



First Day

Twelve-year-old Cinderella clutched her school supplies and cloak in one arm as she walked down the hall in Grimm Academy. She eyed a row of lockers, looking for the one she'd just been assigned by the dragon lady in the front office. With her free hand, she flipped her long candle-flame yellow hair back over one shoulder, feeling excited and a little nervous, too.

It was Monday — her first day at the famous academy, which stood in the heart of a magical realm known as Grimmlandia. But she wasn't exactly starting off on the right foot. For one thing, she'd gotten here late. Very late. She'd missed half her classes. By now, it was almost lunch!

Her two stepsisters, who were supposed to be helping her out and showing her around the school, were walking way up ahead of her instead. Their long, beautiful dresses were made of rich blue satin that swished and swayed as they moved.

“Have you heard?” Malorette’s shrill voice called out to a passing student. “A new prince is to arrive at the Academy this very afternoon! His name is Prince Awesome.”

“Grimm-*mazing* isn’t it?” screeched Odette, Cinda’s other stepsister.

The two girls had been pretty much ignoring Cinda since her arrival at the school a half hour ago. They clearly didn’t want her here. They were only showing her around now because, as usual, they were hoping she’d make a mistake. A mistake so big — even bigger than being late on the first day of school (which hadn’t been her fault) — that it would get her sent home. Forever.

She shuddered. She could *not* let that happen. She absolutely had to make it here at the Academy! If she didn’t, she’d wind up back home in her stepmother’s clutches. A servant again. The family maid. Because ever since her dad had remarried last spring, that’s what she’d become. Her stepmom was always ordering her around, and her stepsisters did, too.

As for her dad, he was sweet, but a little clueless. His fabulous new bridge-building job had suddenly made them rich last winter, right before he’d met her greedy stepmom. But his job also kept him away from home so much that he hadn’t noticed what was going on. Not only that — he didn’t even seem to realize that her

stepmother was in fact, well, kind of evil! And so were the two Steps.

Spotting her locker at last, Cinda stopped. Carefully, she lifted the long, ornate key that hung from a chain around her neck, and turned it in the trunk's lock. "One, two, buckle my shoe," she told it softly. She felt a little odd talking to a locker. But Ms. Jabberwocky, the dragon lady in the office, had given her the key and explained that this was how the combinations worked.

Snick! Creak! In response to the rhyming code Cinda had chanted, the door in front of her opened on its own. Like all the other lockers lining the walls, this one was actually a fancy leather trunk standing tallwise instead of flat on its bottom in the normal way of trunks. It was as tall as she was and about eighteen inches wide. Its lid opened outward like a door to reveal a coat hook and three shelves inside.

"Well, aren't you excited about the idea of a new prince?" Malorette asked her suddenly.

The stepsisters had retraced their steps when they realized Cinda was no longer following them. They'd come to stand just behind her and were now nosily staring into her locker. Maybe they were hoping to find something in it that would get her in trouble, which was totally dumb. This was the first time she'd ever opened it!

"Yeah, don't you think the news is absolutely . . ." Odette

looked thoughtful, like she was searching for the most wonderful word she could think of to describe the news.

“Grimmtastic?” Cinda suggested.

The Steps’ eyes lit up. “Exactly!” they said at the same time.

She’d tried to sound enthusiastic even though she wasn’t. Because really — who cared about a new prince? Although most kids she’d seen so far weren’t wearing crowns, there were plenty of princes and princesses among the Academy’s students already. What made *this* prince so special?

As the other two girls discussed the prince’s upcoming arrival in delighted voices, Cinda stowed her cloak in the locker, and then studied the sheet of vellum paper in her hand. It read:

Grimm Academy Class Assignments for Cinderella:

Threads

Comportment

Sieges, Catapults, and Jousts

The Grimm History of Barbarians and Dastardlies

Bespellings and Enchantments

Balls

The first two classes on the list were compulsory. Threads was probably a class about spinning, weaving, and embroidery. *Ick.*

She had no idea what Comportment was. Sieges, Catapults, and Jousts sounded fun, though. It was an elective — a class she'd chosen herself. Grimm History was compulsory, but at least it sounded halfway intriguing.

The last two were also electives. She was excited about Bepellings and Enchantments. She'd never done magic before and was eager to learn.

However, Balls was the class she was the most thrilled about. Would they play basketball in the class? She hoped so. It was a ball game in which players wore masks and shot balls through hoops. She was the star of her team back in the small village where she lived. *Used to live*, that is.

Cinda had said good-bye to all her friends there only yesterday, and she missed them already. What would they think if they could see her now, in this fabulous castle? Trying to act as though she belonged here.

Sadly, she hadn't gotten to say good-bye to her dad this morning. He'd been away at his new job as usual. The bridges in Grimmlandia were so old and crumbling that some were falling down. Like London Bridge. Right now, fixing it was taking up most of his attention. It was important work and paid well, she knew, but she still wished he could spend more time with her.

