

EVERMORE

The Rylakian Heir

Chapter 1

The forest was dark; the moon was just rising in the sky like a crystal ball floating in a bed of royal blue velvet. Bare branches of sinister looking trees reached out to her, like the gnarled fingers of a crone, inflicting unwanted caresses across her cheek; she flinched. Hopelessly lost, she had no idea how far she had come. In the distance an owl cried and something sprang up from the darkness; stifling a scream Snow fell to the ground in defeat and began to silently cry. She had been so strong for so long; stronger than any sixteen year old should ever have to be. Memories assaulted her continuously, replaying in a loop she couldn't escape, but always ending with Gregor the huntsman's face. She would never forget it, it had been burned in to her mind.

It was the bluebird that had alerted her. She had always had a special rapport with birds, with most woodland creatures in fact. It was Gregor himself who had introduced her to the wildlife surrounding Castle White. If the tiny bird hadn't chosen that exact moment to burst in to song, would Snow be alive today? In her heart she had to believe that Gregor would have stayed his hand regardless.

To most he was simply Gregor, beloved huntsman of the Castle White; to Snow, he was Gregor, patient confidant for a lonely little girl...Gregor had been her friend; at times her only friend. It seemed inconceivable that he would do her harm. She'd spun around just in time to see the knife held high in his hand, a look of horror across his face as he struggled against the spell.

The betrayal was unimaginable.

"Run" He'd whispered through quivering lips. "She's asked for your heart."

And so she had. For hours and hours she ran, stopping only to drink from the stream. She ran until she was certain she had safely passed the Rylakian border and now sought refuge in the infamous Kingdom of Lonstas. But where to go from here? A life lived within the walls of Castle White had left the young girl ill prepared for flight; all she was truly certain of was that she had to find water again, and soon. Desperation had given way to exhaustion; eventually Snow gave up and laid her head on the cool damp grass. Come what may, she had nothing more to give.

A voice in the darkness.

Dehydration coupled with exhaustion made her vision hazy and she thought he resembled a dwarf; as he was easily a full three inches shorter than herself. She couldn't find the energy to move.

"The name's Doctor Cornelius Rutherford, but you can call me 'Doc' sweetie." With a strength that belied his small stature, the good doctor had lifted Snow up on to the horse with him, and began trotting through the dark forest. Mute with hunger and exhaustion she had simply stared back at him listlessly.

She had listened silently to the gentle melodic voice as the little Doctor spoke softly to her. He had taken the shortcut through the forest on his way back from treating an elderly elf for a

terrible cough when he had come upon the seemingly lifeless girl. Surprise flashed through Snow's eyes, human's didn't treat elves, and then she remembered that Lonstas, unlike her native Rylak, didn't enforce segregation between humans and creatures. Although not a perfect system, Lonstas was the first kingdom in their world of Evermore to have taken these first baby steps towards equality and coexistence.

Doc had brought her home to his cottage, and with the help of his six kind hearted brothers, nursed her back to health, physically at least; her emotional scars would take much longer. He provided a home for her, fed and clothed her...and loved her as his own. All seven little men doted on her, cherishing every smile and showered her with their unconditional love in return. It was more than she could have hoped for.

But Snow knew one thing for certain, this idyllic life wouldn't last forever; her stepmother would never stop....

A relentless pounding on the cottage door abruptly brought Snow back to the present. She swung the door open to find herself face to face with Cindy, flushed, out of breath and in mid pound. Cindy was the wealthy daughter of the kingdom's most successful Entertainment Manager, Caspian Vanholston. This of course might explain her flair for dramatics. She was also Snow's best friend; currently her only friend.

"Well, he's gone and done it." She announced as she brushed past Snow, and flung herself in to one of the many sturdy, wood chairs surrounding the long table. Sighing dramatically, she shook out her dark gold curls and dropped her cameo face in to her hands.

"Who has done what?" Snow asked cautiously. Her strict upbringing in Castle White had not included exposure to melodrama, so her dramatic and capricious friend never failed to amaze her. She smiled fondly at the despairing little blonde.

Snow regarded the bowl of shiny red apples placed in the centre of the table, her hand hovering as she sought out the shiniest, reddest of the bunch. She never could resist a perfect apple. The perfect apple tree that her stepmother had planted in the centre of the court...they had had such fun harvesting those apples together...but that had been 'before'. Something had happened to change their relationship; Snow had never known exactly what, but if she closed her eyes now, she could almost smell the blossoms on that tree.

"My father!" Cindy exclaimed, green eyes brimming with tears. "He's been out again last night with that horrible Madame Morgada! That's twice this week!"

Snow swallowed hard and nodded slowly. She understood her friend's fear of 'The Stepmother' only too well; her own had proven deadly.

"Oh thank goodness. I thought you meant Prince Leonardo had gone and married a fairy princess from another realm." She teased lightly, hoping to lighten the mood somewhat; the Crown Prince was usually Cindy's favorite topic, if anything could bring a smile to her doll like face, his name could.

Cindy peered up at Snow from between her fingers. "My life is practically over! And all you can do is make jokes!" She was silent for a minute as she considered.

"And the tabloids haven't even hinted at any sort of romance in his life yet. As far as they can tell, he's happily slaving away at med school". Cindy placed her hand over her heart and took a deep breath. "This is bigger than Prince Leonardo Charming."

And that really was saying something, because the elder Charming prince was the object of every teenage girl's fantasy, in all the known realms. A perfectly muscled six foot two, with shoulder length brown waves, intelligent blue eyes and a warm, confident smile...he was the picture perfect, although somewhat reluctant, celeb. Rumours of his courage on the battle field

and prowess with a sword abounded, but Prince Leonardo was at heart, a man of peace. Which of course is why he had spent the last several years in med school, he wanted to learn how to save lives; anyone could take them. This only seemed to enhance his celebrity status. The girls were both members of his fan club; in fact that's how Cindy had befriended the tall, shy new girl.

