

*A Sinistevil come of age
May step before the Sceptre's glow
And pledge their heart of flesh and blood
Which then with hate shall overflow.*

*Heed this warning, Kings and Queens,
Who seek to kill the Sceptre's heir;
Those who obstruct the course of power,
Their wicked life shall not be spared.*

Chapter One

In the centre of Waning lay a castle, a castle of dark brick and twisted turrets which leant over its kingdom as though about to take a bite out of it. Within this castle of terrified servants and endless cobwebbed corridors lay a bedroom, a bedroom with a family tree painted meticulously down one wall.

The name on the tree was known throughout the kingdom of Waning – largely because it was the name of the rulers who kept burning down their houses. It was a name that could silence a room, that could make a cavalry run for the hills, that could send shivers down even the sturdiest of spines. The name was that of their rulers, of the most despicable, distasteful and downright *evil* royal family in the entire world.

That name was written in bold, spiky silver letters, painted stylishly and with exquisite care at the top of the family tree. The name read:

The Sinistevils.

The royal family tree was a gnarled one, a *nasty* one. Sinistevils did not play nice with one another, and most family gatherings ended with a few more branches snapped off. Even so, it was a tree that thrived.

There, near the bottom of the tree in angry violet lettering, was the current ruler and matriarch of the Sinistevil household: Queen Viella Sinistevil, who liked to crush peasants and laugh as their villages burned. The silver line of the tree wound down to her equally cruel eldest son, the late Prince Brutus, who led said armies and laughed equally hard at the burning of villages.

However, Brutus was not the final name on the tree. Right at the bottom, crammed up against the skirting board, was a brother. The people of Waning had not yet seen Viella's surviving son and heir to the throne, whose name on the tree was obscured by a crowd of lint and dust-bunnies. But they *did* know his name. The boy who could only be as vile and disgusting as the rest of his bloodline, who could only be as evil as evil can be, was called...

“Ahhh-choo!”

Robbie Sinistevil woke with a sneeze and sat up in bed, drawing a long pyjama sleeve across his nose. “Good morning!” he said to the silvery tree snaking across his bedroom wall as he hopped from under the covers.

As Robbie threw open the curtains on what was promising to be an absolutely glorious morning he assumed, like the rest of the kingdom did, that he was as evil as evil could possibly be. Why would he ever think otherwise? Robbie was a Sinistevil, and Sinistevils were evil. Evil was his legacy. It was in his blood. It was in his – he looked at his sleeve and grimaced.

Time to get dressed.

Robbie pulled his robes out of the wardrobe. They were black, of course – the only acceptable colour for a Sinistevil to wear – and suited him perfectly.

Well, maybe *perfectly* wasn't quite the right word; they didn't actually *fit*. The sleeves of the cloak fell past Robbie's hands and further still, while the bottom of his trouser legs pooled around the soles of his shoes. But that didn't matter to Robbie. Sleeves could be rolled up, trousers could be hemmed (or stapled; Robbie was not skilled at sewing). What mattered was not how the clothes *looked*, but what they *represented*; they'd been his brother's.

Robbie turned back to his family tree and dropped to his knees, smiling at the emerald name *Brutus*. "See you in a bit!" he said with a wave. He then rose without realising he was stood on the corner of his cloak, tripped forward and hit his head against the bed post, where it gave a resounding *bonk*. Robbie rubbed his pointy nose and smiled bashfully at Brutus' name. "I'm sure you did that all the time," he said brightly.

You see, there was a pitfall in the assumption that the youngest Sinistevil was the evillest being known to man. This was the fact that when it came to being pure evil, Robbie Sinistevil...

Well, wasn't.

Robbie skipped out the door and began the journey down the winding corridors of Sinistevil Castle which would eventually, with any luck, end in breakfast. The sound of his oversized boots pounding the flagstones of the castle floor echoed down the empty corridors, softening as they hit the deep red carpet of the portrait wing. He passed painting after painting of green-skinned ancestors, some glaring down from glorious battle scenes, others simply glaring down.

