

EVERMORE: THE SECRETS OF SARRILIA

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PROLOGUE

Now history shall record these events as history sees fit, and who really is to say *how* exactly these events came about, but three very important things happened that morning at precisely the same time. Perhaps it is merely coincidence, perhaps not.

The first concerned Cindy.

Cindy was quietly sitting on the edge of the town wishing well in those early hours that morning, trying very hard to process the events of last night. The Madame and her ugly stepsisters had returned home from the Ball quite late, complaining loudly all the while about the mystery girl that had stolen Prince Nickoli's attention all evening. And just when it had looked so promising for Juliette too, her stepmother had whispered fiercely; the Madame vowed to find out who this mystery girl was...and destroy her. Cindy shivered involuntarily.

Cindy begged the Madame to let her out so she could make herself something to eat, and the Madame had tiredly relented and unlocked the door. Grabbing some bread and cheese from the fridge Cindy waited until she heard the terrible trio turn in for the night before grabbing her coat and leaving herself.

Now she found herself sitting on the edge of the well, wanting more than anything in the world to talk to Snow. Only a best friend could understand the predicament she found herself in that morning. Her fairy godmother, Lailie had arrived right in the nick of time, and with a rather flamboyant bibbity bob of her wand, transformed Cindy from a tired and bedraggled angry teen in to a beautifully costumed enchanting young lady. Cindy had arrived at the ball in full Blue Fairy costume and spent the evening delightedly flirting with Leo's younger brother Prince Nickoli Charming. Now Cindy, supposedly under lock and key was forbidden from revealing her true identity, and especially seeing as the stepmother had sworn vengeance on the mystery

girl...well Cindy found herself in quite the predicament. And worse yet, she had lost one of the enchanted glass slippers Lailie had dressed her in, she now hid the remaining slipper deep in her bag. If there was ever a time when she needed a best friend, it was now and if there was anything, anything in the world that she could do that would bring her friend back she would do it in a heartbeat. There was no price she wouldn't pay, no treasure she wouldn't gladly give up.

Now, if she could wish for anything in the world, if this 'magic wishing well' was actually the real deal, if her wish would actually come true it...it wouldn't be for the Madame to run away, or even for her to treat Cindy better. It wouldn't be for Prince Nickoli to fall in love with her and take her away from all of this, and it wouldn't be for her life to magically return to the way it was before her mother had died.

"No," She sobbed. "I wouldn't wish for any of that. I just want Snowy to be okay. That's all that matters anymore. We all need Snow, and she needs us." She sobbed, feeling completely helpless to save her friend. Helpless, and lonely. Terribly lonely.

And as she sobbed a few stray tears snaked their way down her sweet cheeks and were caught up in the early morning breeze. The capricious breeze that had caught them just as easily released them and they found their way down in to the wishing well water.

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Across worlds on the Neutral Plane.

The Oracle was sitting cross legged looking deeply into his viewing pool. The muse, Sybil paced back and forth behind him anxiously; her long white boots were soundless against the thick green carpet of grass as she strode.

"Are you going to help them?" She asked in her soft, sweet voice, dropping down to sit beside him.

The Oracle smiled his big beautiful wide smile and shook his crazy blonde mane. "I don't need to luv, they got this one all figured out already, all they needed was a push. Look here." He pointed to something in the pool.

Sybil leaned over his shoulder, and what she saw made her smile as well. The Oracle squeezed her hand affectionately and they gazed deep in to the pool together.

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And lastly, in the Rutherford Cottage, at Snow's bedside.

"Aw White." Prince Leonardo Charming sighed. Her hand was so cold in his, her breathing was even slower if you could imagine. His heart felt like ice, it hurt to breathe; he knew she wouldn't last long.

During the course of his days and nights spent sitting by Snow's side, he had come to realise a few very important things. The first being that he cared about Snow; really cared about her, he had barely left her side in days. If he had to pick the moment when he first subconsciously discovered it, he would have to say that morning on the road with Mercury. That dusty country road, how the sun had shone in the sky, even the air had smelled wonderful. He would always love that road. But maybe it went further back than that, that night in Crystallise at the palace, he had felt such a kinship with her, little had he know that she was the Rylakian Heir. He could have stood out on that terrace for hours listening to the breeze with her. Or maybe it had been the night they had all had dinner, when she had shown such remarkable insight. Maybe he was just supposed to care about her, maybe she was...it hurt to finish the thought.

The second thing he had realised was that he should have kissed her that night after the wedding. He'd meant to, was just about to in fact, but didn't. Now he never would. At the time it just seemed like the thing to do; now it was the only thing he *wanted* to do.

He buried his head in her cold hands. He had spent days at her bedside; they would have to drag him away when she passed.

"A prince and an exiled princess...the Rylakian Heir. It *would* have been an unstoppable combination." He raggedly whispered.

Slowly Prince Charming leaned in and kissed Snow White softly on her rose pink lips.

Snow's large dark eyes snapped open at that exact moment.

