JAX
OF ALL TRADES
A FAIRY TALE REFORM SCHOOL
SHORT STORY
Hi! Jen Calonita here!

Have you ever wondered how Jax wound up at Fairy Tale Reform School? What did he actually do to get sentenced? What was his life like before he arrived and met Gilly, Jocelyn, Maxine, Ollie, and Allison Grace? Now’s your chance to find out the answer to all those questions. Take a walk down memory lane with me to a time BEFORE Gilly was at Fairy Tale Reform School and see what Jax’s life was like.

Thank you for preordering Cursed. I really hope you’ll enjoy this first-ever Jax short story.

Jen Calonita
Let me make sure I have all the facts straight,” says the fairy staring at me. She pushes aside a three-foot high stack of papers on her desk and leans across it so that we’re practically nose to nose. “You’re telling me you’re the one for responsible for every single one of these?”

She holds up a yellowed scroll marked Jaxon’s misde- meanors in red that unfurls to the floor. There are at least fifteen infractions.

Other students might panic upon seeing how many times they’ve gotten in trouble at school.

I’m not one of those students.

I clasp my hands in my lap and smile beatifically at her. “Yep! That’s all me.”
Ms. Whisp, who has been employed as the new assistant headmistress for Little Royals Boarding School for Boys all of two hours, looks from the scroll to me and back again. Her yellow eyes look like they might pop out of her head. (I actually saw that happen once to a troll on a camping trip. It wasn’t pretty.) “That’s…that’s just not possible!” she squeaks. I notice her wings pop out from her back and start to flutter quickly. She rises out of her chair and has to force herself to touch down again.

“Oh, it’s possible,” I say. “Ask anyone—I’m responsible for every item on that list!” I lean back and put my muddy boots up on her desk for the full effect. I have to admit, this is always my favorite part of being wicked—the do-gooder reaction. “I guess I’m what you would call a legend around this place.”

She clears her throat and looks over the list again. “Legend? But…you…are…you…”

“Yes.” I nod my head. This is always the hardest part for the person in charge to believe, and, having been at this school since I was five, I’ve seen a lot of headmasters, headmistresses, and assistants come and go. I, however, have remained a constant. “I am royalty.” I hold out my hand and lean over the table. “Prince Jackson of Enchantasia, son of
Arnard the Fourth. But you can call me Jax. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” I smile brighter.

It’s my smile that is my biggest asset. No, wait. It might be my hair. These golden ringlets work like a charm, as do my violet eyes, which I’m told are the most unique in the seven kingdoms. People seem to find them mesmerizing. Ms. Whisp appears to be one of those people.

She blinks hard and looks away, then stares at me again. She points to something near the top of her scroll. “Prince Jackson, are you trying to tell me you…”

“Jax,” I correct her again. “Yes, I placed a dragon’s egg in Headmaster Arthur’s bedroom knowing full well it was about to hatch. I believe the scorch marks on his floor are still there to prove it.”

Ms. Whisp’s wings have picked up speed. She points to something halfway down the list, and I know exactly what it is without looking at it.

“And yes, I also was the one who decided to have a Pegasi race through the castle during exams week to lift spirits. The other boys bet on the race too—at my suggestion—and we raised several bags of coins that were donated…” I laugh. “Who are we kidding? We didn’t donate anything! We used
the money to buy a water slide, which went to good use last summer during the heat wave. Have you ever dived off a magic carpet onto a water slide, Ms. Whisp? It’s exhilarating…and also not allowed, which is why infraction number sixteen is all about that water slide party.”

Her jaw opens, then closes.

“But don’t worry. Not everything on that list is accurate. Number twenty-two on the list—the wand duel between me and the Pied Piper of Longburg was greatly exaggerated. Yes, I stole the keys to the lab, which is how we broke in there at night for the battle, but the two night watch trolls who found us did not disintegrate! I accidentally send them to another realm, but not to worry! Headmistress Frogmore was able to find a spell to get them back…two months later.”

Ms. Whisp’s eyes narrow. “Two months later? Do you find that funny, Prince Jackson? Sending trusted trolls to another realm?”

“Jax,” I try again. “And I like the sound of those two words together, ‘trusted trolls.’” I start to laugh again.