Robbie stopped at the fifteenth portrait to the left, stepping onto the worn patch of carpet in front of it. He looked up and sighed, taking in his favourite painting.

It was the goriest painting in the castle and quite possibly, although Robbie could not know this, the goriest painting in the world. Vivid reds and purples depicted limbs scattered across a battlefield, some still attached to people. Sinistevil warriors shook nasty looking weapons at weeping villagers, weapons that seemed cruel, unusual and altogether quite frightening.

Robbie liked the picture. He was *sure* he liked it. If he tried hard enough, he could even look at it for more than a few seconds before his stomach protested. It was definitely creative; Robbie hadn't known blood could come in so many different shades of red, and the expression of the man looking for his right arm was exceedingly emotive. Yes, it didn't matter if Robbie felt queasy in its presence, if this was indeed the goriest picture in the castle then Robbie decided that he must like it, because he was evil and evil people like gory things.

However, this is not the reason Robbie considered this painting his *favourite* painting in the castle. The reason it was his favourite was because it had his brother in it. There he was, in the upper left corner, grinning with childlike glee as he set a nearby peasant alight.

Now *that* was a Sinistevil.

There were lots of paintings of Brutus Sinistevil in the castle, he even had his own gallery in the south wing, but in Robbie's opinion none of those paintings depicted Brutus nearly as dynamically as this one. Robbie puffed up his skinny chest with pride as he gazed up at his big brother, who held a burning torch in one hand and the green jewelled Sceptre glowing in the other. So strong, so villainous, so powerful. And Robbie thought it only fitting that the best painting of Brutus in the whole castle showed him doing what he loved: levelling innocent villages.

Brutus represented a benchmark for all young Sinistevil heirs, heirs such as Robbie himself. If he stared hard enough at pictures of Brutus, Robbie could even convince himself that he shared a lot of his brother's features. It wasn't that Robbie considered himself attractive (he knew he wasn't, Mother had told him so), it was that, genetically speaking, he was made up of all the things every other Sinistevil was made up of. His skin was the green of congealed algae, his warm yellow eyes ringed with deep grey. Like his brother, his hair was thick and black as an oil spill on a reef. Unlike his brother, it stuck out rather more than it seemed it should.

The only things missing were the muscles, which Brutus seemed to have an excess of. Some days, Robbie secretly wished Brutus had left some for him; by the time *he* was eleven, Brutus' arms had looked like overfilled potato sacks, while Robbie's currently looked like damp noodles. He'd been only one when Brutus had died but Mother assured him Brutus had always come home from battle looking like the dead returned to wreak revenge, whereas Mother had once described Robbie's short, wiry frame as that of a bemused scarecrow.

Robbie wasn't worried. He was optimistic - a trait he had inherited from no one and seemed to have developed all on his own. It was due to this inexplicable optimism that Robbie was certain he would fill out his late brother's clothes by the time he turned twelve. He would *have* to, or else he wouldn't have the strength to wield the Sceptre when he pledged his heart. He looked back to the Sceptre painted in Brutus' hand, the glow it emitted bathing the surrounding gore in a soft green. Every Sinistevil had been bathed in that mesmerising glow, and someday soon it would be Robbie's turn...

The thought of the Sceptre made Robbie's stomach gurgle, and he decided that now was the time for breakfast.

After all, it was irresponsible to be evil on an empty stomach.

Chapter Two

Robbie did not live alone in Sinistevil Castle. There were the staff of course, but there was also *something else*. Something which stalked the hallways like an irritated storm cloud on a breeze of disgust.

This creature also bared the trademark Sinistevil features, but more so. Their teeth were black and ragged, and their fingernails resembled their teeth. Their body was like that of a tarantula, squat and haggard yet still able to move with incredible speed. Their face rarely smiled, and when it did you had reason to be frightened.