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CHAPTER ONE

Snow wasn't exactly sure what how this had come to be, but Prince Leonardo Charming, had just kissed her. She was elated. She was stunned. She was terrified.

Her heart skipped a beat, and then proceeded to nearly beat itself right out of her chest. It was her first kiss. It was beautiful. It was frightening.

He felt the change, and slowly pulled his lips off of hers.

"Snow?" He could barely contain his joy at seeing her beautiful brown eyes, open and fixed on his own soft blue ones. "You're alive! You're *alive!*" He shouted, small tears slid down his cheeks.

He held her face in his hands, his eyes shining with a thousand emotions. Snow tentatively smiled at him. "Snow..." He whispered tenderly.

The door burst open, and Uncle Doc came running in, Leo let go of her.

"Your Highness!" The small doctor exclaimed.

"She's alive!" Leo repeated, the smile covering his face once again.

Uncle Doc's six brothers filed in after him and surrounded the bed, their faces a study in joy.

"Oh dear, sweet girl." Uncle Doc began, as he enveloped the teen in a hug. "We so blessed to have you back." He whispered.

"What woke her?" Uncle Horst asked, his face, always beaming with happiness, now seemed to light the room.

"I'm not sure what you mean?" The handsome prince asked.

"Something must have broke the spell." Uncle Doc explained. "She was under a very powerful dark spell, something had to trigger the break. These things, never just happen, spells must be *broken*. Do you remember anything about when you woke up?"

"About when I woke up?" Snow repeated. The image of Leo's lips, softly caressing hers....she blushed furiously. She glanced over at the prince for help. She felt very confused, and as much as she loved the doctor and his brothers, at this particular moment; she just wanted

them to leave so she could talk to Leo. Or let him talk to her...if he wanted to....

Uncle Doc followed her gaze. "Prince Leonardo?"

Snow and Leo exchanged nervous looks, each searching the others face for the correct response.

"Well, I don't know." Leo mumbled, self-consciously brushing his shoulder. He spared another glance at Snow, to ask her how to proceed, but she wasn't looking at him anymore. He looked back at the seven doting men, all watching him closely. "No. Nothing." He finished rather sadly.

"How long was I asleep?" Snow asked, unsure if she really wanted to know.

"Two weeks." Uncle Snyder replied.

"Two weeks?" She nearly jumped out of her bed in shock. "Two weeks!"

"Closer to three." Uncle Gordon corrected.

"I missed the ball." Snow realised sadly. She had been so excited about the costume ball, her and her very best friend Cindy had worked so hard on her costume.

"Leo sat right here, by your side, all night long."

"He did?" She asked, her eyes wide as she turned to look at the prince again.

"Of course I did White," He sat down lightly on the bed beside her. "My costume would have looked silly without yours."

That's right, they had spoken about

"Well, I'm sure our girl is starving! I am going to whip up all your favorites for breakfast!" Uncle Horst announced. He got up and walked towards the doorway.

His six brothers circled the bed, wide expectant smiles on their faces as they gazed at their girl. Snow bit her lip and looked up at Leo. Uncle Doc followed her gaze again.

Uncle Horst cleared his throat, and his six brothers looked up. "I could use some help...from all of you!" He commanded, giving them all a very meaningful look.

The little men all jumped up and began shuffling out of the room. Snow stifled back a small laugh. Then she realised that she was laying in her bed, all alone with Leo again. And he had just kissed her not fifteen minutes ago. Cautiously she lifted her eyes to his.

His gaze was so soft and warm, his blue eyes shining, his light brown waves, falling appealingly over his broad shoulders. He smiled at her, and she forgot how to breathe.

“When I woke up,” She began in a nervous voice.

Leo laid his warm hand over her own small white one. “Snow, I have so many things to say to you, so many things I have only just realised—”

He was cut off by the sound of a banshee scream, or at least that is the first thought that entered his mind.

Cindy, screaming at the top of her lungs, catapulted herself from the doorway, and on to Snow’s bed.

“Oh my God, oh my God, Oh my God!” She screamed. “You’re awake! You have no idea how much I have missed you! Snow!” She grabbed her dumb struck friend in to a huge bear hug. “You have no idea how much everything sucks without you!”

Snow laughed, as she eased herself out of the incredibly tight embrace.

“Well, I’m glad to know that a world without me ‘sucks’.”

Cindy and Leo both nodded.

Rapunzel marched in to the room, a huge smile covering her lovely face.

“Snow! I feared I would never see your smile again, it broke my heart. How was the spell broken? I have spent countless days pouring over books, myths...rumors. Manuel has even interrogated witches.” She added.

“Yikes.” Snow whispered. Manuel, her closest vampire friend, and Rapunzel’s beloved boyfriend’s idea of ‘interrogation’ might be much scarier than the word typically implied. Manuel was single minded, loyal, and completely lethal.

“We aren’t entirely sure.” Prince Leonardo Charming answered, his eyes locked on Snow’s.