“Prince Jackson,” Ms. Whisp says, her voice tightening. “None of this is amusing to me. Nor did I find it appropriate that just twenty minutes after my arrival, you…”
“Used a spell from our Spell It Like You Mean It textbook to charm Prince Caleb Hendricks and his bed onto the roof of the castle while he was still sleeping,” I fill in, cracking myself up. “Even I couldn’t believe that spell worked! As you can probably see from my transcripts, spelling isn’t my strongest subject. You might have also heard I don’t like to study.”

Ms. Whisp’s wings stop fluttering. Her demeanor is deadly serious. “Yes, I’ve heard. Your grades are abysmal as is your attitude. Caleb’s parents, who run the Kingdom of Harmont, have already called me. They were very unhappy their son was put in mortal danger before getting out of bed this morning.”

“I wouldn’t call it mortal danger,” I interrupt, but she cuts me off.

“Mortal danger!” she repeats, her voice strengthening. “Now, I believe Little Royals has been more than lenient with you over the last few years, but as Headmaster Arthur told you after your last infraction…”

“A midnight fairy dance party in the gardens after curfew,” I supply. “Classic. We all shrunk to fairy size and it took Headmaster Arthur four hours to find us.” I snort despite my better judgment.
“Prince Jackson.” Ms. Whisp’s voice takes on a deadly calm tone, and I try to control myself as she rises into the air again. “I’m afraid you’ve given this school no choice but to expel you.”

I pull my feet off the desk and sit up straight. “Expel?” I must have heard her wrong. “You can’t expel me. I’m a prince.”

Now it’s Ms. Whisp’s time to give me a beatific smile. “I know, and as an heir to this kingdom we have been more than lenient with your behavior, especially under the circumstances surrounding your poor sister being locked away in that tower all those years.”

I clench my jaw. Rapunzel is all anyone in this kingdom talks about. When your sister is stolen as a baby and locked away in an ivory tower, it kind of rules your world, even if it happened long before you were even born. The one good thing about being sent away to Little Royals—for my safety since villains were lurking at our door—was that I escaped the blanket of sadness that permeated every inch of the castle. I was sad, too, of course, even though I was too little to understand, but it was hard living in the shadow of a sister I never met. “Rapunzel is just fine now, so I’m told.”

I thought for sure when Rapunzel was found, I’d be
brought home immediately. I’m not sure what I expected—us to be one big, happy royal family again—but instead, Rapunzel has been home a while now, and I haven’t even been allowed to even visit. Mother wrote me saying Rapunzel is still getting adjusted and it was best for me to stay away. But adjusted to what? Having a brother? Or were they just happy having their heir back and had no use for the spare?

“That’s wonderful,” Ms. Whisp continues. “But it doesn’t excuse your behavior. You and I both know this school is a stepping stone to Royal Academy, a school meant to train you in the art of royal behavior so that you can someday lead our fine kingdom! But you are less than a year from receiving your invitation to RA and as of now, I cannot in good conscience hand you over to Headmistress Olivina after seeing this rap sheet.”

I lean forward excitedly. “Yes!” I say under my breath.

“What was that?” Ms. Whisp ask sharply.

“I said, ‘Yowza!’” I correct myself. “What can I do?”

Little Royals might be regimented and dull, but from what I’ve heard about Royal Academy from my friends who go there, RA sounds like a total snooze-fest. Dress codes, fancy balls on a weekly basis and lessons on how to snag a
Princess from an ancient fairy godmother? Who wants to do that? I’m eleven!

I have never wanted to go to Royal Academy. But I don’t want to stay at Little Royals Boarding School for Boys either. All I want is to go home. I haven’t been there in so long, I forget what it even looks like. Can anyone really blame me for trying to get myself kicked out of school? Others said it would never happen. This place does not expel princes. And yet, here we are.

I pretend to look outraged and even cough up a few sniffles. I blink back tears that I’ve been practicing forever. “But you can’t do that…” I sputter. “I’ll be better! I promise! Please don’t call my father.”

“He’s already here.”

His booming voice sends a shiver down my spine, and for a split second, I regret my actions. Now that Father is here, this could go south quickly. “Father?” I turn around.

King Arnard’s very presence demands attention. It could be why the guard at the door is shaking in his boots. Father stands in the doorway in a gold-threaded white jacket I have long seen in portraits on my mini magical scroll. He seems to wear it for important occasions, and I’m not sure if that
means his appearance here today is a good or a bad thing. My father has never shown up at school for anything before—not my fourth-year class’s live reenactment of how Humpty Dumpty fell off his wall nor my fifth-year choral concert where we sang “Three Blind Mice.” If he’s here, that means maybe he’s finally going to take me home!