"Okay." Snow nodded slowly, she now knew what exactly was expected of her. Once Cindy was wound up, only hours of speculation and considerable patience would bring her back down. In other words...girl talk, and lots of it.

Saying that Cindy was uncomfortable with her father's re-entrance into the dating game was a huge understatement; it had been simply the two of them, Cindy and her doting father, for so terribly long now, and Cindy had never really been very good at sharing. Snow was quite sure that had she been older when her father, King Roland, had begun dating Rosalyn, her dreaded stepmother, she would have reacted a lot like her desperate friend. Unfortunately there wasn't anything Snow could do for her desperate friend, aside from providing a shoulder to cry on and an ear to listen with. Cindy was her first best friend, she was learning on the job.

"Let's talk about it while I get ready." Snow suggested as she led the way through the homey cottage and up the stairs to her bedroom. Eagerly Cindy followed, hands punctuating various points as she poured her fears and frustrations out.

"Crap Snowy, what can I do?" Cindy moaned. "She's so horrible! What if he marries her?" Tears spilled down her cheeks again.

In truth, Madame Morgada was...well she was tough. Tall, with dark auburn hair pulled back fiercely from her face in to the neatest chignon imaginable, arched eyebrows over piercing gray eyes and a perfect although somewhat narrow nose. The Madame was beautiful, but in a stand up straight and make sure there isn't any dirt under your finger nails kind of way. Her twin daughters Annette and Juliette had inherited their looks from their mother...as well as her imposing presence, and they steadfastly avoided Cindy and Snow. But most of the popular group did anyway, so Snow didn't think it was personal. Well, maybe just a little personal.

"Okay," Snow replied, slipping her feet in to her long, shiny white boots, as she tried to think both diplomatically and tactically as she had been taught at Castle White. "He hasn't formally introduced you, nor has he suggested a family dinner. This has all been very casual, I would think you are safe until one of those situations is proposed."

"Don't use that word, it sends creepers up my spine." Cindy glowered.

"Sorry, maybe he is just...just..." Snow trailed off as she looked for exactly the right phrase, the one that *wouldn't* send Cindy into hysterics.

"Just what?" Cindy moaned. Then she gasped out loud, startling Snow completely, as she laid her hand across her mouth in horror.

"Oh no! You can't do that! What are you thinking?" Cindy jumped off the bed and pointed at Snow's new white boots. "You can't wear those fabulous boots with that ugly old dress."

Snow sighed loudly as Cindy began to quickly rifle through her large, walk-in closet, they really didn't have time for this, but Cindy had very strong ideas with regards to fashion. Very strong ideas.

"He's just...he's just what?"

"Just...passing time. Maybe they're just friends, you know playing cards and betting on wagon races? He might be lonely...maybe..." Snow hoped so for Cindy's sake, although she seriously doubted it. Caspian Vanholston was the single most sought after gentleman in the village, he was never, never lonely, and The Madame Morgada was not the sort to waste her time. Ever.

"He doesn't bet on wagon races...much."

Cindy took a deep breath and nodded before continuing. “Okay, maybe. I hope you’re right.” Neither one of them added the silent *but I seriously doubt it*, that lingered in their heads. They didn’t need to.

Cindy tossed a silver and white dress on the bed. White with silver panels up the side, it was form fitting and...short. “Wear this.” She commanded with more authority than a five foot two inch, doll like teen should ever be able to achieve.

Snow eyed it suspiciously. “I think it has a skirt.”

“Not with those boots and this cape it doesn’t.” Cindy beamed as she held out a royal blue, velvet cape. No one dared to argue Cindy when it came to fashion, and Snow was no exception. She *was* usually right, and besides that, you wouldn’t win anyway, Cindy could out-talk just about anyone Snow had ever met; she was a master.

The master herself, had chosen a filmy lavender sleeveless top, matching tights and sparkly sandals. She was adorable.

“Ugh.” Snow said as she grabbed the garments. It was actually a great outfit.

“Honestly Snowy, I don’t know what you’d do without me.” Cindy began to buff her nails, a small smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

Cindy liked to feel needed.

Chapter 2

The town of Turin was set in the valley, just east of the great mountains that separated the Rylak Kingdom from Lonstas. Turin, being part of Lonstas, was ruled by the benevolent and much celebrated Charming family, and had been for generations; much like Rylak was ruled by the White’s. Surrounded by dense forests, vibrant meadows and an abundance of lakes and rivers, Turin was your average Tudor style village. Now stories disagree on the actual reasoning, but Turin, despite its small size was a prominent and well known village. Some say it was the loss of the Idiot, others firmly believe that the magic wishing well, dead centre of town, tapped in to some magical ‘ever after’ stream, attracting good luck; still others feel it was the neighbourhood watch and aesthetics board. But for whatever the reason, Turin was home to the Holiday Palace of the Charming family, and that was enough to put it on the map.

Although all of the roads in Turin were made of cobblestone, it was only the red ones that led to the town square. By day traveling merchants displayed their wares, such as exotic spices, freshly caught fish, fresh fruit, and Cindy’s personal favourite; imported fabrics. At night, lovers, young and old alike congregated to stroll through the fragrant gardens and whisper sweet nothings beneath the moon. But the true heart of the square was that wishing well.

Legend said, that a sincere selfless wish, spoken from an honest heart, no matter how improbable, would always come true. Now teenagers for years had been making wishes for this person or that person to like them and so on, but as these wishes were not completely selfless, they were destined to fail. Adults, not wanting to waste time with a fickle well, consulted fairy godmothers, apprentice fairies and in some cases sorcerers.

The Legend had never been proven either way.