“Whatever the reason, I am just overjoyed that it was broken.” Uncle Doc asserted, walking in the room with a cup of steaming coffee for Snow.

“Well I wished for it in the wishing well.” Cindy nodded.

“Yes, of course, that must have been it!” Both Leo and Snow announced quickly in unison.

“It’s really weird when you do that.” The little blonde commented dryly.

Manuel stared at the horizon as the sun bade her magnificent farewell. Since that fateful day when Rapunzel, his love, had saved his life by administering the small vial of elixir that Snow had given her, he had been able to tolerate the rays of the setting sun.

As he watched the sun dip behind the horizon, he took the moment to appreciate the fact, as he did every night, that he was perhaps the only vampire in existence to witness this beautiful farewell.

Not that he could traverse the world during her strong and resplendent daytime reign, not that he would have even tried, but he could wake just those few moments earlier and watch her paint the sky in her varied palette of reds, purples and oranges. He had fallen in love with her beauty.

He traveled down the path and on towards the Rutherford cottage, a tall three story Tudor cottage on the outskirts of Turin, that currently was home to two of his closest friends, Snow White, the exiled Rylakian heir, and Rapunzel...his Rapunzel.

They say, that for every vampire, there is one heart, one being that they can never turn from, Manuel did not know if that was true, but he did know that he would risk anything for the tall blonde girl; he already had. And if there were such a thing as an undeniable heart for him; hers would be it.

Since liberating Rapunzel from cave that the crone had imprisoned her in, he had not missed a single evening of her company. Of course, he had left early many a night as he searched for any clue as to how to break the formidable curse that Snow White laid under, but he always stopped in to check on Rapunzel.

As he turned the corner and began walking up the lane to the cottage, Manuel caught sight Cindy, standing at the gate...waiting for him...anxiously.

He didn’t want to know why.

“Listen, I only have a minute, but I need a favor, and it will be so easy for you to do.” Cindy nodded her head at the impassive vampire as soon as he came within speaking distance.

“What is this ‘favor’?” Manuel asked dutifully, without even a touch of curiosity.

Cindy rummaged around in her over sized bag, looked carefully over both shoulders, and brought forth a gleaming, glass slipper.

“I need you to hide this for me.” She whispered urgently. “Just take it and hide it in some secret...vampire place. Please Manuel, I really need your help. This is serious.”

“Did you steal it?”

“No! I didn’t steal it, it belongs to me, but it’s really complicated and I can’t get in to it right now. Please Manuel, please help me. There is no one else I can ask, you gotta help me!” She pleaded, tears welling in her huge, jade green eyes and spilling down her soft delicate cheeks.

“Are you in trouble?” Asked Manuel darkly. “What have you done....”

“No, I just need you to hide it for me...that’s all. What’s with all the conspiracy theory attitude. Seriously Manuel, loosen up.” Cindy strove for nonchalance...but fell, not surprisingly, very short as she brushed her tears away. “And you can’t tell anyone either.”

Manuel raised one sceptical eyebrow at the tiny blonde.

“I will hold on to this glass slipper until such time as it is imperative that I retrieve it. And it is I and I alone that shall decide when such a moment arrives.”

“It’s just a shoe Manuel. There’s no need for dramatics.”

“If there were no need for dramatics, why on earth did you feel the need to beg, plead and... cry.” It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

“Manuel! Manuel!” Rapunzel’s ecstatic shout came from the house, and the tall willowy blonde sprinted towards the dark and elegant vampire. “The most wonderful thing has occurred!”

“Hide the freaking shoe, Manuel!” Cindy squeaked in near hysterics.

Manuel looked sharply down at Cindy before slipping the shoe in to his black, embroidered jacket.

“I am sure Cindy has already told you,” Rapunzel allowed Manuel to take both of her hands in his. “Isn’t it wonderful! Snow is awake! The curse has been lifted!” Her eyes shone with joy.

“No, love, she didn’t quite -”

“Was getting to it! Like I didn’t get a chance, but you know he’s your boyfriend, so you know, it’s better and all if you tell him anyway. So everything worked out...you know, it’s all good.” Cindy rambled in agitation before turning and running in to the cottage.

Rapunzel shook her head and laughed softly.

“She has been under insurmountable stress, poor Cindy.”

“Perhaps.” Was all Manuel said before leading Rapunzel in to the cottage as well, very much liking the sound of the word ‘boyfriend’.

“Cindy, you are being uncharacteristically quiet this evening. Are you alright?” Leo asked as he glanced over at the tiny teen.

Cindy was perched in her usual chair beside Snow’s bed, but where she typically glowed with infectious energy, today she stared at the blanket, lost in her own thoughts. Quickly she looked up and smiled at her friends.

“I’m sorry, I’m just thinking about...” She trailed off. “How amazing it is that you woke up. I just so glad. Cause you know, like I said, it sucks without your best friend.” She nodded.

Leo and Snow glanced over at each other, and then away again. He reached over and grabbed her hand again.