“Jaxon,” my father says form then turns toward Ms. Whisp. He offers his hand and a charming smile. She immediately drops into a curtsy, which is sort of amusing.

“My king,” she says. “When I sent the scroll this morning, I didn’t think you were going to come yourself to discuss this matter. I thought you’d send someone in your place. If I have interrupted anything of urgency…”

“Ms. Whisp, this is of extreme urgency,” the king tells her. “I’m thankful for your scroll and your discretion about my son.”

“Of course,” she says quickly. “No one knows you’re here.”

I look at my father for a moment. It’s been over a year since I last saw him. My last visit home was before Rapunzel was found and I haven’t been invited back since. Father’s beard has grown in length as has the amount of white hairs woven into it. The lines on his face have deepened. He looks
tired. The dark circles under his eyes don’t lie. “Is Mother here?” I ask quietly. She’d make him go easier on me.

“No,” Father says curtly. He turns toward Ms. Whisp again. “Is the transfer order I requested taken care of?”

“Done, sire! I’ve already made note of it and will make sure all who work here know that’s where he’s headed,” she says. Just talking to the king makes Ms. Whisp’s wings flutter with excitement.

My shoulders droop. Transfer. Royal Academy, here I come, if they’ll take me early. What’s the alternative? That creature care school in Nottingham? I’m not big with animals. I’ve never even had a pet.

“Thank you,” says Father, shaking her hand again. “Discretion is of the utmost importance considering this delicate situation. I’d prefer people not know where he’s going, but if they pry, of course, say what you must.”

Discretion? What are they worried about? That I’ll make things look bad for Rapunzel? My face starts to burn with anger.

“Of course, my king.” Ms. Whisp curtsies again. “And if there is anything we can do for you at Little Royals in the future…” She looks at me uncertainly.
“You have done more than enough, Ms. Whisp,” my father assures her.

More than enough? She’s been here two hours! “Is anyone going to tell me what’s going on?” The edge to my voice is harder than I’d like. Father’s eyes flash in my direction.

“His bags are already in the carriage, sire,” Ms. Whisp assures him. “Good luck to you both.”

I sit up when I hear the news. They packed for me? I’m not even saying goodbye? I didn’t count on that. I look at my father for some sort of understanding, but his face is stern. He motions for me to rise and I do as I’m told, walking out of the office without saying goodbye to Ms. Whisp or going back to my room to see my roommates. It’s late in the day and the corridors are empty. Everyone is already at the mess hall for dinner. Two guards hold the door open for us to exit and I stop short in surprise.

“What is that?” I ask, my jaw opening wide.

The carriage outside the castle cannot be ours. My father doesn’t travel in a wagon. His royal ride usually has six Pegasi attached, a carriage painted with gold leaf and our royal family crest etched into the hand carved seating area. The ride waiting is basically a wooden wagon with a small canopy
that has seen better days. There are several patches on the canvas and a few rips as well. Horses have replaced Pegasi for transportation, which means this journey home will take forever. At the helm are two men in straw hats, blue shirts, and suspenders holding up their worn black pants. They are definitely not royal drivers.

“That is our ride,” Father says pleasantly, peeling off his white dress coat to reveal a ratty blue shirt and suspenders underneath, much like the drivers. “Get in.” He walks to the back of the carriage and climbs in through the back. This wagon doesn’t even have a door!

I have no choice but to follow. I’m barely tucked inside when the wagon begins to rumble down the road, Father and I bouncing along on wooden boxes. I stare at him waiting for him to explain what’s going on, but it’s a good fifteen minutes or so before he says a word.

“You should be pretty pleased with yourself, Jackson,” Father says, and I strain to hear him over the clip clopping of the horses whisking us along the bumpy road. “In all the years that gentlemen in our family have attended Little Royals Boarding School, you’re the first ever to get expelled.”
“Father…” I start to say, but he holds up his hand for silence.