This person threw open the dining hall doors, sending them crashing into the walls with a force that knocked over two candelabras and half a dozen servants. Robbie looked up from his breakfast and smiled.

“Oh, good morning, Mother.”

Mother sneered at Robbie from the other side of the table, her yellowy-white eyes rolling upwards with contempt. “How can it be good?” she snarled. “*You’re* here.”

Robbie chuckled; how he enjoyed Mother’s sense of humour in the morning. He went about eating his toast, unaware of the eyes training themselves on his every move from across the table. Robbie lifted another slice to his lips.

“Look at you,” said Mother. “What are you eating? *Toast*. Chewing away like a lousy little insect.”

Robbie swallowed his mouthful. “If I don’t chew, I could choke...”

“And what a day that’ll be!” spat Mother. “I’ll throw a parade!”

“Wow,” said Robbie, smiling as he reached for his orange juice. “I’d get a parade all for me? That’s crazy, I’ve barely done anything.”

Mother growled. The servants exchanged anxious glances, and one particularly pale faced one hastily disappeared from the room. It was no secret that Mother despised Robbie with a burning hatred so intense you could roast marshmallows on it, a hatred made all the more vibrant and dangerous when faced with Robbie's interminable cheeriness. The servants were well aware of the patterns Mother's verbal jabs usually took when it came to Robbie and knew that in a moment she was going to bring up her favourite subject: the comparison of brothers.

"Idiot!" she said. "If your brother were here there would be none of this *juice* and *toast*, it would be hog roast for breakfast and that cup would be filled with the blood of his enemies!"

Flecks of green spit rained on the tablecloth as Mother continued her tirade. Robbie listened with his chin in his hand.

"Wooooow," said Robbie dreamily. "What else would he have for breakfast?"

"*Idiot!*" Mother banged her fist, sending mugs jangling across the table.

The pale faced servant reappeared and discretely dropped something in front of Mother. The castle staff also knew the only way to calm Mother's dining room tirades was with the arrival of the morning paper.

Mother snatched up the paper in her talons and held her greasy nose up to the front page. Her chapped lips curled into a grin. "*Sinistevil Army Quells Rebellion With Extreme Violence*, what a wonderful headline."

"Can I see the comics?" called Robbie. Mother tore the back page from the paper and chucked it over the maroon tablecloth. Robbie caught it as it fluttered down in front of him. "Did Brutus ever read the comics?" he said as he straightened out the crumpled paper.

“He read the financial section,” replied Mother through gritted teeth. “Because he had a *brain*. Hm,” Mother drummed her fingernails on the table. “This is a similar headline to yesterday’s paper.” Her head snapped up as she locked gazes with a terrified servant, whose legs began to shake under Mother’s scrutiny. “If this isn’t today’s paper the one who’s responsible will have their tongue pulled out through their ears *and you know that’s not a mere threat because there’s a painting of the procedure in the portrait wing.*”

“Why don’t you check the date?” said Robbie from behind the comics.

“I don’t need advice from a toady little juice swilling worm like yourself!” spat Mother as she scanned the top of the front page for the date.

If Robbie hadn’t been so preoccupied with the comics section of the morning paper, he may have noticed Mother’s face change, its usual green becoming tinted with a sickly mottled pink. He would have noticed her yellow eyes widen and her mouth slowly twist to reveal those jagged black teeth.

As it was, Robbie was so engrossed that he didn’t even notice Mother had got up until she’d snatched the paper from his hands, scrunched it up and thrown it at his head. She was already at the dining hall doors when she turned and said,

“I’m no longer in the mood for breakfast. Looking at your face has ruined my appetite.”

“Oh,” said Robbie. “Well, I do hope you feel better soon.”

“*IDIOT!*” Mother screeched, and she slammed the door behind her.

The servants breathed a collective sigh of relief as Mother’s footsteps disappeared down the corridor. As they set about clearing the table, Robbie pondered what he was going to do with the rest of the day. He didn’t want to stay around the castle, especially if his face was

making Mother ill – what if they ran into each other and it worsened her condition? He couldn't live with himself if that happened.