“What about Mercury? I haven’t seen him all day, doesn’t that strike you as weird?” Cindy realised. And it was weird, the werewolf was typically paling around with at least one of them, everyday.

“I didn’t... do you know if Red was at the ball last night?” Cindy asked suddenly.

“I wouldn’t know, I was almost dead.” Snow remarked wryly.

Prince Charming chuckled softly.

“I am so sorry that you were barred from attending Miss Cinderella” He said with a twinkle in his soft blue eyes. “But I guarantee that nothing shall stand in your way for the next ball, if I have to make a royal request I will.”

Cindy smile tightly.

“Thanks, I was just curious, cause you know, it’s getting close to the full moon again and he always gets really weird about Red then.”

Snow nodded. Mercury, the werewolf was hopelessly obsessed with Red Adair, a tall Aristocratic beauty, and the top contender in the tabloids search for the perfect wife for Crown Prince Leonardo Charming, or his younger brother, Prince Nickoli Charming. Mercury ate, slept and breathed Red Adair...er....perhaps not ate. Red, for her part, enjoyed the attentions of the dangerously handsome Mercury immensely, but had not given any indication that she was serious about the flirtation. Not her smartest move. But then again, she had no idea that she was toying with a werewolf.

“Perhaps I should check on him, or better yet maybe Manuel could stop by on his way home this evening.” Leo decided. “Has he arrived yet?”

Cindy nodded. “He’s out on the porch with Rapunzel...sucking face.”

“What?!?” Both Leo and Snow said in unison.

“Joking. It was worth it to see your faces.” Cindy chortled, sounding much more like the Cindy they both knew and loved.

Just then a knock sounded at the bedroom door. Uncle Doc slowly opened the door and poked his head in.

“Kids? This messenger from the palace has arrived with a request for you ladies.” He explained.

The Royal Page entered the room behind the doctor.

“This is Snow, Cinderella, and I am sure you are familiar with Prince Leonardo.” Uncle Doc said with a grin.

The Page bowed low. “Good evening your Highness, I do hope I am not interrupting you.”

“Of course not Lewis. What brings you here?” The prince inquired curiously. “Oh wait, the shoe, that’s right.”

“Yes, Sire, I was informed that there were young ladies was in residence, a Miss Snow Rutherford and Miss Rapunzel Goethal.” He agreed with a smile.

“That would be me.” Snow smiled back, sweetly. “Snow Rutherford.”

“I have been instructed to have you try on the glass slipper, my lady.”

“But Snow was in a coma during the ball.” Prince Leonardo reminded the Page. “I was at her side. There is no way it was she that left the ball so mysteriously last night.”

“Of course, your Highness, but what of the other young lady of the house?” The Page responded with a bow.

“Rapunzel? I believe she was at home as well, but I am sure she would try it on for you, if you were to ask.” Leo replied.

Rapunzel and Manuel quietly slipped in to the room. Rapunzel’s magnificent silvery blonde hair catching the light and creating a soft glow around her.

“Ah, I understand that you were not at the ball last night, but I have been instructed to try this glass slipper on all of the ladies in the household. Would you sit down and allow me to slip it on for you?”

“May I examine that glass slipper?” Manuel asked casually, extending his arm out.

“Of course.” The Page quickly agreed, fumbling slightly as he placed the slipper in the beautiful vampire’s hand.

Manuel turned the slipper over carefully, scrutinizing every curve of the exquisite shoe before handing it back to the nervous Page.

“Beautiful work, isn’t it?” The Page asked.

“Yes. One of a kind, I would say.” Manuel returned with a touch of charm. “What brings this slipper our way?”

“This glass slipper was left on the stairs of the Holiday Palace last night, it seems a mystery is left for us to unfold.” The Page responded, beginning to enjoy himself, just a little.

“How so?” the vampire encouraged.

“A young lady arrived at the ball wearing a blue fairy costume, and Prince Nickoli became instantly smitten.”

Cindy’s usually glowing face paled considerably.

“This mystery girl arrived by herself, and left suddenly at the stroke of midnight, never giving the prince even as much as her name. He has been talking of nothing else, and has bade us to slip this small slipper on the foot of every young woman in Lonstas and the surrounding encampments, and whosoever the slipper fits-”

“Is his one true love, the love of his life, the ying to his yang, you get the picture. Nickoli has a very strong romantic streak, annoying I have always found it. Although, for some reason I think he might be quite serious this time, this blue fairy really got to him.” Prince Leonardo shook his head.

Manuel looked up and locked eyes with the statue still Cindy, who returned his stare with the blankest of faces.

“Indeed.” The vampire remarked quietly.

“Miss?” The Page nodded at Rapunzel.

“Oh, yes, of course. But I do need to remind you that I was at home, here in this cottage last night, looking for a cure for my friend. Prince Leonardo and Manuel both can attest to that.”

Rapunzel carefully held her slender foot out towards the Page, who with equal care, slipped the glass slipper on to her foot. But Rapunzel’s foot, although slender and perfect, was still too large for the dainty slipper.

The Page nodded and removed the slipper from her foot.

