



Grimmtastic Girls
Rapunzel Cuts Loose

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The Message

Rapunzel lifted the silver chain that hung around her neck, and poked the key that dangled from it into the lock on her trunker — a fancy leather trunk that stood tallwise on its end like a locker among other trunkers lining the school hallway. As she turned the key, she softly sang her unlocking combination. *“I love to dance, dilly dilly, I love to sing. When I am queen, dilly dilly, you’ll be my king.”*

Most of the unlocking combinations at Grimm Academy were short and could be chanted or spoken, but she’d gotten a long one, and it had to be sung in tune. Luckily, she had a good voice.

“Hey! Thanks for the offer. But I’m too young to get married,” a boy called out. It was Basil von Valerian. As he went to his trunker nearby, Rapunzel sent him a quick glance, her lips curling into a smile. He was a head taller than she was, with light brown hair and mischievous green eyes full of good humor.

Rapunzel's three best friends here at school were girls — Snow White, Red Riding Hood, and Cinderella. But Basil was her guy BFF. They'd been friends ever since she'd rescued him from a bully named Little Jack Horner on the first day of first grade. Jack had been such a bully that teachers had often made him sit in a corner where he couldn't bother other students.

"Ha-ha," she said to Basil as her trunker door swung open. "We're only twelve. Besides, I'm not a princess and you're not a prince. So how could I ever make you a king or —" Rapunzel's tongue froze as she noticed the boy opening the trunker just beyond Basil. Prince Perfect. Her super-secret crush.

He was the only boy in school who could make her blush with embarrassment over nothing and stumble over her words. Seeing him unsettled her, and her hand trembled as she reached for her Academy Handbook. As she pulled it from its shelf, a mouse-shaped cat toy tumbled out of her trunker and rolled halfway across the hall. *Tink, tink, tink* went its bell.

"Oh, frogwoggle," she murmured under her breath. There was a flash of blue in her long glossy black hair as she flipped it over one shoulder and scurried after the toy. She grabbed it, then quickly ran back and stuck it in her trunker.

She'd worn her hair mostly loose today, with only the

blue-streaked sections woven into a series of intricate braids at the back of her head. Some people thought the blue strands were dyed, but they were actually natural. Good thing, because her hair grew a foot or longer every single day, which meant she would've had to re-dye the streaks daily to keep up. Sometimes her hair grew inches in just minutes. She had cut it to waist length yesterday morning, but already it hung down to her knees. By night-fall it would touch the floor.

Realizing that both boys were staring at her now, she explained lamely, "That silly nursery rhyme I was singing is just my trunker combination. The one Ms. Jabberwocky gave me at the beginning of school." She was babbling like an idiot. *Stop it!* she told herself.

Basil shot her a weird look as he shut his trunker door with the nudge of an elbow. "Duh, yeah, I know that obviously. I've only heard you sing it about a million times. It was a joke, Rapunzel."

"Oh. Yeah. A joke," she echoed. She'd known that. But Prince Perfect might not have. She'd really only said all that for his benefit. She didn't want him to think Basil was her crush or anything. Unfortunately, she'd wound up sounding kind of bubbleheaded.

She dug aimlessly around in her trunker, rearranging the row of dark nail polishes on the top shelf in rainbow order, starting with Redtabulous and ending with Velvet

Violet. But her attention was fixed on Perfect, and she kept giving him sidelong glances. There were so many princes going to GA that they all just went by their last names. And the name Perfect fit him *perfectly*, in her opinion. Tall with dark hair, he wasn't just cute like most boys at the Academy. He was *handsome*, like the princes in the great fairy-tale books penned by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm.

"Hey, Rapunzel! Want to meet in the dungeon after school to talk about . . . stuff?" called Cinderella, who went by Cinda for short. Her trunker was directly across the hall, with Snow and Red Riding Hood's on either side of it. Those three Grimm girls were all looking Rapunzel's way now, the same question in their eyes.

"Stuff? Sounds intriguing," said Prince Awesome, whose trunker was two down from Prince Perfect's. He wiggled his eyebrows at Cinda, his crush, and she grinned back.

Rapunzel knew what *stuff* her friends wanted to discuss. Secret stuff. Like treasure! And how to find it. At Prince Awesome's ball a few weeks ago, they'd accidentally discovered a mapestry, which was currently hidden in the cute nut-brown wicker basket Red held over one arm. It was a magical map in the form of a stitched tapestry that showed the entire realm of Grimmlandia, including the Academy. They hoped it would lead to a legendary treasure so enormously valuable that it would save the school from

financial ruin at the hands of a terrible secret society. A society called E.V.I.L. (as in *Exceptional Villains In Literature*).