Now that particular morning, it wasn’t the exotic spices, the infamous well or even the fresh fruit vendors that caused the girls to be late for school, it was the newly arrived ‘Fanciful Fabric’ vendor that had caught Cindy’s eye. Cindy held close the dream of being a fashion designer one day, in the capital city of Crystallise. Crystallise was home to all of the wealthiest and best dressed people of all natures and origins in the Lonstas Kingdom. If Turin had a ‘season’, that

being when the Charming family was in residence and throwing balls, Crystallise was one big 'season'.

Dashing up to the Tudor style school as fast as their not so sensible shoes would allow, Snow had the distinct feeling that she was being watched. Quickly she spun around just in time to catch a very tall, muscular boy with longish dark brown hair, look the other way...but not before they made eye contact.

His light brown eyes, flecked with green and gold were really unusual, but that wasn't what made her pay closer attention, it was the way he moved. He was fluid, he moved in a sleek, dangerous way, like a predator, and he was really, really cute; she knew in that moment that he wasn't human. She found herself staring at the boy; she had never been this close to a creature before, Rylak had been very strict in keeping non-humans far away from its cities and castles. Socialising between species was definitely not encouraged by the Aristocracy, regardless what kingdom; in fact it had been known to tarnish reputations, in some cases beyond repair. The only other non-humans that Snow had encountered as of yet were the Cronos of Turin. But no one ever counted them; all they really cared about was sugar packet stealing and bingo anyway.

The boy turned back and flashed them a truly 'devil may care' grin with a teasing lift to his eyebrows, before sprinting out of sight, which of course caused an embarrassing red blush to spread across Snow's pale cheeks.

"Oh he was so cute! Do you know him? Please say you do!" You could always count on Cindy to notice the really cute ones immediately.

So naturally there she stood, her rosebud mouth open and awe stamped across her dainty face; the boy had kind of taken their breath away.

"Nope." Snow slowly shook her head. "Not at all." '*Unfortunately*' she thought, and then immediately blushed again. He *looked* so human; she wondered what he *really* was.

Cindy thought for a minute. "Was he looking at you, or at me?"

Snow laughed and began to steer Cindy to the school house door. "We wish."

The boy had run off so quickly, she hadn't had the opportunity to see who he actually *was* watching. It had all happened so fast. However, Snow was clear about three things, one: the boy had been watching *someone* intently, two: he wasn't human and three: he was trouble.

Snow had a feeling that they hadn't seen the last of him. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about that.

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"Miss Snow W. Rutherford." Announced Miss Hollyhock, teacher extraordinaire, as she looked over her notes. "This is the second time this week that you and your sidekick, Miss Cinderella Vanholston, have been late arriving at school. Do you have anything to say in your defence?"

Miss Hollyhock was the tiny school's only teacher, and despite her hokey Sally Sweetness name, she ruled with an iron glove. No one, not even the boys dared step out of line; she had eyes in the back of her head and uncanny hearing.

"I'm not the sidekick." Cindy interjected with a toss of her golden curls. Snow groaned inwardly, knowing this was going nowhere good...and fast.

"Excuse me?" Miss Hollyhock looked up from her notes with a look that would have shut anyone down, anyone except Cindy that is.

“I said I’m not the sidekick” Cindy blew a dark gold curl off her forehead; she hated being underestimated more than anything. “Just because Snow’s taller than me doesn’t automatically mean she’s the leader. We are 50/50 with everything. There’s no boss you know, we’re equals.”

“Thank you for clarifying that for me, Miss Vanholston.” The teacher said with a malice laced smile. “In that case I assume you won’t mind accompanying her this evening to The Lonesome Forest with today’s lesson.”

Cindy’s face fell; Snow looked confused, and some boys snickered in the back.

“Excuse me, Miss Hollyhock? Why am I taking the lesson to The Lonesome Forest?” Snow inquired as politely as she could, considering the fact that being sent to The Lonesome Forest was somewhat like taking a long walk off a short plank. The punishment certainly didn’t fit the crime; she really hated, cold dark forests.

“Penance.” said the teacher with a smile. “Our newest student is stricken with Hoglas disease and can’t leave her tower for class. As penance, you and Miss Vanholston will bring and explain the day’s lessons; you will continue to do so until I say further.”

Snow had never heard of Hoglas disease, she hoped it wasn’t catchy and it certainly didn’t sound good.

“Miss Hollyhock?” Snow questioned again. “What exactly is Hoglas disease?”

“Excuse me?” Turin’s one and only teacher had never found herself questioned so closely by a student before; she didn’t like it. She glared at the offending student...in this case, Snow. This glare might have frozen another student immediately, but they hadn’t been brought up in Castle White. They hadn’t stood face to face with her stepmother, the Queen of Rylak.

“Hoglas disease. I have never heard of it.” Snow repeated in a strong, level voice. “I am concerned that it might be communicable.”

Flustered and irritated, the teacher began to shuffle her papers again. “Why it’s a, it causes, it has...Miss Rutherford, I have been assured it is not communicable, and if you have any medical questions I suggest you direct them to Dr. Rutherford, we are already behind on today’s lesson. I’m sure you can all understand why you will be kept later this afternoon to make up for this unnecessary delay.”

The room was suddenly filled with groans, which were immediately silenced by a dark look in the furious teacher’s eye.

“Just one more question, please?” Snow pressed. “What is the new student’s name?”

“Rapunzel. Her name is Rapunzel Goethal.”

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Saying there were actual roads through the Lonesome Forest would be an overstatement. Paths, very overgrown paths would be far more accurate. Even though the sun shone bright in the afternoon sky, the glorious rays could hardly penetrate the densely overgrown foliage. “*How aptly named*” Snow idly thought as she took in the dark and mysterious forest. Carefully the girls picked their way through the dimly lit path, Snow in her knee high white boots and Cindy in her fragile silver sandals. Needless to say, the going was slow...very slow.

