



Ever After High



Raven Queen's
Story



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 ONCE UPON A NEW SCHOOL YEAR, RAVEN Queen was packing. She blasted Taylor Quick's new album from her MirrorPod, dancing while grabbing things from her closet and tossing them into her clothing trunk. The heap of clothes was entirely purple and black, so she threw in a pair of silver sandals to add color.

Raven opened her window. The sun was setting into the copper sea. The last page of summer was closing.

"Hey, Ooglot!" she called out as she hefted her trunk onto the windowsill of her fourth-story

bedroom. She let the trunk fall. In the courtyard below, the family ogre caught it with one blue hand and waved to her. She waved back.

Summer had been nice. No homework—just hours and hours to listen to music and read adventure novels. A couple of days each week she had babysat Cook's twin boys—Butternut and Pie—in exchange for heaps of pastries. And she and Dad had sailed their little boat down the coast to spend a week with Pinocchio and his daughter, Cedar Wood. Raven had loved making tea visits with the Blue-Haired Fairy, playing card games by the fire, and staying up late with Cedar, singing karaoke and laughing into their pillows.

All nice as mice. But Raven was eager to rejoin her friends at Ever After High for her second year of boarding school.

She was trying very hard not to think about how her Legacy Day was just a few weeks away. Ever since witnessing Legacy Day as a first-year, she'd done her best to block it out. Back then, the future had seemed so distant.

A foghorn bellowed, calling her to dinner.

Raven put on a sweater as she left her room.

Queen Castle was chilly. There were far too many unoccupied rooms to bother lighting fires in all their hearths. When her mother had ruled, the castle had teemed with servants, soldiers, and creatures of the shadows. And all of them had watched young Raven, ready to tattle to her mother if they caught Raven doing anything kind.

"Raven," her mother would say, "Yop the Goblin says he saw you apologize to a rat for stepping on its tail. Such behavior must stop!"

"But I didn't mean to step on its tail," she'd say.

"Not that. The apology! The Evil Queen never apologizes for anything. You must learn that now."

Raven preferred the castle mostly empty.

She made her way through the massive Great Hall, feeling as if she'd been swallowed by a whale. She stuck out her tongue at the shadows and slid down the banister of the staircase as she used to when she was a kid.

She flung open the huge dining room doors and announced, "I'm here!" Years ago her mother used to host hundreds of guests at that dining table. Tonight, as usual, the only diners were Raven, her father, Cook, and Cook's four-year-old sons.

“Raven!” Butternut and Pie said in unison. They had hair as orange as Butternut’s namesake and faces as round as Pie’s.

“Hey, little Cooklings,” she said.

“I made this for you,” said Pie, pushing a piece of paper across the table. Raven held up a finger painting of herself done in all black and purple.

“Wicked cool. Thank you,” she said.

Raven’s father, the Good King, kissed her forehead when she sat beside him. His trimmed beard was beginning to gray, and the top of his head was totally bald, as if his hair had made room for the golden crown he rarely bothered to wear. His eyes were bright blue and brightened even more when he smiled—which was often.

“All packed?” he asked. “Don’t forget a warm coat. And rain boots. And an enchanted umbrella.”

“Got it,” said Raven. “And don’t you stay cooped up in here all year without me. Cook, make sure he gets outside, goes sailing and fishing.”

“Of course. Now dinner. I made roast duck,” Cook said hopefully, lifting up the platter.

“I’ll just have a princess pea-butter sandwich,

please,” Raven said while playing peekaboo behind her napkin with Butternut.

Cook rolled her eyes but handed Raven her usual sandwich.

“Thank you,” Raven said, and then winced automatically. But her mother wasn’t there to scold her for being nice.

Her father must have noticed her wince, because he put a comforting hand on her shoulder and smiled.

“My meat is cold,” said Butternut.

“I can warm it up for you,” Raven said, wiggling her fingers as if preparing to cast a spell.

“No!” both Cook and the king said at once, lunging to their feet.

Raven laughed.

“Oh my, you had me for a moment.” The king pressed his hand to his heart and sat back down.

A couple of years before, Raven had tried to reheat her father’s meal and ended up setting the entire table on fire. She wouldn’t make that mistake again. Dark magic + good intentions = catastrophe.

After the plum pudding, the Good King said, “Cook, thank you so much for a perfect dinner.

Raven, would you...?" He inclined his head toward the door.

Raven's stomach turned cold, but she followed him out.

Once they were alone in the hall, he whispered, "It's time, Raven. If you'd rather not..."

"No, I'll go talk to her."

"I'll go with you," he said.

Raven shook her head. She was fifteen now. She was old enough to face her mother alone.