One of the servants brushed against the dining hall's thick purple curtains and a slither of light caught Robbie's eye. The curtains were always drawn in the dining hall as Mother detested so much as a hint of sunlight, and Robbie had forgotten what a beautiful day it was. What time was it? If it was still early enough, he could visit his friend.

Of course, Robbie noted, that involved *sneaking out*. Robbie did not take such things lightly; as a prince and heir to a throne hated by the entire kingdom, leaving the castle walls was an extremely difficult and dangerous task – he could be murdered by the townsfolk, that is if he was lucky enough to get past the extremely vigilant castle guards. However, Robbie was not new to the concept of sneaking out and knew exactly how to do it. All he needed to do now was slip past the servants and disappear without anyone noticing.

As inconspicuously as he could manage, Robbie pushed back his chair and strolled out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

“Where's he off to, do you think?” said one of the servants.

“Oh,” said another. “He's probably sneaking out the castle to see that friend of his.”

“Aw,” said the first servant. “That's nice.”

It is common knowledge amongst parents, teachers and most locksmiths that the word “impenetrable fortress” means nothing to small children, who seem to be able to find themselves anywhere regardless of how hard a person tries to keep them in one place.

Mother considered the Sinistevil fortress to be utterly impenetrable, and for the most part it was. What she *didn't* know was that if a small child of around six were to drop the coin they were playing with in the east wing, they would then follow it. If the shiny object were to roll away down some stone steps and up to a particularly grizzly tapestry of Lazarule Sinistevil inventing the game Kick the Bear Head, that small child might come across a draughty, crumbling piece of wall with a hole just big enough for a child of around six to fit through, a hole which led to a passageway. That child may then emerge from a tunnel directly behind the hovel-like home of one Layla Granite, also aged six.

Robbie had been sneaking passed Mother to see Layla ever since. With practice, he had gotten to be quite good at it.

The castle staff also knew about this tunnel, mostly because they had found Robbie stuck in the hole numerous times. However, they had collectively decided *not* to inform Mother of the tunnel or Robbie's friend. This was due to the fact that they had never known a Sinistevil to be capable of something so innocent as friendship, which to them made Robbie's excursions to Layla curious, intriguing, and absolutely adorable.

Robbie emerged into the morning sunlight on his knees, scrabbling through dirt until he reached the familiar brown grass of Layla's village. He brought himself to his feet, tripping on his baggy trouser leg as he crept across the grass to the truffle tree which stood behind Layla's shack. His skinny frame was hidden by the thick trunk as he reached for the lowest branch and tugged it, making the leaves bob up and down one, two, three times. Then he waited.

“Took you long enough.”

Robbie jumped, then spun around excitedly to see his friend. Layla grinned as she brushed the tight black curls from her deep brown forehead. While Robbie's smile was broad and goofy, Layla's grin was bold, toothy, and dangerous – the kind of grin that said you were either about to be hugged or punched. Robbie could never help but return this grin.

But after a moment, he frowned. "Wait, were you expecting me?"

Layla crossed her arms and sat down heavily against the trunk of the tree. "Of course, I *always* know when you're about to appear in my yard, Robbie Sinistevil. I can smell the clean. Come on, sit down, my parents are at market."

Robbie slid down next to her. "Isn't it a lovely day?"

Layla snorted. "Every day's a lovely day when you live in a castle and don't have to work for a living. I've been digging up potatoes since six am. Look at you, you're ninety percent soap whereas *I* have my own dust cloud."

Robbie nodded. "I hear mud is good for your skin."

Layla flicked at the encrusted dirt on her overalls. "Then my skin has transcended goodness."

"Are those new overalls?" said Robbie.

Layla smiled and her face glowed with pride. "Yes, made them myself! Another potato sack tore yesterday so I got a whole new outfit."