“When I heard about your first infraction last year, I thought, this is just a young boy finding his way, but after the fifth or sixth citation, I knew you were trying to send a message.” He looks at me, and I pale. “I started to wait for word of your latest incident as one would wait for news on *Happily Ever After Scrolls*. I’d think, ‘What has the boy done now?’ Releasing fifty mice in the school kitchen was rather pedestrian, but that bed spell you pulled on Caleb Hendricks this morning, well that was…” I notice his mouth twitch ever so slightly. “Let’s just say if King Hendricks’s son is anything like that pompous braggard was in school, he had it coming. I realized today you were ready for the next step.”

I sit up straighter, trying to ignore the numbness in my bum from sitting on this crate for so long. Did I hear Father right? Is he on my side here?

Father reaches across the way and grabs my hand. “Jackson, I know you’ve wanted to come home for a while now and I’m sorry we ignored your cries for help. I need you to know it wasn’t because we didn’t want you home with us.”

I look away. “I kind of wondered.”
Father gives my hand a squeeze. “I’m sorry. We wanted you home with Rapunzel, but after the circumstances surrounding her return, it became clearer than ever that that we needed to keep you away to protect you. But I’m afraid I can’t any longer.” He lets go of my hand and stares off at the back of the wagon.

“Father?” I question.

“There is a darkness trying to take over our kingdom, and I fear I no longer can keep it at bay,” Father says quietly. “Villains are here, and they can’t be stopped.”

“Villains?” I ask breathlessly. “But I thought they were all…”

“Good now?” Father gives me a hard look. “Yes, yes, I know Flora is running Fairy Tale Reform School now with the aid of the sea siren, the Big Bad Wolf, and the Evil Queen, and they claim to have turned over a new leaf, but I don’t know…there are rumors out there that can’t be ignored. Gargoyle sightings, wicked fairies, curses long prophesized possibly coming to pass, threats that Gottie is returning to claim your sister once more. Villains are quietly biding their time till they can strike and I’m not sure how to stop them.”

“Surely, the royal army—” I start to say, and Father shakes his head.
“An army is no match against witchcraft. Danger is knocking at our door, and I’m not sure how much longer we can keep it out,” he says. He looks at me sternly. “That’s why I need your help.”

“My help?” I sputter. “How am I going to stop a group of powerful villains?”

Father locks eyes with me. “By being our spy.”

I start to laugh despite myself. “Me? A spy?”

“Yes,” Father says with a straight face. “We need someone on the inside, keeping their ear to the ground, being in the right place at the right time to find out what they’re planning.”

“And you know where that place is?” I wonder.

“Yes. Fairy Tale Reform School.”

“You want me to go to Fairy Tale Reform School?” I shout.

“Yes,” Father says calmly as if this is the most reasonable request in the world.

“But…but…but…that school is full of potential villains! Ogres, trolls, mer-folk, humans, fairies—all with wickedness on their mind. All. The. Time. I’ll get eaten alive! I’ll…”

“Fit right in,” Father finishes. “Think about it—every
stunt you’ve ever made is exactly the kinds of things these students were thrown in for. If anyone can pose as a potential wicked one in training, it’s you!”

I stare at him in surprise. “When I started pulling tricks at Little Royals, this is not the future I had in mind.”

“It’s all prepared you for this moment,” Father smiles and pulls a scroll out of his pocket and hands it to me. “I’ve come up with the perfect cover story for you—you’re a farmer’s son, got into trouble at Corn Husker Elementary, and now you’ve been sentenced here. You go by the name of Jax Porter, by the way, which should please you.”

I look over the scroll, reading the story of my supposed farming family and my trickery on the farm that got me sentenced to Fairy Tale Reform School. “No one is going to believe this. I’m a prince!”

“A prince most people in Enchantasia have never laid eyes on,” Father says, smiling. “You went to boarding school when you were quite young—your hair was darker then and not as blond as it is now—and you haven’t been seen at royal events in years. Crowning Achievement thinks you’re transferring to Nottingham, while Nottingham and I have spoken in private and they will cover if anyone asks if you are enrolled there as
a favor to me. We are all in agreement that we need to move quickly, and you living among potential villainy is the best way to do it.”

I’m still in shock. “Why don’t you just ask this Flora and the other teachers at FTRS what they know?” I protest. “If they’re so good now, they’ll tell you what’s really going on.”