“Okay. Sounds good,” Rapunzel told her friends in answer to Cinda’s question.

Prince Perfect gave her a sideways glance. She really wished he hadn’t overheard Cinda’s mention of the dungeon. Rapunzel didn’t like calling attention to the fact that she was . . . different. That while all the other girls lived in the three tower dorms on the fifth and sixth floors of the Academy, she chose to live deep down in the school’s dungeon.

Bong! The sound of the huge Hickory Dickory Dock grandfather clock over in the Great Hall echoed throughout the school, signaling the hour. Everyone who was dawdling in the hallway or at a trunker suddenly shot off in different directions, all heading to their third-period classes.

Snow, Cinda, and Red quickly murmured their trunker locking combinations. They looked like a pretty bouquet of girl-size flowers in their colorful dresses. Only Rapunzel was wearing all black — ankle boots, leggings, dress, bag. Everything. As usual. It was her favorite color, as everyone knew.

Snow’s dress was turquoise. It was a color she’d been wearing a lot lately — ever since she’d found a certain sparkly tiara with turquoise jewels in it. Cinda wore pink,

which looked grimmazing with her long candle-flame yellow hair and blue eyes. She was on the basketball team sixth period and often wore pink-laced sneakers. But today, she had on her glass slippers.

Red carried her basket of course, and the dress and hooded cape she wore matched the red streaks in her dark, curly hair. Her basket could fetch things if asked in just the right manner. However, it would obey only Red. Because it was her magical charm — which was far more important and not at all the same thing as a lucky charm.

Snow's tiara was *her* magical charm. Cinda had a magical charm, too — her glass slippers. In fact, of the four Grimm girls, Rapunzel was the only one who hadn't yet received her charm. Which was okay, really. Most students went to the Academy for *ages* before their special charms appeared. Still, it would be nice to have one!

The three girls waved farewell to Rapunzel as they dashed off to their classes in a whirl of satin and silk, each carrying their Academy Handbooks. She hurriedly crooned the relocking half of her combination. "*Who told you so, dilly dilly, who told you so? 'Twas my own heart, dilly dilly, that told me so,*" she sang softly. It was a beautiful song, but a bit *silly silly*, if you asked her.

Her trunker lock snapped into place and she slipped her key out of the lock. Instantly, an image of her face magically painted itself in the small heart-shaped inset on the

trunker, right above the lock. Dark almond-shaped eyes, and lips glossed a red that was so deep the color looked almost black.

She tucked her Handbook under one arm. Lifting the hem of her long black skirt with her free hand, she sprinted down the first-floor hall of Pink Castle. The marble walls here were a pretty pale pink and were hung with tapestries showing scenes of feasts and pageantry.

Rounding one of the tall stone support columns, whose top was carved with figures of birds, flowers, and gargoyles, her eyes went to the magnificent grand staircase in the school entrance. She could see Basil, Perfect, and Awesome up ahead of her. Most classes on this side of the school were all-girl, but some included boys. And all three of these boys were in her third-period Bspellings and Enchantments class.

When Basil dropped back to walk with her, Rapunzel shot him a grateful half smile. He knew she was deathly afraid of heights and hated stairs. In fact, she rarely climbed to the dorms, or even higher than the third floor. Taking a deep breath, she started up the steps with him. "How's everything coming for the festival this weekend?" he asked, probably hoping to distract her before she could get nervous. Too late!

"Pretty good," she replied. "That's some of the *stuff* Cinda and the others probably want to talk about after

school.” Rapunzel and her three BFFs had come up with the idea of a festival as a way to earn money to boost the Academy’s finances while they continued to look for treasure. It was Thursday and they’d be discussing last-minute plans and divvying up final chores to do because the festival began the day after tomorrow!

“Well, tell them that the guys — Awesome, Foulsmell, Perfect, Prince, and me — are working on a last-minute game for the festival. Wait till you see.” The first three princes he named were in their next-period class. The last one was actually named Prince Prince, his first and last names being the same.

They’d reached the second-floor landing. Only one more floor to go. Rapunzel’s fingers gripped the handrail tighter the higher they went. “So what is it? Your amazing thing for the festival?” she asked, trying to keep her mind off her fears.

“Not telling yet. It’s a surprise.”