“Sorry Miss.”

“Not at all.” Rapunzel returned with a laugh.

“And you Miss?” He asked, turning his gaze on the diminutive Cindy. Cindy’s huge green eyes got bigger as she bit her lip.

“The slipper has already been to my house...this morning...”

“Ah, so you have already tried on the slipper?”

“Yes sir.” Cindy nodded solemnly, which was actually true...she had in fact tried on that glass slipper...but not that morning at her house. Cindy had not even been there.

“Would you care to try it again?” He smiled hopefully.

“No sir, I already know how it fits on me...I don’t need to...umm...do it again.” She nodded and looked down, hoping that he took that as shame that it didn’t fit her.

He did.

“I see Miss, no need to put you through that again, I am sorry. Are there any other ladies in this household?”

“No.” Uncle Doc supplied with a small smile.”I truly hope you find the young lady in question before too long. Would you like a cup of coffee, or a slice of cake before you leave?” He asked as he led the royal messenger out of the room.

Leo smiled at the doctor’s warm hospitality. Rapunzel crept up beside him as Manuel left the room.

“Leo? If I may, I have a small request.” Rapunzel timidly whispered to the handsome prince.

“Of course, Rapunzel, anything.” he replied with a dashing smile.

And so she asked him...his smile wilted a little.

The grand parlour in the Holiday Palace of Turin, was done in various shades of cream and blue, and it had always reminded Prince Leonardo of a trip to the beach. The polished floors were a golden cream, the walls a lighter, satiny cream, and all of it accentuated by numerous shades of blue, from the deepest royal blue curtains, to the pale robin’s egg blue flowers. He had always loved this room, because he had always felt at peace and in control when surrounded by such settling colours. Not so today. Leo could tell, by the set of Snow’s rosebud red lips, that she had heard of his decision to try her stepmother Rosalyn, on charges of attempted assassination. And it was abundantly apparent that she did not agree. He felt a terrible headache coming on as he sat down on the chair next to her.

Snow, herself was dressed like she belonged in this room, with her cream coloured silky top and leggings, and her soft blue cape. He thought she looked quite beautiful, and was about to say so, when he caught the look in her luminous dark eyes. He cringed...just a little.

“Are your soldiers truly heading for Lyra, with a charge against my stepmother?” Snow spoke quietly, taking her time to enunciate every syllable.

He let his breath out slowly. “Lonstasian soldiers, and our family lawyer have set out for Lyra, that is true.”

“You just decided to do this? You didn’t think it necessary to speak with me?” Snow responded carefully.

“I didn’t just decide this, I thought on it for some time, and my father agreed with my reasoning, in fact he was outraged by recent events.”

“Your father?”

“Snow, Rylakian soldiers have beat and tortured our citizens...on our land...unannounced. That is almost a declaration of war!”

“Alright.” Snow spread her hands in front of her.”I understand that, they should never have done that, I am not defending it, I would never sanction something like that. But...my stepmother...and me. That’s different, it’s personal.”

“No Snow, it’s not. She tried to kill you. That is a crime, under any country’s law, be it Rylak, Lonstas, Sarrilia or even Devon for that matter, and like any being residing in any of those countries, she is subject to the laws governing that country.” He spoke as evenly as he could, but the mere thought of how close that evil woman had come to snuffing out Snow’s life made it hard.

“Leo, you have to proceed carefully. Lonstas and Rylak have been at peace, our fathers the best of friends for years. If you irritate my stepmother, if you present these charges in the wrong manner...you may risk everything. Can’t you just send a convoy to diplomatically speak to the Rylakian council about the rumours? Start an open dialogue, perhaps things can be settled without such a heavy hand.” Snow tried to sound reasonable and keep her temper in check, but he was doing this to *her* country. Her father’s country.

“We will speak as diplomatically as we can with regards to the alleged actions of her soldiers in my lands, but Rosalyn will be informed of the charges against her, and we will proceed from there.”

“Why can’t you leave me out of this?” Snow almost shouted in her frustration. “What she did to me has nothing to do with you!”

“That bitch almost killed you, that has *everything* to do with me!” He shouted back, losing the battle with his temper.

“Why can’t you understand, she’s my stepmother...not ‘*that bitch*’...and I love her.” Snow yelled back, having lost the battle as well.

“She tried to kill you, not once but four times! Snow, does that sound like a woman who loves you back? Listen to reason! Rosalyn of Rylak will be found and she will be tried on charges of attempted assassination, because that’s what she did!”

“I refuse to press charges!” Snow’s eyes flashed with unsuppressed anger.

“Not your call, this happened in *my* kingdom—not yours! The kingdom will press charges on your behalf, remember, you are only seventeen and in Lonstas, that makes you a minor.”

Snow bit her lip in fury and balled her fists.

“You would do this, you would press charges against my stepmother, air all of my personal, private pain, all of it, just out there for the tabloids to jump all over?”

“Snow! This is your life we are talking about!”

“I know! And you are intent on ruining it!”