“And if they are in league with Gottie or, fairy be, Rumpelstiltskin, they’ll just alert them that the royals are on to their behavior and then we will be doomed,” Father says grimly, and I know he’s right. “Getting someone on the inside at a reform school for villains is our best shot and in order to do that we need a student of the proper age and background. That student is you, Jackson. I know I’m asking a lot, but I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t have full faith that you could do this. You won’t be alone.” He pulls another scroll out of his shirt. “There are tunnels beneath the school where we will meet regularly.” He pulls a mini magical scroll out of a sack by his side. “And this scroll has been bewitched to send you messages and then erase itself immediately. In fact, this whole sack has things disguised as regular items that you can use to communicate with me whenever you need to.”

I look over the map on the scroll and then at my backstory,
afraid to ask the one thing I really want to know. “So that’s it then? You just want to get rid of me?”

“Get rid of you?” My father says in surprise. “I need you. Your kingdom needs you. Rapunzel would help if she could, but she has been through so much and needs time to recover. I know you can do this. You’re strong. You’re clever, mischievous, and charming. I’ve been waiting for the moment you finally got yourself kicked out of Little Royals to make this move happen. There was no other way to explain you leaving that school other than your expulsion. And now it’s time for you to serve your kingdom because if there is anyone who can help us stop these villains, it’s you, the son of a farmer.” He winks. I laugh and he does too.

My father needs me. Not Rapunzel. Not the royal guard. Not his most trusted advisors. He needs me—his son—and he thinks I could help save our kingdom. For the first time ever, I don’t feel like I’ve been tossed aside for my sister. Sure, I’m going to a new school with characters that seem a bit shady, but if he thinks I can hack it, I know I’ve got this. “Okay, Father. I’m in. I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” Father says and then he claps me on the back. I feel the carriage take a hard right.
“Sire? A hairy man with a long beard is coming out of the castle,” one of the drivers says, sounding nervous. “He looks like he’s…part wolf.”

Part wolf?

“Professor Wolfington! Yes, we spoke via magical scroll. Thank you!” Father turns to me. “Jackson, listen. We don’t have much time.”

He proceeds to tell me what he knows about this trickster Rumpelstiltskin, the Wicked Fairy Alva, and the woman of Rapunzel’s nightmares, Gothel. We talk about Princess Ella and Snow White’s stories and all he knows of the Wicked Stepmother and the Evil Queen. I listen intently, trying to pay attention when he explains how the Big Bad Wolf became Professor Wolfington, and how the sea siren came to be at FTRS, but before he can even finish telling his story, the wagon slows to a stop. We’re out of time.

“He’s a few feet away, sire!” the driver says, his voice squeaking.

“You have to go now. I can’t be seen with you, of course,” Father says, handing me the sack and my trunk with all my personal things. Apparently, there are uniforms here, so I won’t need many of my regular clothes, but I do get to keep
my favorite books. Father hands me something else before we part—a tricked-out family pocket watch that can cause an explosion when it’s timed just right. “Use this only in dire emergencies,” he warns. “You cannot risk getting yourself kicked out this time…but then again, don’t behave so well that they think you don’t belong either.”

Don’t be too bad or too good. “Got it!” Father pulls me into a hug.

“Good luck, son,” he says gruffly.

I blink back tears—for real this time—and step out of the wagon, pulling my trunk along with me. Father’s carriage speeds away and I find myself standing in front of an extremely hairy man with a wicked smile.

“Mr. Porter, I assume.” His voice sounds more like a growl than actual words.

“Yes, sir,” I say, sounding more nervous than I intended.

“I am Professor Wolfington. Follow me.” He turns and heads back toward the gates. “And please, grab your things, Mr. Porter. We carry our own weight at this school.”

I grab my trunk and start to pull it toward the black wrought iron gates, but my eyes are on the school beyond it. The gothic castle is enormous as are the grounds and lake
behind it. I see Pegasi taking flight in the distance along with magic carpets and a few explosions from wands on the ground. Kids of all species are running around on the lawn together.

The castle gates open with a squeak, and I walk inside. Father’s wagon is already wheeling away as I make my way up to two large double doors with familiar marks etched into them featuring a glass slipper, an apple, a full moon, and a trident. By the time I’ve dragged my trunk up the steps, Professor Wolfington is gone. The doors open as if on cue, and I step inside an enormous foyer. A mirror to my right brightens and comes to life in a swirl of purple and yellow flashes.

“Jax Porter of Corn Husker Elementary School?” the mirror asks.

“Yes,” I say, trying to sound sure of myself.