Layla posed, showing off her patchwork overalls – patchwork because they were made up of patches of anything and everything she could get her hands on. Brown sack, purple linen, even the tartan of an old quilt cover. If someone else had discarded it, you could be certain Layla would stitch it together and add it to her wardrobe.

“I don’t know what potato sacks are,” said Robbie. “But they look lovely on you.”

“You pampered little rich boy,” said Layla, shaking her head.

“I’m not pampered,” said Robbie. “I am a finely tuned war machine.”

“I’d like to see that.”

“It’s true! One day I’m going to pledge my heart to the Sceptre, receive its power and lead the Sinistevil army, and I’ll do it all with the Sinistevil iron barbed fist.”

To illustrate his point, Robbie made a fist. It was a very thin, angular fist. Layla prodded it gently, making Robbie hiss.

“Ow! Not so rough!”

“You’re so weak! You’re like a sentient pillow.”

“I am not. I am a vicious tiger.”

Layla laughed and pushed Robbie’s shoulder. Despite it being the lightest of pushes, Robbie’s lack of anything close to balance sent him sprawling to the ground.

“I’m fine,” said Robbie, spitting out dirt.

“I hope pledging your heart will be easier than this!” Layla snorted as she reached out a hand. Robbie laughed too, but once he’d sat up he noticed Layla’s smile wavering.

“What’s the matter?” he said as he brushed the soil off his cloak.

“What will it be like, do you know?” said Layla, her voice hushed just a little. “When you pledge your heart to the Sceptre?”

Robbie’s face lit up. He cleared his throat and puffed out his chest as he recited:

“A Sinistevil come of age

*May step before the Sceptre's glow
And pledge their heart of flesh and blood
Which then with hate shall overflow."*

He grinned smugly at Layla, who frowned back at him. "That was lovely," she said. "Good projection, wonderful diction. But what does it *mean*?"

"I read it in one of my great, great, great, great aunt's diaries!" said Robbie.

"For your lessons?" said Layla.

"Actually, Mother gave it me to read," Robbie beamed proudly. "To shut me up because I kept asking questions. They're ancient instructions, passed down from Sinistevil to Sinistevil! *That's* what it's going to be like when I turn twelve and can *finally* pledge my heart to the Sceptre."

"Overflow with hate," said Layla, her voice unsure. "Doesn't exactly sound pleasant."

"Power isn't always pleasant, Layla," said Robbie, folding his arms. "It's a cross we Sinistevils have to bear."

Layla rolled her eyes. "I'm so sorry for you."

"But I do agree," said Robbie. "The instructions are a bit vague - the diary ended awfully abruptly for some reason, before she'd even explained anything. Either way, I'm certain it'll all become perfectly clear when I come of age and finally get to go into the Sceptre Room and see the Sceptre for myself. Maybe there'll be more instructions on the..."

"Wait, wait, wait," said Layla, holding up her hands. "You've not even *seen* the Sceptre before?"

"Of course not," said Robbie indignantly. "It's an extremely important Sinistevil artifact! In fact, the last person to even hold the Sceptre was Brutus."

“I didn’t know Brutus pledged his heart to the Sceptre,” said Layla. “Doesn’t that mean he was king?”

“Oh, yes,” said Robbie, nodding so enthusiastically his bushy hair fell into his eyes. “He became king just before he died in battle.”

“Not a long reign, then.”

“About half an hour, Mother said. Either way, Brutus was the last person to hold the Sceptre, which is probably why Mother doesn’t want me touching it before I’ve come of age,” Robbie gasped and held his floppy sleeves to his mouth. “It might still have his fingerprints on it!”

“If that’s the case,” said Layla. “Then I’m sure your Mother has it displayed in some sort of shrine.”

Robbie leant back against the tree. “Imagine if it has his hand-print on it – I could see if our hands were the same size!” He stretched out his hand in front of him and sighed. To hold the Sceptre that Brutus himself pledged his heart to. He couldn’t turn twelve soon enough. Then he thought back to breakfast and scratched his chin. “She was in a funny mood today, Mother.”