Rapunzel glanced over to see him grinning. Then her eyes flicked ahead. *Just ten more steps.* She gritted her teeth.

“So, are you going to the Festival Ball Sunday night?” Basil asked a few seconds later.

“Mmm-hmm. With my friends,” Rapunzel replied, her mind on each step they took upward. *Two more left.* “You?”

At last! They'd reached the point where the grand staircase split off into smaller twisty stairs that went higher and higher. But they weren't going up farther, thank goodness!

"So I was wondering . . ." Basil began. Leaning against the door to the third floor, he pushed it open with one shoulder, and they stepped out into the hall. Rapunzel was just breathing a huge sigh of relief to be done with all those stairs, when suddenly, a ball of black fur whipped by, crossing right in front of her.

"Whoa!" She tripped, falling forward and tumbling to her knees. Her long hair spilled around her in a tangle of glossy black. The cat she'd just tripped over scampered up to her and licked her cheek in a friendly way. He obviously had no idea he had almost caused a dangerous accident.

"Mordred!" scolded Rapunzel, sitting back to glare at him. "How did you get here so fast, you bad boy? I just left you in the dun — uh, my room, not ten minutes ago." He was one of her five cats, a black one with a white star on his forehead. The only one who seemed to halfway understand her when she talked to him. When he felt like listening, that is.

"Hey, you okay?" Basil reached out to help her up.

Feeling embarrassed, she shrugged his hand away. "Yes," she snapped, jumping to her feet on her own.

Basil reared back with his palms out, pretending he was shielding himself from her mood. "Overreact much?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "I guess I get kind of grumpy when my own cat practically tries to kill me."

She pushed her hair back over a shoulder and glanced ahead. Perfect was way down the hall now. Unfortunately, he was looking back at her and she was sure he'd witnessed her fall.

"Yeah, what's up with you, crazy cat?" asked Basil. As he bent down to pick up Rapunzel's Handbook for her, he gave the cat a quick pat, ruffling its fur. A puff of white poofed up into the air.

"Mordred, what have you been up to?" Rapunzel asked the cat, who appeared to be covered with a light dusting of white powder. She picked him up and gave him a quick dust-off, causing both Basil and her to sneeze. *Achoo! Achoo!*

She sniffed the cat's head. "Flour and a hint of cinnamon," she announced.

"Was he down in the Great Hall kitchen?" Basil wondered.

Rapunzel's eyes narrowed and she went still as she caught sight of the small crystal orb tied to Mordred's collar. It was a message marble! Such marbles usually contained important time-sensitive information from their senders. This one had clearly been sent by Mistress

Hagscorch. For one thing, it had her initials carved on it. A dead giveaway. She was the cook and head of the school cafeteria down on the first floor. Also one of the scariest grown-ups at the Academy.

“More likely in the Pearl Tower dorm,” answered Rapunzel. “Red’s tower task is Snackmaker, remember? She bakes cookies up there all the time.” Actually, she was pretty sure Basil was correct about where the cat had been, but she had her reasons for not wanting him to know he’d guessed right.

She reached for the marble, but before she could even touch it, Mordred leaped from her arms. “Here, kitty,” she called sweetly. But Mordred sauntered off down the hall as if he hadn’t heard her. She took off after him, but he quickened his pace to keep just out of reach. “Come on. Come here, and I’ll . . . take you to the festival this weekend, okay?” she offered.

The cat paused and turned his head to look at her. He twitched his tail and almost seemed to grin at her in a satisfied way. Then, with one enormous leap, he bounded into her arms.

“Not a bad bargain,” said Basil, as he caught up with her outside the classroom door. Then he added, “For the *cat*.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re a pushover.” He gave Mordred’s head a gentle stroke and the cat purred.

“Am not!” Rapunzel protested.

“Face it. You couldn’t bargain your way out of a paper bag,” he said with a grin. “At least when it comes to cats.”

Meowww!

“Oh, sorry, Mordred!” In her consternation, she’d hugged him a little too hard without realizing it. Now she nuzzled the top of his head with her chin. Except for one bad deal she’d made when she was only six, she didn’t think she totally stunk at deal making. Oh, wait a minute — there was also that bad bargain she’d made with Hagscorch earlier this year. *Hmm. Maybe I am a pushover.*

She hoped not! That was the very last thing she wanted to be. Her parents had been pretty much the worst deal makers ever in the history of Grimmlandia and she’d promised herself not to be like them. Why, before she was even born, they’d bargained her away to a witch!