Grin and Bear It

by taytayloulou

Summary

“Wow,” Jay breathes, “you really meant…everybody is coming to this party.”

The VKs finally meet the heroes of their parents' stories. It all goes to hell.

(Sequel is now up, called 'Instructions Not Included'.)

Notes

Yo, enjoy my crazy long piece of work! This took me a little less than a month to create, I put a lot of thought and effort into this, I hope you enjoy. This is my first time writing a lot of these characters (everyone but Ben and the VKs), but I did my best to keep everyone in character.

Before you start reading, I would super crazy love you if you were to leave a comment on
this monster. I'll ask more at the end of this piece, but if you could read with these things in mind, I would love to hear anyone's thoughts!

- Who is the most in character in this fic? Is there anyone you feel was out of character?
- Is there a scene that bored you? That could be shortened or re-written to be more enticing?
- How about your favorite scene?
- Which conflict is most believable? Which needs more work?

Also, all relationships mentioned are minor or implied, some can even be read as non-romantic. This is not a romance-centered piece.

(And big thanks to Turntechgodliness (AmberzillaRex) for motivating me when I couldn't motivate myself! And a thanks to tumblr use, tothetardissterek for giving me the title!)

See the end of the work for more notes.
December 21st

10:06 pm – Mal and Evie’s Dorm Room

Evie steps out of the shower, hair dripping down the back of one of Jay’s old t-shirts and not a smudge of make up on. She feels clean and tired, but when she passes her vanity and catches a glimpse of her natural face, Evie flinches. She sits before the mirror to do something – foundation, lip gloss, just a little bit of mascara – but someone grabs her wrist.

It’s Mal, stretching her arm and torso as to not disturb Carlos’ head in her lap. She is dressed in a white tank top and a pair of black shorts – no doubt belonging to the boy resting against her – and her wounds have been properly cleaned. The blood that ran down her legs and stained her shoes is gone and her knees are bandaged meticulously, a handiwork that Evie recognizes as Carlos’.

Mal’s running her fingers through black and white curls while Carlos hugs Dude to his chest. He is utterly silent, but Evie can tell his mind is alive with the night, replaying every event and blaming himself for all the faults. Jay is next to Mal, hair finally released out of his formal bun and over his shoulders. He is fidgeting restlessly with a bouncing knee and hand running through his hair and teeth gnawing at his bottom lip. His mind is just as active as his body, recalling the same panic that Carlos is right now, the same stress that Mal is reminiscing and the same inadequate self-loathing that Evie is feeling.

The urge to make herself small and invisible is a hard one to fight, but Evie draws strength from the cool hand still gripping her wrist. She makes her way onto the bed, curling into Mal’s side and reaching for Carlos’ shoulder, muttering “I think this is the worst night I’ve had since we left the Isle.” Her necklace, the one Evie absolutely loves and is never taking off ever again, lays against her chest and she fiddles with one of the pieces, lifts it to her mouth to kiss.

“Definitely not one of the highlights of my life,” Jay agrees with a shaky exhale.

“The nights when we planned on stealing the wand were worse,” Mal offers. Her fingers still in Carlos’ hair as she ponders. “We had everything to lose that night.”

“We don’t now?” Evie whispers as she moves closer to Mal, fighting off the chill of the night.

“No,” a muffled voice calls from further down the bed. Carlos shifts against Dude and speaks up, “we already lost it all.”

5:36 pm – Carlos and Jay’s dorm room

“We’re gonna be late!” Carlos whines as Evie fixes his bowtie for the tenth time. He’s decked in a casual suit that he found with Ben and Jay earlier in the month. It had taken a while to find a suit with shorts, but they did and Carlos snatched it immediately and then took another hour to hunt for a bowtie and shoes that were the same shade of red.

Though, if his opinion is asked for, the time was well spent. He looks quite dashing.

“You’re adorable,” Evie awes.

Adorably dashing.
“There,” she fluffs the bowtie and brushes off his shoulder, “right off the cover of a magazine!”