“What do you mean?” said Layla. “Was she nice to you? Did she give you a hug?”

Robbie blinked one of his patented slow blinks, which gave his mind time to catch up with the words he’d just heard. “I don’t get it. She’s *always* nice to me. And she never hugs me because she doesn’t want to catch diseases.”

Layla frowned. “Catch diseases?”

“Well, she said something about not wanting incompetence to rub off on her, and I can only assume that’s some kind of disease, so I respect her wishes.”

Layla sighed. Robbie could never understand why Layla felt the way she did about Mother. She'd never been anything but a wonderfully kind and affectionate Mother to him, despite some of the things she regularly said about his intelligence and physical appearance. Perhaps Layla just didn't understand the concept of tough love.

"By the way," said Layla, reaching into her pocket. "I've got to go meet dad at the market soon, so I'd better give you this now. Happy birthday."

In her hand she held something small, flat and crumbly, like a cake someone had accidentally stepped on. In fact, the more Robbie looked at it the more he was convinced it was exactly that. His eyes started to glisten as he took the gift from Layla's hand, holding it together in his spindly fingers.

It was... beautiful.

Then he looked up.

"This is a cake, right?"

Layla huffed and her eyes flicked to the side. "Yes, of *course* it's a cake. A birthday cake! Don't look at me like that, I'm good at *clothes*, not *cakes*. Besides, I had to hide it in my pocket so my parents wouldn't see it."

"It's not my birthday," said Robbie. "... Is it my birthday?"

"Yes, it's your birthday," said Layla incredulously. "June eighteenth, same as every year. You're not telling me you forgot, are you?"

"I just didn't know today was the eighteenth," Robbie put the cake into the pocket of his robe, looking up in time to catch another of Layla's eye rolls. "Well, it's not like it's a special occasion, is it?" said Robbie. "Why would anyone want to celebrate *me*?"

Layla crossed her arms. “Oh, of course, I forgot that your loving Mother doesn’t celebrate your birthday.”

Robbie sighed. “Well, you can’t expect a working Mother to have time set aside to celebrate her child’s birthday, it’s just not feasible. She has neither the time nor the effort to spare on such things.”

“Except for your brother, whose birthday is a national holiday.”

“Aha!” Robbie raised his index finger. “But his *death* day isn’t! Therefore, Mother is probably waiting for me to die before she... celebrates...”

Layla was about to scold him but stopped. Robbie had taken the cake out of his pocket again and was turning it over in his hands with an expression of such dopey joy. He looked up at Layla with that big, goofy grin and said, “I love it.”

Layla smiled widely. “I’m glad.”

Robbie slipped the cake back into his pocket - then jolted. His chest felt extremely tight and his insides all lurched at once. He leapt to his feet.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Today’s my birthday. That makes me twelve!”

Layla stood up and frowned. “Sure,” she said. “What’s the big deal with twelve?”

Robbie tried to come up with the words, to voice the possibilities, but his brain wouldn’t slow down enough for him to *think*. He began to pace, immediately tripping on his trouser leg and whacking his head against a low hanging branch.

“Ow,” he said.

“You know,” said Layla, watching Robbie rub his head. “I’ve got some thread left over, are you sure you still don’t want me to fix up your clothes?”

Robbie gasped. “Of *course*, I still don’t want you to fix them!” He stood up straight and rolled up his cavernous sleeves. “What would Brutus say if he knew I’d been stitching away at his perfectly fine royal cloak?”

“I think he’d have a thing or two to say about those staples in the legs. Now look, I’ve really got to go help my parents, but have a happy birthday, okay?”

“Thank you!” said Robbie. “And you have a happy... potatoes at market... day...”

The two hugged, then Layla smiled and saluted before running back to her shack to grab her wheelbarrow. Robbie waved until she was gone and then turned to the tunnel. He had a rather urgent matter he needed to discuss with Mother as soon as possible.