Only the most eccentric, would make their home anywhere near The Lonesome Forest, and few ventured beyond the point where the sun failed. The depth of the forest was said to be home to trolls, vampires and various non-unionized fairies and witches; and if the legends were true, sleeping dryads rested deep within the dark and silent trees. Dryads are the spirits of the trees, they had long since stopped dancing in the moonlight. Ancient texts told stories of great

celebrations in the forests, magical nights inspired by the dryads sheer joy of life; dryads had always been Snow's favorite mythological creature. She loved daydreaming about those beautiful dancing dryads, their long hair and arms swaying so ethereally and gracefully as they moved. She could almost imagine joining hands and being caught up in the dance as well. She sighed softly to herself as she let her mind wander. It was all just fantasy now, the legends stated that the dryads had been hunted almost to extinction; earlier humans had believed that if they could cut the dryad down in her home tree, her magic could be absorbed. It was false, and thousands of dryads were sacrificed according to the stories. Whatever dryads had escaped the massacre had retreated to The Lonesome Forest, where it is believed they eternally sleep, or as some stories go, turned in to vengeful spirits tormenting any who disturb that sleep. Regardless, they no longer befriended humans, if they ever had.

With their destination finally in sight, the girls began to pick up the pace, and within minutes found themselves standing directly in front of a dark stone house. The dark, narrow tower seemed even taller up close. The house, situated in a small clearing in the dreary forest, appeared sinister without the help of green grass or colourful flowers to add warmth or personality. Snow followed the dusty path to the dark, rounded door with Cindy just a step behind, but before she could knock, the door swung open revealing a bent, dour looking woman.

Quickly Snow recovered her manners. "Good day Madame." She said curtsying gracefully. "My name is Snowy and this is Cindy. We have brought..." She hunted for the new girl's name.

"Rapunzel." Inserted Cindy, who had no intention of curtsying.

"Rapunzel's lesson from school today." Snow finished. Uneasily she smiled up in to the woman's disagreeable face. The woman took the girls in one by one. The effect was that of being inspected and dissected; there was no warmth to be found anywhere in the woman's face. Snow's bright smile wilted somewhat.

"I am Mother Goethal. You will find Rapunzel at the top of the stairs. Explain your lessons and mind that you don't dawdle." The raspy voice informed them with great reluctance; and with one thin and gnarled finger she pointed to the staircase.

The dark stairs went round and round, higher and higher, seemingly forever. Cobwebs grew between the stairs in the gloom and it appeared that nothing had seen a broom in years. Finally the girls reached the top of the dark, dusty staircase. The rounded door was shut in front of them, so Snow grasped the large brass knocker and rapped politely three times.

The girls turned to look at each other slowly as the rapping sound echoed off of the walls eerily; Cindy stepped in as close to Snow as she could.

Nothing.

"Hello? I have your lessons..." Snow trailed off, unsure what else to say. She looked at Cindy for assistance, Cindy who was never at a loss for words. Cindy was very helpful, she shrugged; she didn't want to be there at all. They waited for another minute in the dark and dreary stairwell. Snow knocked again.

Still nothing.

"Just leave it outside the door. We're leaving; this place is way too creepy." Decided Cindy with apparent relief. "Come on, we can still make it to Prince Leonardo's Fan Club Meeting."

Snow placed the books on the step outside the door and both girls gratefully turned to leave.

"Come in." Barely audible, the voice floated out from behind the door. Snow hesitated; Cindy sighed and shook her head.

Cautiously Snow opened the creaky door, nodding for Cindy to go in.

“Na ah. I’m just the sidekick.” Whispered Cindy giving Snow a little shove forward. “You’re the leader.”

“Oh, *now* I’m the leader.” Snow whispered back as she took a tentative step in to the room.

“What, you’re taller.”

The room was round, and made entirely of stone; the only light came from the window directly across from the door. A bed, a wardrobe and a chair were the only furniture to be seen.

A tall young girl stood off to the side, hiding half in the shadows. Dressed in a simple floor length black dress, she seemed ghost-like. Silently, and without expression, she regarded the girls, you could feel her fear. Long platinum hair poured over her shoulders and down to the floor, it flowed across to the chair and coiled in front of the wardrobe.

“Oh. My. God.” Cindy breathed as she clutched at Snow’s cape.

Slowly Snow held up the lesson. “My name is Snowy, and this is my friend, Cindy.” She said slowly, indicating her small friend. “We were sent with your lesson.”

Rapunzel stared blankly at the girls.

“You know, from school?” Snow added carefully.

Rapunzel stepped out from the shadow. As the light hit her face, Snow was struck by how sad she looked; it shadowed her eyes, fringed with an abundance of black lashes, they were as dark as her hair was light. Her mouth, so perfectly red on her beautiful heart shaped pale face, looked as if it had forgotten how to smile. She was utterly beautiful, in an ethereally remote way. Snow was at a loss for words, and apparently so was Cindy, which was really quite rare.

“Why do you stare at me?” Rapunzel asked in a breathy voice full of fear and self consciousness, one pale hand fluttered helplessly by her slender throat.

Instantly Snow was ashamed. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to, I was just-”

“It’s your hair.” Interjected Cindy. “I have never seen anything so beautiful! How do you get it so shiny? How do you move around? How do you brush it?”

They had never seen hair like it before. They couldn’t begin to imagine how long it truly was, it seemed to stretch on forever, gloriously silver blonde. Tentatively Rapunzel touched her own hair. Her smile was slow, as if her mouth was unaccustomed to the motion, and as it touched her rosy lips she cautiously looked up towards the girls; hope shining in her dark eyes.

“It truly is beautiful.” Snow affirmed. Magical it seemed, the cascades of silvery blonde hair that flowed across the room; you *could* almost believe it was magic. Hair like that, you just knew would feel like the finest silk if you were to touch it.

Cindy looked on in confusion. “Seriously, hasn’t anyone ever told you that before?”

“I don’t remember meeting anyone.”