“Good. I’m Miri the Magic Mirror, who sees everything going on in this school. Professor Wolfington had to head to class, but the Headmistress will see you in a few minutes,” the mirror tells me. “You may have a seat while you wait, and I suggest—”

“Miri! Help!” cries a troll who lumbers into the hallway
at full speed, making the ground quake. “Stop it!” The hall behind the troll is flashing bright red and I hear popping sounds. A fireball shoots past my head and torches a portrait of the Big Bad Wolf on the wall. I jump out of the way just as a girl in a long, black skirt and shirt comes rushing into the foyer with another fireball poised in her right hand.

“Jocelyn! Whatever do you think you’re doing?” Miri shouts.

“Nothing!” She hides the fireball behind her back. “I was just talking to Edward and trying to defend my family’s honor!”

“Liar!” Edward shouts from behind a chair that’s smaller than he is.

“Edward had the nerve to call my sister a rotten apple in my presence.” She glares at the cowing troll. “My sister will be addressed as Her Evil One or Professor Harlow only.”

“She’s no longer evil,” Miri reminds her.

Jocelyn looks at her black fingernail polish. “Yes, well, whatever.”

“I will be interviewing others in the halls to see what truly happened here,” Miri says. “If I find you threw a fireball,
you will be in detention having dance lessons with Madame Cleo!” Edward starts to laugh.


“Sorry! I’ll start interviewing people shortly,” Miri says sweetly. “I’m sure it won’t take me long. You can probably start serving detention this afternoon. I hear the firestep is Madame Cleo’s new favorite dance."

The firestep is the worst. I snort.

Jocelyn’s eyes flash toward me. “Who are you?”

Miri answers for me. “Jax Porter from Corn Husker Elementary school. He’s here on three counts of stolen corn.”

“Corn?” Jocelyn asks skeptically.

I feel the same way. Corn and Corn Husker Elementary? Is that really the best my father could come up with? “I like what I like,” I say with a smile.

The door to the left opens and I hear wailing and loud sobs. Two ogres duck out of the room leaving behind an ogress girl wearing six strands of pearls. Her dress is soaked from all her tears. “Mama! Papa! I’m sorry!” she blubbers and I notice one of her eyes roll in its socket as she holds out clumsy large hands to reach for them.
“Be a good ogre, Maxy-Waxy, and you’ll be back at our tree in no time,” the mother cries. She blows loudly into her handkerchief as the father leads her past me and out the door. The girl only wails harder.

“Oh, for the love of Grimm,” grumbles Jocelyn. “Pull yourself together, or you’re going to cause a flood in the castle!”

“I’m sorry,” the girl cries. “It’s just I’ve never been away from home before and now I’m told I have to stay here indefinitely.”

“Indefinitely?” I repeat, jumping into the conversation. Father didn’t mention that part. Both girls look at me. “Sorry, I’m new here too.”

Maxy-Waxy nods and wipes her nose with the sleeve of her dress. “Yeah, I hear it’s almost impossible to get out of this place until you’re completely reformed and I don’t know anyone who’s ever been reformed!” She cries harder. “I’m Maxine, by the way.”

“Pr—Jax,” I correct myself and Jocelyn looks at me strangely. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” she says and starts to hiccup. “Wha—wha—what are you in for? I’m in for stealing jewelry.”
“I’m in for plucking corn,” I say and feel my cheeks color. Maxine stops crying. “Corn?”
It sounds as ridiculous as I think it does.
“Ms. Hockler?” I hear someone inside the room call. “Come back in here, please. Bring Mr. Porter too.”
“Jocelyn?” a sharper voice calls. “Join us!”
The three of us trudge into the office together and that’s where I see the Evil Queen and the Wicked Stepmother of legend for the first time. I stop short at the sight of them. They don’t exactly project warmth and happiness. The Wicked Stepmother is dressed primly and her salt and pepper bun makes her look like a young grandmother. The Evil Queen, however, looks like a villainous princess. She’s dressed in a deep purple sequined gown and has a raven sitting on her shoulder.
There is a fire going and a stack of books on the desk in front of them. I notice two titles: *Three Steps to Good and Sinister to Sweet*. The magical chalkboard behind the desk is writing something: *Troll Hunting starting in five minutes! Today’s seminar topic: Embracing your Inner Dark Side to Find the Good, run by Professor Wolfington.*
“Well, don’t just stand there, boy!” the Evil Queen snaps.
“Sit down already! We have three other students arriving today and still have to get Ms. Hockler settled in her room as well.” At that mention, Maxine starts to cry again. “Oh fairy be, Flora, do something about the girl, will you?”

