, his usually sharp blue eyes, watery and unfocused.

“I asked what was wrong, you aren’t acting like yourself.” Snow asked with concern. “Are you ill?”

“No...not ill.” he mumbled gruffly.

She shook her head slowly, she didn’t believe him. The stag that she had thought she had seen earlier emerged on the path in front of them, they both stopped to admire his magnificent antlers. That was the word for him...magnificent. He

looked up in to Snow's large dark eyes. Snow was so delighted, she could hardly breathe.

"Oh Gregor! Isn't he beautiful!" Snow whispered softly. "Do you remember the first time you showed me a deer? I do, they look so gentle and kind, I would love to pet one. Although I'm not sure how I would ever get close enough, and I am pretty sure this stag wouldn't appreciate it if I tried either. But just look at him."

The stag suddenly startled and jumped off the path, Snow watched in awe as so effortlessly and gracefully galloped away. A bird, a bluebird squawked in apparent terror and Snow spun around in alarm.

Time stood still.

Gregor. In his hand, he held a long evil looking knife. Snow's heart stopped as she realised that he was holding it high above his head...as if he was ready to strike. But what scared her more was the look in his eye, he was horrified, remorseful....conflicted. For one endless minute they stared at each other.

"Run." He whispered, his lips quivering as he struggled for control of his hand. "She's asked for your heart." He managed to spit out.

She didn't need to ask. It could only be Rosalyn of Rylak, only Rosalyn had enough power to spellbind someone as strong as Gregor.

"Run." he whispered again, hand shaking with exertion, beads of sweat trailing down his face as he fought the compulsion to slay her.

And so she did.

She ran east. She ran to Lonstas.

I hope you enjoyed this novella, please follow Snow as she flees to the magical kingdom of Lonstas in Evermore: The Rylakian Heir.

And the story continues in Evermore: The Secret in Sarrilia coming soon!

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