Raven straightened her shoulders and began the long walk to the Queen's Wing in the Other Side of the Castle for the first time in a year. Colors dimmed—dark wood walls, scarlet and black carpets. Portrait paintings looked down. Her mother smiling. Her mother not smiling. Her mother's profile. A close-up of her mother's nose. In one, her mother was winking. In all of them, she was beautiful.

Monstrous statues seemed to watch Raven as she passed. Drapes rustled where there was no draft. Raven's forehead prickled with cold sweat.

Two guards in shiny armor stood outside her mother's old bedroom, wielding spiky spears and magic staffs. They nodded to her as she opened the door.

"Remember," said one, "never touch the mirror."

"I remember," she said.

The room was so thick with cobwebs it seemed as if skeletons had decorated for a party. Raven fought her way through the webs to the far wall and ripped the velvet cloth off the mirror. She saw her own reflection staring back—long black hair with purple highlights, dark eyebrows, strong nose and chin. It was strange to see her own face. She usually avoided looking at herself in mirrors. Mirror-gazing had been her mother's hobby.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall," she said, "um... show me my mother."

The mirror didn't require a rhyme to work. Rhyming was *so* last chapter.

The mirror sparked, electricity skating across its silver surface. Slowly her mother appeared. She was wearing a striped jumpsuit. Her dark hair was piled on her head in the shape of a crown.

"Raven, is that you? You're so... so beautiful!" The Evil Queen laughed. "You *are* going to give that fair-skinned, blood-lipped brat a run for her money!"

Raven pulled her hair out from behind her ear, letting it fall over half her face.

“Hey, Mom,” she said. “How’s, you know, mirror prison?”

“Meh,” the Evil Queen said with a pretty shrug. “Tell me all the gossip. What’s happening in Ever After? Did they figure out how to undo my poisoning of Wonderland madness yet? Has someone else copied me and tried to take over all the kingdoms? Is your father still a mind-numbing excuse for a man?”

Raven clenched her fists. *Don’t make fun of my dad!* she wanted to shout. But she met those dark eyes in the mirror, took a deep breath, and looked down. Even with her mother imprisoned far away, she didn’t dare argue back. “Everything’s pretty much the same as last year. And the year before.”

“Ha! See what happens when I’m gone? *Nothing.* I made life interesting. I hope you learn from this, darling. You have to go out there and force life to be what you want it to be, like I did.”

“Yeah,” said Raven. Her mother had certainly made her childhood interesting. In those days, the castle was always crowded with soldiers in spiked armor and creatures that scurried through shadows and hissed at her. Quality time with Mother had included sitting on her lap while the queen met with

her generals and hatched plots to kill, conquer, and rule, or spending hours in the dungeon workshop, coughing on smoke and helping Mother make toxic potions and evil spells.

“So are you ready for your Legacy Year?” asked the queen. “Ready to sign the Storybook of Legends and bind yourself to following in my footsteps?”

Raven shrugged.

“You should be eager to become the next Evil Queen. Why, your legacy is one of power, control, and command! Just think, you could have been born to one of those pathetic princesses who have to sit in a tower and wait to be rescued. Or worse, get suckered into eating a poisoned apple.”

The queen cackled beautifully. If ever a cackle could bring a tear to your eye, it was the Evil Queen’s.

“I guess I just... I just...”

“What? Don’t mumble. Stop slouching and speak up like a Queen. Now, what were you saying?”

Raven straightened her spine. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“Don’t be so timid, Raven. This is your chance to show those dull ‘good’ folk just what you’re made of!”

“Okay, I’ll try.” And as a show of effort, she cracked a small smile.

“I’m so proud! Oh, I miss you, my beautiful baby girl.” Her mother lifted her hand, pressing it against the mirror as if she were just on the other side of a window. “Let me touch you, even if it’s only through glass.”

Raven’s hand lifted, almost of its own accord. Her mother really did love her, in her way. Hope was like a sticky, too-sweet syrup she yearned to drink just one more time. But Raven stopped her hand before she touched the mirror. This wasn’t the actual mirror prison. That was far away and locked up tight. But her mother was such a powerful sorceress, she might be able to take Raven’s hand even through a viewing portal.

“I love you, Mother,” said Raven, “but I’m not helping you escape.”

The queen’s eyes narrowed, and her hand dropped. “*Hmph*. If you were as evil as I raised you to be, you wouldn’t hesitate. I must say, Raven Queen, I’m disappointed in you. Never mind. I’ll watch with interest to see what you accomplish. You have inherited a bottomless capacity for true evil and breathtaking

power. Don’t waste it.” She leaned so close all Raven could see in the mirror were her mother’s deep purple eyes. “Give ’em hex, Raven.”

Raven swallowed. All she wanted was to run away.

Their time ended and the mirror turned off. Instead of her mother’s face, Raven saw her own again. It was remarkable, really, how much they looked alike.

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