“Maxine, dear? Stop crying,” says the Wicked Stepmother, kinder than I’d expect. “You will be fine. We will introduce to your roommate and bring you to your quarters as soon as we’re done with Jax Porter here.”

“Now Mr. Porter,” the Evil Queen addresses me. “Corn Huskers Elementary already sent over your scroll earlier this morning and I must say, the list of, well, corn-related incidents is quite large. Can you tell us why a corn farmer would steal the very vegetable he’s learning to grow?”

Oh boy. “I wanted to sell it. My corn was the best in the kingdom and people paid top dollar for it, but I never had enough to sell so I started to steal corn too. I hated when other people had more corn than me, or better corn, because you know, corn can be grown differently by different people. I’m a fan of the white and yellow blend myself.”

“Me too.” Maxine sniffs.

The teachers continue to stare at me. “And we, uh, won awards based on our ability to produce yellow corn, or white
corn, or my favorite blend, and sometimes others did a better job than me so I stole…their crop.” This sounds ridiculous and I know it. I’m starting to perspire.

I clear my throat and I feel the Evil Queen shooting daggers my way. It’s making me even more nervous, which makes me start stammering. “And I don’t feel bad about it—the right corn needs to be in the hands of the right farmer! So I took their corn and their wheat too. Also the occasional radish and strawberry. Blueberries too. And cabbages.” I cough. “And sometimes…”

The Wicked Stepmother glares at me. “This story isn’t adding up. Where is Corn Huskers Elementary anyway? I don’t believe I’ve ever even heard of it.”

I was losing them. “It’s for young aspiring farmers,” I say, having committed my scroll backstory to memory. “We’re a small school. Only six in my grade. Very prestigious.”

The Evil Queen comes around the table and looks at me. Her raven squawks. “It says in your file that your nickname is the Escape Artist. You tried to run away from a school that teaches children about vegetables?”

I swallow hard. “Wouldn’t you? There’s only so many times you can hear a lecture on creating the perfect soil. I
decided to steal corn and, uh, use it to buy my way out of this rotten kingdom.” She stares harder at me. I know I’m not sounding as sure as I should. “I am sick of this dump and ready to start over somewhere new. You can’t do that without some money in your pockets.”

“And that money comes from selling corn?” The Evil Queen’s smile is thin. She whirls around, her cape flowing behind her. “Flora, I don’t like this. The boy’s story doesn’t add up.” She turns to me again. “He’s hiding something.”

Uh oh. “Look, if you don’t want me here, I’ll go right now. No questions asked.”

The Evil Queen smiles. “Then go.”

“Harlow, please!” the Wicked Stepmother sounds exasperated. “Mr. Porter, I’m just trying to understand. Why didn’t your parents come in with you today? This is the first time a student has showed up alone. Professor Wolfington said you were just dropped off on our front steps. Your magical scroll only arrived this very morning letting us know about your countless infractions. You can understand why that would raise some red flags.”

I shrug, but my heart is beating fast. I can’t screw this up already. “My father dropped me off.” Not a lie. “But he had
to get back to the farm to get ready for harvest, which is why he didn’t stay.” I looked at the headmistress. “Ask Professor Wolfington. He saw my father driving the wagon. He was the one in the straw hat.”

“I don’t know, Flora,” the Evil Queen says again.

“Flora? Harlow!” The mirror behind them comes alive and starts flashing red. “Wand battle in the cafeteria! They just blew up the patty-cakes cart and now there is pandemonium.”

“Not again,” Flora groans. “We just got that cart fixed! Children, stay here,” she instructs. “We will be back.”

“And don’t touch anything!” the Evil Queen hisses. “Jocelyn, watch him.”

“With pleasure,” Jocelyn says sweetly as the door closes behind them. She turns toward me. “Okay, fess up. What’s your story? You’re not a farmer kid and you didn’t steal corn.”

I freeze. “Yes, I am. Check my file.”

“We did. When it came over this morning,” Jocelyn says. “Funny, most kids have files for years. Yours just appeared today. So what are you hiding?” Her eyes flash, but I hold steady.

“Everyone has secrets,” Maxine pipes up, still sniffing.
She gives me a lopsided, sad smile. “You don’t have to tell her yours if you don’t want to.”