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Walking home that evening, the term ‘The Lonesome Forest’ seemed to have taken on new meaning. The dark silence of the forest seemed fitting and proper, allowing both of the girls to consider all they had just learned. Years had passed since Rapunzel had met another soul. Until today; until they arrived. How lonely she must be, they couldn’t even begin to imagine. Once she had gotten past her initial unease, she had hung on their every word, apparently fascinated by their very presence; taking in every movement, every expression like a sponge. They both felt sorry when they left her, but their reassurance that they would return the next day had brought another tentative smile to the remote young girl’s face.

One more very important thing happened without their knowledge that sunny afternoon in the forest, both of the girls made a subconscious pledge to befriend and help the lonely girl in the tower. This decision would change the course of their lives.

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She was close. He could smell it, lifting his nose up towards the dazzling moon he inhaled deeply, revelling in the rich scent of her. It flooded his brain and instantly he relaxed. If there was a Heaven, he believed it would be full of her perfect scent. Or perhaps She herself would be present. He banished the thought instantly as his pulse began to race. No, this was enough. If he could only see her and smell her.... This would be enough.

Silence.

He froze as she made her way down the path. Crouched down in amongst the brambles, in the dusty half light that barely infiltrated the base of The Lonesome Forest, he knew she would not see him. She never did. She traveled this way perhaps twice a week, each time with a basket held tightly in her slender hands. Each time he watched her. Watched over her, he corrected himself. Because he would have laid down his life for her from the first moment he had caught her scent.

She stopped, mere feet away from him. He froze. She looked up at the moon, so perfectly set in the sky and a smile crept over her lovely features. He watched her smile lighting up her face and he felt his heart would explode. Unbeknownst to her, she was among a very select group of beings who had nothing to fear in this dark and dangerous forest. He had vowed to protect her from everything and anything that would threaten her in all of the Kingdom of Lonstas. Even from himself. Such was the love of a werewolf.

Chapter 3

Annette and Juliette Del Grotta, the twin daughters of Madame Morgada Del Grotta, had never thought much of Cinderella Vanholston. In fact they were mortified and distraught when their mother, The Madame, was noted in the company of Caspian Vanholston III...frequently. It was not a lack of money that put the twin girls off you see, the Vanholston's certainly had no lack of such; it was the lack of Aristocracy. You see for all of Caspian's swashbuckling good looks, generosity with money, and that general air of good humour that always seemed to surrounded him, he had not a single drop of Aristocratic blood. This meant that Cinderella, his one and only daughter, was also found wanting. Now, had they thought to make their misgivings known to Miss Vanholston they might have found a valued ally. Instead two increasingly hostile camps were formed.

The Del Grotta girls were identical twins, each inheriting the dark auburn hair and steel grey eyes from their mother. Although they were widely considered to be pretty girls, they might have been considered beautiful if they had not let bitterness harden their hearts, this bitterness and occasional malice twisted their features very unbecomingly. It was bitterness and irritation that the twins felt in their hearts that Monday afternoon, so it was bitterness and irritation that showed on their faces as they watched Cindy and Snow leave the classroom.

"The ugly step-sisters are watching us." Cindy nudged Snow. "I think I hate them."

"Seriously Cindy! You don't hate anyone; it isn't very nice you know." Snow almost laughed at the thought.

“No, I hate ’em.” Cindy assured her as she held her ridiculously over-sized, hot pink and silver bag close to her body. “They never smile, they’re ugly and they have the worst fashion sense.” That being a crime of unimaginable proportions coming from Cindy.

“They never smile at *you*, they are definitely not...ugly, and...okay they do have really boring fashion sense, you got me there.” And they did. Greys, browns, dark blues, sweaters and skirts. It was expensive, yet utterly dull un-inspired fashion...a cardinal sin in Cindy’s eyes.

“Oh, and they aren’t your step-sisters...yet; but I heard a little rumour last night that-”.

At that Cindy swung the bag at her. “I don’t even know whose side you’re on anymore.” And then the implications of the term “step-sisters” struck her. “Oh my God! That would be the worst possible thing that could ever happen to me! I will jump in the river if that happens! We will engage in sabotage! Never surrender!” Clutching her chest, Cindy gasped for air.

It was quite humorous, Snow mused, watching Cindy in her little hot pink tunic and leggings, she’d caught her golden curls up in a circlet of daisies piled high on top of her head. She looked adorable; but she was clutching her heart, gasping for air and rolling her eyes like a two hundred year old crone whose number has just been called. Bingo was really big with the crones in Turin.

“Baba Yaga at bingo last Thursday!” Snow joked, playfully pointing at her friend. “That was an impression, wasn’t it? You are really good. I think you should abandon designing and join the dramatic arts!”

“You are a terrible person.” Cindy sniffed.

“Maybe.” Conceded Snow. “But just think how much better in comparison you will look standing next to them in Family Pictures. And that actually hurt, you’ve been guarding your ugly old bag all day, what’s inside?”

And that’s all it took. Cindy had been bursting at the seams all day with some secret, having to do with her hot pink bag, which she had kept close to her body at all times. She indicated that Snow should follow her off to the side of the school house. With great curiosity, Snow did just that.

Slowly, Cindy unravelled a very long rope ladder. She looked up at Snow expectantly, excitement rolling off of her in waves, her electric green eyes shimmering with mischief. Snow took a long look at the rope, she had no idea what could have brought forth this level of excitement, and Cindy was fairly dancing with glee. It was just some rope as far as she could tell.

“You want we should hang someone?” She finally asked with a sceptical look across her face.

“It’s for Rapunzel you dope!” Cindy explained in complete exasperation. “I worked on it all weekend. I think it should be just about long enough, but if not we’ll improvise! And my bag is neither ugly nor old, it is completely fashion forward.”