“I am intent on saving it!”

Leo knew he was being irrationally angry with Snow. But every time he thought about those days spent beside her bed, every time he thought about how close he came to losing her, about a world that didn’t include Snow...it was more than he could bare. His rage against Rosalyn knew no bounds, it was barely controllable. Why on earth could Snow not see that he was trying to protect her.

“Aghhhh!” Snow shouted in aggravation, spinning on her heels and leaving the room in quick strides, her soft blue cape flaring out behind her “You are impossible!” She threw over her shoulder.

He stood up in shock.

He knew he should run and catch up with her, explain his fear that Rosalyn could come back and take her away from him, explain how he couldn’t bare to go through it again...explain how he never wanted to be without her...that a world that didn’t include Snow, wasn’t a world that held any fascination for him. But he somehow he couldn’t make

himself. It wasn't that he didn't care that Snow was angry, and Snow was rip roaring mad, it was because he didn't know how to explain his feelings...at least not to Snow. It was because he was afraid.

When she had woken from the coma, he supposed he *had* dropped the ball, lost his big chance to tell her exactly how he felt about her, it was such a magical moment that a declaration of that magnitude wouldn't have seemed so jarring...or so frightening. If he had told her how he felt back then, perhaps they wouldn't be arguing now. Or perhaps they still would, because Snow was stubborn and so was he, and both being crown heirs of their respective kingdoms, they were both used to getting their own ways. Perhaps him more than her, he conceded a little. But if he had told her how he felt about her...well, she certainly didn't appear to want to hear something like that now.

He looked at his watch. Damn he was late.

Turning quickly he headed out through the courtyard towards the oldest gardens west of the Holiday Palace. She would be waiting there for him.

Rapunzel was indeed waiting for him, in this unused portion of the back garden. Leo had chosen this location for a number of reasons, the first being that it *was* so unused, which made it highly unlikely that anyone would stumble upon them. He also liked the fact that much of the garden was falling apart, the ground was uneven and there was debris to jump upon, this led, in his opinion, to a better learning environment.

When Rapunzel had asked him for a small favor, Prince Leonardo would never have imagined, never in a million years, that it was for sword lessons. He dreaded Manuel finding out. If the powerful vampire had any inkling that the prince daily swung a sword at his beloved...Leo didn't want to even think of the repercussions.

Dressed in a tight black shirt and pants, long sturdy boots, with her abundance of thick blonde hair securely tied back, Rapunzel looked like she meant business. Which in fact he did.

Rapunzel was incredibly good with the sword. She was astonishingly agile, much stronger than she looked and an exceptionally fast learner. Leo had never expected her to come back for anything more than her first lesson, perhaps the second. Women typically liked the idea of sword fighting, but lacked the strength or endurance to

properly wield the sword. Not so for Rapunzel, she had surprised him so completely by begging for lessons daily, and if not daily, then three or four times a week. He could hardly refuse her, especially after he saw how quickly she took to the sword.

And every teacher enjoyed a star pupil. He had come to enjoy their sparring sessions immensely.

“Stop day dreaming and have at me!” Rapunzel laughed as she brought her sword up and swung quickly for his head.

He brought his own sword up just in time to save his royal head.

“A lesson I shall not be quick to forget!” He laughed back as he leapt over a fallen log, deftly evading her next stroke.

“Just for the record...I would have pulled the stroke.” Rapunzel assured him.

“Just for the record, I don’t believe you. If I find I can’t block you, I’ll simply run away.”

“I think I should like to see that, I could use a good laugh!” She returned as she furiously drove him backward.

They carried on like that for the next ninety minutes before breaking. Their hair and swords flying, as they sparred across the old and decrepit garden.

“You are somewhat distracted. Is there something troubling you?” Rapunzel asked with concern.

Damn. She was good. This argument with Snow was eating at him horribly.

“Oh, you know, pictures, interviews and stunning new suit fittings. I am not sure when I shall find time to get the highlights dear Cindy indicated I needed.” He replied flippantly.

“It’s a girl.” Rapunzel nodded knowingly. “Is it Snow?”

She sat down on the nearest bench with her water bottle and looked up at him inquiringly.

“Well, you know...I talk to a *lot* of girls.” Leo protested. “All the time.”

“Yes, yes, I am sure. Tell me what happened, perhaps I can help you sort it out.” Rapunzel offered.

He ran his hands through his tangled waves and sat down on the bench beside her.

She waited patiently for him to begin.

He outlined his decision to try Rosalyn of Rylak for attempted assassination on Lonstasian ground, not once but three times. The

attack in the forest had occurred while Snow was still in Rylak, every time he thought on it his blood boiled again. How frightened she must have been, how desperate. He told her of his troops that were still chasing tales of Rylakian soldiers torturing Lonstasian goblins, imps and ogres, something that bordered on war. He told her all of it, and it was a relief to express all of his frustrations finally.

She nodded gravely.

“I see. You would see Snow and your citizens avenged.”