“I just want to know why someone would want to come to Fairy Tale Reform School,” Jocelyn says. “Because that’s clearly what’s happening here.”

My heart beats faster, my lips feel dry and I can feel my fingers curling into fists. She’s on to me. I could lie, maybe, and pull it off, or she could see right through me like she already has and I’ll be sent packing before I even make it here an hour. I can’t let Father down so what are my options? I decide to tell her the truth—or at least a version of it. “I need someplace to hide, okay? Someplace no one will look for me and this looked like the perfect place to disappear. I’ve got a lot of heat on me at the moment.”

Jocelyn stares at me curiously and Maxine pipes up, “That sounds fair.”

“Well, it won’t work,” Jocelyn says. “My sister will eventually find out the truth. You’re out of here, farmer boy.”

“Unless you help me,” I try. “And I help you.”

She seems to think about this. I see her aim a fireball at the mirror in the room and a veil falls over it. “Talk fast. Miri will be on to us in minutes. What do I get out of it?”
“I’ll take the fall for your spelling Edward out there in the hallway,” I say, thinking quickly. “Maxine here can back me up.” She nods. “I’ll take your detention. I’ll take your next three detentions. I don’t care. I’ll do your homework too. I’m pretty smart…when I actually do the work. Look, I’ll do anything you want,” I say. “I just need somewhere to lie low and for people not to ask questions.”

Jocelyn is quiet and I can hear the fire’s crackling flames. “I’d take that deal,” Maxine says and we both look at her. “My lips are sealed, too.” She smiles and drool puddles from her mouth. “It’s kind of nice to be in on something for a change. I usually work alone, but this is more fun. Now we just need to come up with a way to trick the Evil Queen.”

“No one tricks my sister,” Jocelyn says with a sigh. “Unless…” She taps her chin. “You do something to get her attention. Something that would ruin her day—and possibly mine—but make you a goner, which means you’re sentenced for sure.”

I lean forward. “Tell me what to do.”

Jocelyn glances at the magical chalkboard. “Ever hack into a school calendar?” She grins.

I lean back and put my feet up on Flora’s desk. “Only once a week for the last two years. What do I need to do?”
By the time Flora and Harlow come racing through the door of the office, I’ve already worked my magic. The entire magical scroll system for the school has been tampered with—thanks to Jocelyn giving me the code word. (It’s ‘good.’ Bad kids would never think to use that word.) All classes for the day have been canceled, and students have been told to report to the Evil Queen’s dungeon instead for personal reflection and meditation time. In fact, the scroll says all classes are being run by Professor Harlow for the rest of the week! Her face is practically purple by the time she reaches me.

“Why, you little rotten apple,” she seethes.


Professor Harlow’s face returns to its natural white ivory. “Wing…I would rather like one. The School for Evil’s Greatest Villain.” She stares off into the distance.

Flora clears her throat. “Former villain,” she reminds her.

Harlow waves her hand. “Details, but fine. You deal with this boy.” The raven squawks as Harlow whisks out of the room. “Jocelyn, come now, and bring the ogre girl with you. I need to get these children out of my dungeon now. And
Flora? Make sure that boy is not in my classes for the foreseeable future. Let him be Wolfington’s problem.”

Jocelyn waits till no one is looking to motion a dance step to me on her way out. I nod. Maxine’s face is tear-stained, but she’s stopped crying. She winks at me and I give her a small nod too. No matter what happens, the three of us are linked forever now.

“Yes, Harlow,” Flora says and then she turns to me, her eyes a mixture of mischief, amusement and yet, concern. “Jax Porter, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Uh…that I should have put Professor Harlow on cafeteria clean up duty for a month?” Flora gives me a hard look. “Sorry. I couldn’t help myself. What can I say? I’m in need of some redemption. Can you help me?” I ask sweetly.

Flora sighs and goes to her desk, signs the top scroll on a stack of papers and stamps it. I know what it is before she hands it over. I resist the urge to smile. This is what Father wanted. It’s my destiny and my curse all wrapped up in one. The future looks scary and uncertain but exciting all at the same time. My heart quickens with anticipation as I hold out my hand.

Flora gives me the parchment. “Jax Porter, you are officially sentenced to Fairy Tale Reform School.”
Learn more about Jen Calonita’s Fairy Tale Reform School and Royal Academy Rebels series:

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