“Whatever you say.” Snow shook her head, she could never keep up. “You are up to some nefarious deed again aren’t you, you know, the type that ends up with us getting caught, scolded and grounded?”

Sighing dramatically, Cindy nodded in happy agreement. “I’m going to break her out.”

“You’re going to break her out? And go where? You can’t break her out she has Hoglas disease, what if she gets sick? What if The Mother Goethal finds out.” She shivered at the mere thought. With her raspy voice and knowing eyes, the bent old woman managed to make the girls feel skittish and guilty every time they arrived with the Lesson.

“She seems fine to me. We’re dropping the ladder off this afternoon. We’ll come back for her tonight.” Cindy informed her confidently. “Trust me.”

So it was “we” plan. Snow shook her head. They were going to get in to so much trouble.

The idea had been planted that Friday when Cindy had brought along the latest issue of “The Lonstasian Eye”, a very popular tabloid magazine. Rapunzel had seized it immediately enchanted with the stories and pictures of people and places she had never seen; and likely never would. Perhaps it was when the lonely girl had innocently asked what grass felt like beneath bare feet. Perhaps it was the picture of Rapunzel leaning out the window of her tower wistfully, as she watched the girls begin their walk back through the forest. But whatever the reason, the girls had left with heavy hearts that Friday.

So they were going to break her out. Cindy just loved to make plans.

~~*~~

The trip through The Lonesome Forest that evening was very quick, even with the heavy bags and cloaks Cindy had outfitted them with. Maybe they were becoming more familiar with the path, maybe it was the threat of trolls and other such night dwellers, but much of it would most likely be the cause of the sensible walking boots Snow had insisted they wear. They made good time.

Several sets of eyes watched the two girls as they trotted through the dark forest that evening; but only one set assured their safety. Neither of them was “Her”, but he wasn’t completely unfamiliar with these girls, and since it was a rare occurrence for a human to traverse The Lonesome Forest after dark, he decided to follow them. None of the creatures of the night dared to interrupt a wolf in what appeared to be a hunt, and so Cindy and Snow arrived safely at their destination.

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“It’s a masterpiece.” Breathed Cindy as she placed the last pin in Rapunzel’s hair.

Snow turned from her lookout at the window to take in Cindy’s handiwork. Amazed, her jaw dropped.

Rapunzel’s silvery blonde hair had been braided and re-braided, caught, looped and wound. The finished effect was stunning, although it still cascaded down to the small of her back and stood about six inches off her forehead, making her appear even taller, but it was beautiful, and oh how it shone in the moonlight. She ran a hand through her own long, satiny black hair and wondered if she should let Cindy have a go at hers as well. Maybe she would.

Outfitted in riding breeches, tunics, boots and cloaks, the girls were finally ready to leave the tower. Cindy was about to burst with mischievous excitement, Rapunzel was about to faint, or perhaps fall backwards from the weight of her hair, but Snow was still frowning as she looked out the window. She couldn’t shake the feeling that someone had followed them, and although she had heard nothing, and seen even less; she had felt the eyes upon them. And it bothered her. A lot. But then again, all dark forests at night bothered her; anything and everything could be lurking.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” She asked the visibly trembling Rapunzel, who simply nodded in response.

“Okay then.” And with that, Snow began to crawl out the window and down the rope ladder, there was no way she was leaving either of her friends alone so, as uneasy as she was...she was in.

Reaching the bottom, she waited nervously for Rapunzel to descend. Somehow climbing up the rope ladder hadn't seemed quite as frightening but Cindy had given them one important piece of advice that in her opinion would make or break this part of the adventure. 'Whatever you do, don't look down.' Simple, but effective, Snow had found it invaluable and began to wonder just how much experience Cindy had with breaking out. Something told her tonight wasn't Cindy's first time.

Sneaking out had been much harder for Snow. True, the idea had never crossed her mind before, but truly, sneaking out of a castle posed many more logistics problems than sneaking out of a cottage. When she'd yawned and announced that she was retiring early that night, seven pairs of eyes had fallen upon her in concern.

Guilt.

She felt terrible. And if they had asked her what was up, she knew she would have told them; she was a terrible liar. She still felt guilty. She hadn't had much of a choice really, if she hadn't come along, Cindy would have done this alone and who knew what kind of trouble would have ensued. Cindy could plan the mischief, (and Cindy was very good at doing just that) but Snow had to be there as the voice of reason; and with that she banished all feelings of guilt. Well, almost all.

Halfway down the ladder, Rapunzel paused. Her long white fingers clutched desperately at the rope ladder, her eyes wide with apprehension as her slender form lagged against the ropes.

She had looked down.

"Oh crap, oh crap." Whispered Cindy from the tower window.

"Rapunzel," Snow's voice came very softly. "No, don't look at me, just listen. Look at Cindy."

Rapunzel looked up toward Cindy who was nodding and smiling from the window encouragingly.

"Take your time. You can do this, you're almost there." Snow encouraged quietly.

"Besides," Cindy's voice floated down. "It's the same distance up or down, and if you fall going down now, it's not so far. You'll be fine."

Snow rolled her eyes and shook her head. So not helping; but wait, Rapunzel began to slowly make her way down again. As the frightened girl carefully descended, the moon crawled out from behind the clouds illuminating the small yard, almost as if she was welcoming Rapunzel in the night. Finally she planted one tentative foot on the ground.

Snow felt tears spring to her eyes as she witnessed Rapunzel's first step outside of that tower in years. Rapunzel knelt down to touch the dusty path, marvelling at the uneven texture of the ground. She looked up and gazed at the moon that fairly blazed down at the girls. A slight breeze caressed her face and she covered her mouth to stifle the laughter that had nearly escaped. In awe Rapunzel gazed at the world around her, a stray tear of joy slowly made its way down her soft cheek.

Quicker than anyone could have imagined, Cindy had made her way down the ladder and joined them on the path. But even Cindy was not inclined to interrupt this beautiful moment. Finally Rapunzel looked at the girls, and enveloped them both in a hug.