Brushing off her homesickness, Cinda stashed the vellum sheet, inkwell, and other supplies that Ms. Jabberwocky had

given her into her trunk-locker. Then she set her book inside, too. For some reason, that dragon lady had given her only one book, even though she had six classes. And she'd just realized that all the vellum pages in the book were blank. Weird.

Right before she closed the trunk's lid-door, Cinda noticed a five-inch orange ball sitting on the floor of her locker, below the bottom shelf. *Is that a little pumpkin?* she wondered. *Did some previous student have this locker before me and leave it here?* She started to reach for it.

"Ow!" Cinda jerked around in surprise as Malorette yanked a lock of her long yellow hair.

For some reason, the Steps looked a little worried now. And all of a sudden they were in a big hurry to rush her off.

"C'mon, let's get over to the Great Hall," Malorette commanded.

"Yeah, I'm starving," added Odette. She nudged Cinda out of the way and then, after a brief pause, pushed the tall lid-door shut and stepped back.

"Me, too," said Cinda, still rubbing her head where her hair had been pulled.

"Well, come on, then," said Malorette.

Cinda turned the key again, saying, "Three, four, lock the door." She'd take whatever that orange thing in her trunk-locker was to the Lost and Found later. After classes were over, when she had more time.

Snick! Once the lock clicked into place, an image of her face magically painted itself in the small heart-shaped inset on the trunk, right above the lock.

Cinda's blue eyes widened. She wasn't used to magic just . . . happening like that.

As she withdrew the key, she looked at the trunks on either side of hers. There was a heart-shaped portrait painted on each of those, too. One of a pretty, brown-skinned girl wearing a hooded red cape. And the other of a girl with short ebony hair and a pale, rosy-cheeked face. There were heart shapes on all the trunks, she realized. They must be there to indicate who was using each trunk, er, locker.

Suddenly aware of how quiet it had gotten, Cinda looked around. The two Steps had headed off to the lunchroom without her. *Typical!* She hurried to catch up. *Clink. Clink. Clink.*

Oh, hobwoggle! She'd tried to jazz up the hand-me-down gown she was wearing by sewing some tiny bells along its hem. Major fashion error, unfortunately. Now the clinking echoed through the halls like her skirt was playing "Jingle Bells."

Malorette looked over her shoulder as she walked, giving Cinda's gown a critical once-over. "The Dark Ages called and they want that dress back," she told Cinda. Then she and Odette cracked up.

“Yeah, hello, this is the Middle Ages,” added Odette. “Has been for centuries and always will be in Grimmlandia. So get it together, fashion victim.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Cinda replied with a bright smile. She knew it drove the two Steps crazy when she pretended their words didn’t hurt her. They did, though. And after months of their continually cutting her down, she had sort of begun to feel like a loser.

Still, she couldn’t resist one teeny little jab back. “It’s better than being a fashion *slave*,” she mumbled. She made sure to speak very quietly. Because this was the kind of thing that could land her in trouble. Something the Steps could twist into sounding way more insulting than she’d meant it to, when they snitched on her to her dad and stepmom.

“What?” Malorette demanded, turning her head to give Cinda the evil eye.

“Oh, nothing,” Cinda said innocently.

Odette frowned at her in suspicion.

Cinda had promised her dad she’d try to get along with these two. But sometimes she just couldn’t help herself. Besides, what she’d said was true. The Steps had fifty times more clothes than she did and wasted ten times more brainpower deciding what to wear every day. Fashion was their life — and that was okay. But what was *not*

okay was the way they belittled anyone like her, who didn't really care about clothes all that much.

With a superior sniff, Malorette gave her poofy black hair a one-handed fluff, and kept walking. Odette did the same, copying her sister's sniff and fluff. As usual.

Cinda tried to shrug off their meanness by thinking about something else. Like how glad she was to be here!

Tuning out their chatter, she gazed in wonder at the inside of the magnificent turreted castle they were walking through. This was the girls' wing, at the eastern end of Grimm Academy. Classes were held on the three lower floors. The fourth floor was offices and stuff.

Her eyes found the magnificent grand staircase as they passed it. (She supposed there was a matching one on the boys' side of the school.) It branched off to lower floors and spiraled all the way up to the fourth floor. From there, a narrower and twistier set of stairs continued up to the three pointy-top towers on the fifth and sixth floors. That's where the girls' dorms were, she knew, but she hadn't been up there yet.

As she rounded a corner, she touched her fingertips to the smooth, cold marble wall. The stone's pale pink color reminded her of a winter sunrise. Maybe this marble was why the girls' wing was called Pink Castle.

The walls here were hung with tapestries showing scenes

of feasts and pageantry. And every so often, she and the Steps passed one of the tall stone support columns, whose tops were carved with figures of flowers, birds, and gargoyles.

Somewhere in this academy was the library that housed the legendary Books of Grimm, written by two brothers named Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The brothers had built this castle for the students who attended, but also to protect the books and other enchanted artifacts that had come from various tales and nursery rhymes they'd collected.