“How about off of a magazine and out the door?” Carlos suggests and tries to leave before Evie can respond, but she huffs and doesn’t move. He silently groans. They’ll show up to the party as it’s ending at this rate.

When he looks back at Evie, a flush takes over his face and down his throat. “You don’t have to wear that, Evie.”

“I want to!” She grins and holds out the heavy necklace for Carlos to take.

“It doesn’t even match your outfit,” he grumbles, but accepts it nonetheless and toys with the clasp.

Evie turns so her back is to him and lifts all of her hair up in one swoop. “I don’t care,” she promises. “You made it and I love it and I’m wearing it all of the time.”

It’s only composed of scrap metal from his past inventions – an alarm clock, some spare computer parts, a busted phone that Carlos is still determined to fix. He had done some basic welding (that was probably not allowed in the dorms) and a lot of creative thinking, but in the end, his junk metal became a somewhat decent necklace. It doesn’t sparkle and it isn’t colorful, but he had wrapped it in newspaper and presented it to Evie yesterday as an early Christmas gift.

“I love it, pup,” she says again and plays with one of the pendants, “it’s my favorite necklace.”

His face flushes again and Carlos scuffs the carpet with his shoes. “Thanks.”

“Enough of this sappy crap!” Jay yells and makes both of them jump. He and Mal had only started getting ready 20 minutes ago, but they were both done before Carlos and Evie, who have been prepping for the past hour. “We have a party to crash!”

“It’s not crashing if we’re invited,” Evie scolds, but grabs her purse and links arms with Mal.

Carlos whistles and Dude scampers over from his bed to dance in circles by the door. “Hi buddy,” Carlos chirps as he bends down to lift the dog up. “You look dashing too,” he compliments because it’s true: Dude is wearing a simple red sweater that matches Carlos’ bowtie, just like a matching set.

“Did Ben say you were allowed to bring Dude?” Mal tilts her head.

“No.”

Mal looks at him and he looks at Mal. Then she grins and nods in approval.

“Everyone have everything?”

“Oh evil, yes!” Jay groans to Evie.

“Yeah, E. As much as I love to show up late and make a scene, I’m also starving!” Mal opens the door and steps out. “Let’s go!”

6:13 pm – Outside King Adam and Queen Belle’s Castle

“Don’t your feet hurt?” Mal asks. She has on a beat up pair of black running shoes and a pair of heels in her bag, but Evie is in heels that look like stilts and has walked the entire time without complaint, even denied Jay’s offer of a piggy back ride.

“Beauty is pain, M.”
“Please tell me you don’t believe that still.”

Evie laughs and pushes her hair back. “No. But I’ve been in heels since I could crawl, these are hardly an effort.” As if to prove her point, she hops up the castle steps with ease.

“I can still beat you!” Jay yells from behind Mal and hoists Carlos up on his back – just because Evie turned down the piggy back ride doesn’t mean Carlos did – before bolting forward with Dude chasing behind them.

“I don’t want to fall!” Carlos shouts as his ride bounds up the steps two at a time. The speed is terrifying and exhilarating; he laughs while clinging to Jay’s neck and wrapping his legs tighter around the older boy’s stomach.

“Pfft, I’d never let you fall, pup,” Jay breathes when they reach the top, plopping Carlos down at the grand entrance.

Evie glowers when she finishes climbing the steps just a second later. “Next time, we’ll both be in heels!”

“And you’ll carry Mal on your back so we’ll be even?”

“No one is carrying me, ever.” Mal brings up the rear. She toes out of her shoes and pulls her heels out of her bag, slipping into them quickly. She shoves her tennis shoes back into her bag and ignores the questioning looks from the few people loitering outside. “Alright, Ben said food would be here. Let’s go find dinner.”

The four walk together as the doors are opened for them by men in blue and yellow suits who don’t respond to their hesitant thanks. The castle is gigantic, easily the size of Auradon Prep and probably more. All four are dumb struck by the never ending room, the high ceilings, the crazy number of people fitting into one room.

“Wow,” Evie mumbles, “where do we even go?”