“Of course, but why can’t she see that?” He exclaimed as he smacked his thigh in frustration.

“Rosalyn was mother to her. That is a very strong bond. The crone was mother to me, and although I never wish to set eyes on her again, I would not wish her harm.” Rapunzel explained.

“What would she have me do? I can’t, I mean my father can’t just let Rylak walk all over us because Snow doesn’t want her stepmother to get hurt.”

“That is true, allowing her soldiers to torture your citizens breaks numerous peace treaty points, and you do have the moral authority and responsibility to investigate, I am sure Snow is aware of that. But dealing with Rosalyn on the attempted assassination charges will be much trickier.”

“How can I make her see I am right?” He asked.

Rapunzel shook her head.

“Do not try. Trying to force anyone to think the way you would like them to, is always bound to fail. Understand her feelings, and ask her to try to understand yours. Eventually you will come to some sort of an understanding between the two of you.”

“That is your advice?” He asked sceptically.

“That is my advice, you will see, it is very good advice.” She asserted with a small nod.

Snow was miserable. All she could think about was her awful fight with Leo. She sat there at the dinner table long after dinner had officially ended, she cleared the table, washed the dishes and placed them neatly back in the cabinet, all without actually seeing a thing. She was so angry at Leo, that she hadn’t thought she would even care

if he didn't show up for dinner. He hadn't...and she found she did care. A fact that made her even angrier.

There was a knock at the door. Hope flared in her heart and she rushed to the door to answer it.

Gabriel, Manuel's blonde brother, strode through the doorway, carrying a limp Alessa in his arms.

Snow let out an alarmed scream.

"Alessa!" Snow exclaimed, as she recognised the yards of glossy dark, brown hair that trailed down from the blond vampire's arms. The last time she had seen her beautiful gypsy friend, she had been riding out to gather her fighters to aide in Rapunzel's rescue. She had looked like a young goddess, ablaze with passion and power. What could have happened?

"What in the..." Uncle Doc started as he rushed in to the room.

Alessa was unconscious in Gabriel's arms, the large wound on her stomach was bleeding through the make shift bandage that wrapped around her waist tightly, making Snow's vision swim. She turned to the good doctor for help but Uncle Doc was two steps ahead of her.

"This way! Immediately!" He commanded the blonde angelic looking vampire.

Gabriel immediately followed the little doctor to his examination room down the hall.

Carefully, he laid the beautiful gypsy girl down on Uncle Doc's examination table and stepped back.

Glancing down he noticed a trail of blood on his right hand, he brought it up to his rosy lips and sucked the blood off contentedly.

Snow blanched, he winked at her.

Uncle Doc carefully cut through the bandage that covered Alessa's wound.

"She was shot with this arrow." Gabriel announced as he handed the arrow over to Uncle Doc.

"Why did you remove it? If not done correctly, it could have killed her." Uncle Doc admonished gently, as obviously the vampire had done it just right.

"She was crying and she asked me to." The vampire Gabriel shrugged. "Then she passed out...shame."

The door slid open and Manuel slipped in to the room, he nodded gravely to his brother, who nodded equally gravely back.

“Where did you find her?” He asked quietly as the doctor worked at examining and cleansing the wound.

“She was shot down at Old Hawk Pass” Gabriel responded.

“That is very far from here....”

“It is.” Gabriel agreed.

“Why did you not bring her to the camp? Her grandmother could have saved her just as easily? And perhaps much quicker.” Manuel asked his brother darkly.

“I have been forbidden from entering your little gypsy camp, or have you forgotten?” Gabriel smiled sarcastically.

“What did you do?” Snow gasped, the gypsies were renowned for their hospitality, why the first time Manuel had taken the girls there, they had been made official friends of the camp. And *that*, after they had eaten, and danced and been merry.

“What didn’t I do.” Gabriel laughed heartily.

Snow wasn’t so sure she really wanted an answer to her question anymore.

“Take a close look at the arrow that wounded your gypsy.” Gabriel asked his brother.

Manuel carefully inspected the arrow. It was long and elegantly made.

“It’s Devonian.” Manuel sounded somewhat surprised.

“They thought she was human.”

Snow shuddered at the implication.

“Everyone knows gypsies aren’t fully human, there is some mistake.” Manuel shook his head.

“No Manuel, gypsies are counted as human in all censuses and receive full voting rights...they forage far out in to the countryside, without the protection of human cities and the populations therein. They are easy targets for rebellion emulators. They meant to kill this gypsy girl as a message.”

“Warn the camp.” Manuel looked up.

“Already done.” Gabriel replied simply.

Manuel nodded again.

“Manuel, we are stretched too thin!” He hissed. “The entire coven is patrolling our section of Lonstas, night after night we comb the surrounding areas, and still we missed this! If I hadn’t come upon her when I did we would have one dead little gypsy girl.”

“What are you talking about? Manuel, does this have something to do with the movement in Devon? Is that coming here?” Snow gasped, and Uncle Doc looked up in alarm.