"This has been the most wonderful night of my life. Thank you. You have given me the world." She whispered in her soft and breathy voice.

"Oh, it's not over yet". Cindy straightened her cloak and patted her hair. Both the girls looked over at her questioningly. "We're going to Vampire Night School."

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Vampires have existed alongside humans, elves, pixies and all manner of creatures since time immemorial. But, like most non-humans, they did tend to keep to themselves, regardless or perhaps still unsure of the growing equality/coexistence movement. This was not to say that they were ostracized or unwelcome in Lonstasian towns or cities, why vampires are among the most talented musicians in all the realms. No, they were simply, like the Weres, regarded with a certain sense of apprehension, perhaps a lot of apprehension. Now this was most likely due to the large number of folk tales and fictitious stories that cast both species in a bad light. Not that they were “tame” mind you, but in essence, both vampires and werewolves are much like anyone else...most days... or nights as the case may be.

Legend, as old as the hills themselves has it that vampires and werewolves have both evolved from the Fairy Folk of Old. Not to be confused with fairies, the Fairy Folk of Old are a completely different set of beings...reclusive, almost myth now. And fairies, well fairies are becoming so mainstream they are unionized already, although a fairy godmother is still a rare, rare honour. It wouldn't be wise to walk around calling fairies 'mainstream' though; an angry fairy is truly something to fear. But since the theory as to the origins of both the vampires and werewolves was largely unsubstantiated, both sets of creatures rejected the association.

The main difference between a vampire and a human is of course, sunlight. It burned their bodies starting with the blood, leaving nothing left save a tragic pile of ash. It was an excruciating way to die, and although fairies, witches and sorcerers have been working on a solution for centuries, the answer still eludes them. For this reason, the vampires tended to keep secret their daytime place of rest, but at night...they could be anywhere; and you can be sure a good many of them could be found at school.

Vampire School, of course, could only be held at night, and usually outdoors if the weather co-operated.

Cindy knew they were getting close, she could feel her excitement rising. She hadn't been entirely sure Vampire School existed in this part of The Lonesome Forest, but a conversation overheard between a crone and a witch, had made reference to the school (not a wicked witch, just your average garden variety witch)...it had piqued Cindy's curiosity. Vampires were reportedly stunningly attractive, although Cindy had never actually met one...yet, so that might have helped in the actual decision making process.

As she brushed cobwebs away from her face, she turned back to see how her friends were fairing. Snow seemed apprehensive, which was typical, Cindy expected nothing less from her all too responsible friend, but Rapunzel, Cindy had never seen her look more alive. Her face was positively shining with joy, and just as Cindy began to congratulate herself on a most impressive adventure, she collided with something very, very hard and fell back down on her bottom...very, very hard.

“What are three human children doing in The Lonesome Forest at night?” A dark and melodic voice questioned.

Cindy looked up at the ‘Wall’ and discovered an incredibly handsome, and very pale young man. He was perhaps six feet tall with long dark hair pulled back at his neck, beautiful bottomless dark eyes set beneath arched black brows and a perfect nose. His sculpted face, for a moment, made Cindy forget all about Prince Leonardo Charming. But only for a moment. He wore an exquisitely embroidered waist coat, ruffled sleeves covered his wrists and he had really great boots. Really great boots. No sword swung at his hip, but then again, he didn't need one.

Cindy could hardly fault his clothes; however a gentleman would have given her a hand up after knocking her down at the very least. But then again this was no gentleman, this was a vampire. At a loss Cindy said the only thing she could think of.

“I am not a child, I am a lady.”

“What are three human...ladies...doing in The Lonesome Forest at night?” He questioned again in the same dark, melodic and somewhat bored voice.

Snow rushed forward to help Cindy up off the forest ground; time to use her diplomacy skills...would they work on a vampire? She supposed she would soon find out; taking a deep breath she began.

“My name is Snowy; this is Cindy, and this.” She pointed to Rapunzel who stepped out of the shadows and lowered her hood. “Is Rapunzel. We meant no offence, we...” She trailed off as she realised that he was looking right through her at Rapunzel.

Rapunzel returned his gaze. She had never seen a man before, and he was quite something to look at. He was so beautiful, beautiful and lethal. Snow began to get nervous as she realised how alone they really were in the depths of the forest. Then, as she notated the way the beautiful vampire was looking at her tall innocent friend, she began to feel more than simply nervous...she felt afraid.

“You know, we should be getting back...it’s late, people will be, probably *are* looking for us already, right Cindy?” She turned to her friend who had stopped brushing herself off and nodding furiously.

“Oh yeah, there’s going to be like a search party, any minute so, we really have to go. Now. Nice meeting you though.”

The vampire ignored them, stepping forward he took Rapunzel’s slender white hand in his and brought it up to his mouth for a kiss. “I am called Manuel; I guard the entrance to this School of Night. I am honoured to have met you.”

“Okay, nice to meet you too, Manuel, we are very sorry to have disturbed you but we’re leaving now so...” *Please don’t eat us*, she finished silently in her head as she rushed over attempting to take Rapunzel’s hand back from the beautiful vampire, which was somewhat like trying to move a statue. He ran her wrist under his nose, inhaling deeply. He stood incredibly still. Carefully he inhaled again before gazing in to Rapunzel’s dark and innocent eyes.

“Cindy, a little help here?”

“Uh, my father represents a great number of performers from all over Lonstas...if you let us leave, without eating us, I’ll put a good word in for anyone you want. We’re kind of important; big deals and all.” Cindy babbled as she nodded and chewed her lip. Cindy had fantasized a great deal about meeting a real vampire, but this was not going according to her fantasy at all.

“Call off your dog.” Manuel drawled in his beautiful bored voice, his eyes never leaving Rapunzel’s.