Just imagine! One day soon she might actually get to see those artifacts. Touch them. And read the books!

The Great Hall was a ways up ahead. Cinda had seen it from the outside this morning as she arrived at the Academy. It was a long, wide hall, with a two-story-high ceiling, that straddled the Once Upon River and connected the two wings of the Academy. Ms. Jabberwocky had told her that the auditorium and gym took up two more stories directly above it.

Beyond the Hall, the boys' classrooms and dorms stood at the western end of the school. Built of dusky gray-blue stone, their side was known as Gray Castle.

A shiver of excitement and fear swept through her. Tonight she would sleep at the Academy. And until she grew up, this would be her home. Unless, of course, the Steps succeeded in getting her kicked out!

Suddenly, Malorette spun around ahead of her. "Hello?" She stuck her face in front of Cinda's.

Cinda came to a halt, drawing back in surprise.

"Did you hear what I just said about the prince?" Malorette asked impatiently.

Cinda shook her head no. Were they still talking about that dumb prince?

"She said it won't be easy to gain Prince Awesome's notice," Odette informed her as they started off toward the Great Hall again.

"Why would you want to?" Cinda asked, walking behind them.

Odette sent her a *duh, you are beyond help* look.

Malorette muttered something that sounded like "What a pork." No, that wasn't right. She'd said "dork."

"What's the big deal about a new prince, anyway? I'm new here, too, and no one is making a fuss over me," said Cinda.

"Ha!" Malorette said scornfully. "Don't be ridiculous. Why would anyone make a fuss over you?"

Cinda let out a sigh of exasperation. "I don't *want* anyone to make a fuss over me. I just don't understand why I should be excited about another prince coming to the Academy."

"Don't you know what happens when a new prince arrives?" Malorette asked, frowning.

Two mean girls in blue dresses go gaga over him? Cinda wondered. She didn't actually say that, though. Instead she just shook her head.

"A ball!" crowed Odette. "It's an Academy tradition."

"Ball? What kind of ball?" asked Cinda. Then her eyes widened in horror and she screeched to a halt. The Steps kept on walking.

She hurried to catch up again. *Clink. Clink. Clink.*

"You don't mean . . ." she began.

Her stepsisters nodded smugly. "The dancing kind," Odette informed her.

Malorette did a cute little dance step right there in the middle of the hall. Something Cinda could never imagine herself doing without messing up.

She despised dancing and was embarrassingly horrible at it. Which was weird because she was good at sports. But dancing required a type of coordination — an ability to move to music — that was different from throwing a ball or running.

"I hope he's tall," said Malorette.

"Ooh, me, too," said Cinda.

Now it was her stepsisters' turn to look at her in surprise.

"I'm taking Balls class, remember?" said Cinda. "And every basketball team can always use a good slam-dunker."

With that, she quickened her pace and left them behind, her head held high.

Seconds later, the Steps caught up with her. “Balls class isn’t about playing sports. It’s dancing, fool!” said Odette.

“Wh-what?” Cinda stuttered. “But you told me it was ball *games*! Athletics. That’s the reason I chose it.”

The Steps cracked up again. “And you believed us? We were just joking!” cackled Malorette.

Cinda stared at them. This kind of thing was always happening. The Steps did mean things to her, then pretended they hadn’t. That she’d only misunderstood. It was so frustrating!

“Still, now that you’ve signed up, you’re going to get the new prince to fall in like with Malorette and me,” Odette went on.

“Huh?” said Cinda.

Malorette grinned at her. “We did a little sleuthing and found out he’ll be taking Balls sixth period. That’s why we got you to sign up for it.”

“Why didn’t you take the class with him yourselves if you’re so thrilled about him?” asked Cinda.

“Our schedules were already set, and Ms. Jabberwocky wouldn’t let us change,” pouted Odette. “We couldn’t get a single class with him!”

“So you are going to make his acquaintance and talk us

up to him instead. You know. Tell him how wonderful we are,” said Malorette. “Make him long to hang out with me. Assure him that he’ll only want to partner with *me* at the ball.”

“You mean with you *and* me,” Odette corrected, shooting her sister a frown.

“Oh, naturally,” said Malorette, but she didn’t sound sincere.

Before Cinda could reply to their astounding demand, the three girls arrived at the entrance to the Great Hall. To her it seemed that all eyes turned their way. Mostly looking at her. The *new* girl. The one wearing lace-up sneakers under a floor-length, old-fashioned, and threadbare Jingle Bells dress.

What are the owners of all those eyes thinking? she wondered. That her outfit was pathetic? That her hair was tangled and her stockings dusty?

Sad, but true.

Since most of the kids in her village were boys, she’d never worried much about fashion before. But at this school there were lots of girls. And if they were anything like the Steps, they’d care more about fashion than she did. Still, she hoped she would find some friends among them. Some nice girls, not mean ones like the Steps.