Lonstas was taking baby steps towards equality and coexistence between the races, creature, magical and human. It was a slow and painful process, but it was the only kingdom to attempt such to date. And in Devon, creatures that had long been oppressed were rising up. A movement had formed with the object being the total reclaiming of the continent from the humans. That movement was spreading...fast.

“What do you know of it little human?” Laughed the blonde vampire.

“Leave her be Gabriel, she is not like most humans. There are many in Lonstas that are working towards the same goals we are.” Manuel sighed. “Propaganda is just that.”

“I fear that many in our fair land believe that propaganda as well, brother. We are outnumbered and overworked.” Gabriel answered.

“Enlist the werewolves.” Manuel said suddenly.

“You have got to be kidding.” Gabriel snorted.

Snow looked from one vampire to the next, as Uncle Doc worked on the unconscious Alessa. She finally thought she saw a small resemblance in the brothers, it was in the bones of the face, but whereas Manuel was pale and darkly lovely, Gabriel was blonde and angelic looking. But something about the blonde vampire, reminded Snow that he was anything but.

“I have fought with them, they are admirable fighters with an honor that, at times, closely resembles our own.”

“I’m not working with werewolves, they’re emotional and they smell terrible.” Gabriel shook his head.

“Not all of them.” Manuel disagreed. “And besides, what choice do we have? We are already falling behind.”

“Ugh. I think I may switch sides after all.” Gabriel complained, but Manuel smiled beautifully at him all the same, knowing that he had won this particular disagreement with his brother.

“Come now, I would like to let Alessa rest for a while.” Uncle Doc cut in. He had finished cleansing and re-bandaging her wound. “You did a very good job removing the arrow, not a shard was left, although I am worried about that wound, it doesn’t seem to want to close properly. Perhaps you can explain about this rebellion while I look for some

thread, I believe I shall have to stitch her after all.” Uncle Doc clucked as he ushered the vampires out of the room.

Snow knew all about rebellions. Shortly after her father had fallen ill, a rebellion had started in her own homeland of Rylak. She shuddered every time she thought about those rebels marching towards her city of Lyra, intent on slaughtering the entire city as well as the royal family nestled within. Rosalyn had set out with the soldiers, meeting them at the city gates. Not one rebel had made it in to the gleaming city of Lyra...and no one ever questioned the White’s right to rule again. Rosalyn had made short work of it. But the cost, the cost had been unimaginable. The cost had been Rosalyn’s very soul. Or at least that was the way Snow had always viewed it. Rosalyn had returned from war, victorious, but vacant. Where a frightened young queen had set out to protect her people, a strong, warrior queen had returned. But she was never the same.

As soon as the good doctor turned his back to collect his stitching equipment, Gabriel left them. Manuel was much better at explaining politics anyway, Gabriel had never cared enough to involve himself, he had always preferred to ‘go with the flow’. Walking quickly back towards the examination room, he quietly opened the door and stepped in.

He paced back and forth for a moment before finally closing the door and bending over the still form of Alessa.

Carefully he lifted the bandage away from the smooth skin of her stomach, smiling slightly, he bent his head towards the wound, his fangs elongating more than a little.

And that is exactly the moment Alessa chose to wake.

Screaming at the top of her lungs, Gabriel barely got more than a taste and swipe of his tongue, before Uncle Doc and Snow came racing in the room.

“What in the hell are you doing!” Snow shouted as she launched herself at the vampire, who effortlessly caught her in his arms and set her back down, with a smirk. Undaunted she beat against him uselessly with her fists and feet as both she and the doctor screamed for Manuel.

Manuel opened the door irritably.

“Gabriel.” He requested. “Please.”

“It was just a taste, and you know I have coagulating and healing properties. I did more help than anything.” Gabriel defended.

Snow let her jaw fall open.

“Keep your filthy fangs off of me! I would rather die of my injury than be healed by you!” Alessa screamed indignantly, her finger shaking as she pointed at the grinning vampire beside her. “You disgust me! My grandmother will cast a spell on you that will make you tremble every time you think of me!”

“Don’t worry, I already do.” He laughed happily. “Feisty.” He remarked to his brother.

“It is customary to ask, it is very easy to give the wrong impression. And she doesn’t like you much.” Manuel agreed with a small smile.

“Pity.” Gabriel said over his shoulder as he sauntered out of the room. “And you needn’t worry about the stitches holding now....you’re welcome.”

Both Snow and Alessa glared at his retreating form.

“Alessa, I apologise for my brother. As always, his motive is pure but his....” Manuel started.

“Always, Manuel? Always? We both know Gabriel far too well to use absolutes when referring to him.” Alessa shook her head, and settled back down on to the bed, allowing the doctor to tuck her gently in.

“Very true. I will speak to him.” Manuel assured the gypsy. “I too, believe you will find your wound healing admirably.” He remarked casually before following his brother out of the room.

“”Gads!” Uncle Doc exclaimed. “He’s right, wouldn’t you know it, the wound is pulling together nicely.” He shook his head in awe.