“Excuse me?” Snow was positive she hadn’t heard correctly. She didn’t even own a dog; she could hear her heart pounding. She hoped Manuel couldn’t; but knew he could.

“Your dog, send him home.” Manuel smiled slowly at Rapunzel who mirrored the same smile and shyly looked down.

Now Snow began to feel real fear. A vampire was dangerous enough, but an insane one? What were the chances that they were going to get out of this alive...she didn’t dare ask herself.

“I don’t think I know what you are talking about.” She slowly replied, racking her brain for anything she could possibly remember about vampires. She found exactly nothing; vampires

were notoriously secretive about almost every aspect of their lives. Unless they were performers, and a great number of the best musicians were, they tended not to mix with humans.

Manuel sniffed the air once. "I see." An arrogant flash in his deep, dark eyes.

Rapunzel reclaimed her hand and turned to her friends. "There is no cause for alarm; Manuel wouldn't hurt us, would you?" She looked up at him with complete innocence. Of course she would, she had no idea what a vampire *was* let alone what they were capable of. Come to think of it, none of the girls knew what vampires were really capable of; Manuel was their first.

Manuel spoke to the forest. "These human girls shall be my responsibility for the remainder of this evening. This I pledge on the honour of my forbearers."

Cindy and Snow exchanged wide eyed looks; this evening was not turning out as expected that much was certain. Manuel took Rapunzel's arm gently and began walking her back the way they had came. Cindy and Snow started in behind them exchanging looks of confusion.

"The Lonesome Forest is a very dangerous place at the best of times, especially for *human* children. What on earth are you doing out here in the dead of night? I shall escort you safely home myself. Now 'Rapunzel', that is a beautiful name."

Silently they followed Rapunzel and the beautiful vampire home, listening carefully as he pointed out different places of interest for her. There was nothing else they could do.

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The vampire had stated his intention, and unless he wanted to declare a duel, a duel he may or may not win, he had no choice but to leave. He'd protected them as long as he could; they were now the responsibility of the young vampire. If they were harmed in any way, a duel would be called, and blood would be shed but he doubted the vampire would purposely destroy the peace their two people had held for the past two centuries. He'd done all he could; he began his run home.

Snow crawled back up the olive tree outside her bedroom window, silently changed in to her soft silky powder blue pajamas and slid between her sheets.

Bliss.

What a night. Not only had they broken Rapunzel out of her tower, they had met an actual vampire. A *vampire*. Unfortunately he hadn't let them anywhere near the school, but seeing as he had introduced himself as a 'guard', she supposed that was his job. Leisurely he had walked Rapunzel back to her tower, quietly chatting with her; the pace had picked up considerably as he led Snow and Cindy to the edge of the forest in silence, a bored and somewhat disdainful look in his dark eyes. Apparently manners weren't his strong suit.

Snow had turned around to thank him, but he had already disappeared back in to the night. The good news was he hadn't eaten them...this time, obviously a huge relief; Snow wasn't completely sure she wanted to give him another opportunity. He didn't seem friendly in the least.

Maybe they should try the lagoon next time...it just sounded safer. And with that thought she fell deeply and blissfully asleep.

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Rapunzel felt more alive than she ever had from the moment she awoke. For the first time in nearly seventeen years, she rose from her bed with more than merely the need to imitate the motions of life.

Something caught her eye on the stone windowsill of her lonely tower. A rose. A single red rose, the exact color of her lips. Perfect in every way, and so vibrantly alive against the cold stone. Rapunzel knew it had not been there when she fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Candles lit of their own accord, great blazing flames illuminating the dark and fearsome hallway. Spiders hid in the depths of their webs, and rats scurried for a hiding place as the Queen of Rylak strode through the secret underground chambers of the Castle White; such was the cloud of malevolence that enveloped her.

Angry. The queen was angry. And with each long stride she made, the heels of her boots thundered against the floor, echoing off every wall, her long black cape flaring out behind her. Her face, both beautiful and terrifying was twisted with rage.

With a sudden hand movement the massive steel doors of her most secret hidden room, that which was dedicated to the darkest of arts flung open. The room was dimly lit by several wall candles. Books lined two of the walls; shelves with brightly coloured flasks lined the other. A cauldron stood off to the side, and ancient symbols, known only to the most devoted of the arts decorated both ceiling and floor. Six soldiers in black armour immediately knelt as she entered.

The queen stopped and ran a hand over her sleek black hair. "I was gazing at myself in my favourite mirror this morning, as I do most mornings," Her voice like silky cream. "But this particular morning my mirror imparted to me some very...upsetting news. Can you tell me what that news might have been?"

The queen began to pace in front of the soldiers. "Anyone?" She tapped her foot. "Come now, my most loyal soldiers? My eyes and ears in the Kingdom?" She asked sweetly.

Suddenly she spun around, her cape swirling around her, she flung her arm out and all of the soldiers went flying in to the bookshelves across the room.

"My trusted huntsman has betrayed me and fled, while Snow White still lives!" The soldiers fell to the ground and began to get up.

"Find! Snow! White!" The queen roared, the sound increasing and increasing in volume with each word until each and every minion crumbled to the ground clutching their ears in a vain attempt to lessen her deafening roar.

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The Moon was filling. He felt it in his blood, how his heart ached as he pondered his dilemma. "She" would be making her trip again tonight, how he yearned to smell her, how he lusted for-stop that thought. The moon was gaining control, he knew it. He felt the wild emotions assaulting his mind. "She" was not safe with him. Not now.

And neither were "They". Since the first night he had accompanied them through the forest serving as an unseen form of protection. At first merely out of curiosity, and later an unwelcomed sense of duty had taken its place, so he had continued. Countless threats had been...discouraged.

*Now the moon was filling the sky; none of them would be safe. For he would possibly be the biggest threat of all. He didn't know what to do.
Out of the blue it came to him.*