“Toward the food,” Jay offers and follows his nose. He reaches behind himself to grab Carlos, who grabs Evie, who grabs Mal, and the four form a tight link through the crowd.

Despite the open space and the size of the castle, everyone in Auradon is here. Literally, everyone. Ben had said it was an invitation for the entire kingdom, to celebrate their first Christmas with a new king, and he had not been exaggerating like Mal thought he was.

The dining room is less packed than the grand entrance, but that’s probably because there’s no food. All the chairs are still pushed in and the silverware is clean and straight around dozens of plates. That doesn’t stop the newest guests from getting way too close to the table.

Clearly, dinner hasn’t started yet, but Mal hasn’t eaten since lunch, so when she sees a waiter carrying a tray of fruit around, she slips a strawberry from him while he’s distracted with other guests. She’s about to steal a second one before she hears laughter behind her.

“You know the hors d’oeuvres are for everyone right?”

“I don’t know that word, but I’m guessing that means we can eat as much as we’d like,” Mal assumes as she munches on the fruit, peering over Ben’s shoulder to watch Jay take a handful of some strange bread from another waitress, enough for himself, Carlos and Evie. “How did you find us in all of these people?”
"You're my special guests," Ben reminds her with a grin, as if he still is proud of the four despite all the shit they have stirred up since arriving. "I asked the guards to inform me when you arrived. I guessed the food would be your first destination."

"You were right!" Jay says through a mouthful of bread. He slings his arm over Ben’s shoulder and grins, showing off all the food between his teeth.

Evie clears her throat behind the boys. "If you wouldn’t mind, I’d love for the bathroom to be my second destination, Ben."

"Of course. Hello, Evie. Thank you for coming. If you go down this table, there’s a hallway on the left. The first door will be the restroom,” he points for her.

Evie thanks him and leans close to Mal when she passes the shorter girl. "You guys will wait here for me?"

"Of course, princess. Go powder your nose or whatever the ladylike saying is of piss."

Ben has moved onto greeting the boys. "Jay, Carlos, thank you both for coming as well.” He pauses, then laughs, “and Dude too!"

Carlos smiles and grabs Dude’s paw, moving it back and forth as if the dog were waving at their host. Dude does not care in the slightest and is far more interested in the food in his owner’s mouth.

"When does dinner officially start?” Jay asks as he swallows his food. His arm is still around Ben’s shoulders.

"Dinner will begin at 8.” He answers before giving Jay a strange look. Ben reaches out and touches Mal’s arm softly. “You two are both freezing.”

"Yeah, that happens in December.” Jay pats his head. “You know, cold weather and all. The earth does something.”

"It tilts on its axis,” Carlos explains, feeding a small piece of his bread to Dude. “You ought to pay more attention in your science class.”

"Yeah, that!”

Ben pulls away from Jay. “Did the four of you walk here? The school is almost three miles away from here!” He looks concerned and distraught over what has already happened and Mal snorts.

"Yeah. We walk anywhere we want to go. Remember, new kids, no car, no horses, no carriage?”

"I thought you would ride with someone.”

"Like who?” Mal scoffs. “All of the students came with their parents. That’s not really an option for us. Do you really think anyone wants to take four villain kids to a Christmas party?” She raises one eyebrow. Their parents are miles away and half the school still ignores them. Not that Mal or her friends consider that to be sad. In fact, she quite enjoys having just the four of them. She doesn’t need the school to like her, despite the distress it seems to cause Ben.

"Has anyone been disrespectful to you four again?”

"Relax beast boy,” Jay waves him off and steps closer to the dinner table. “It hasn’t been anything we can’t handle.” He eyes the waiter and waitresses coming from the kitchen, all with covered trays
hiding the food. Jay is about to sneak off toward them – he doesn’t care what they have, he just wants it – but Ben stops him.

“You shouldn’t have to handle anything. If someone is-.”

“Ben, really,” Mal interrupts, “we’ve handled way worse than passive aggressive comments. Let’s just enjoy the party, alright?”

“None of you should be paying for what your parents have done,” Ben frowns, “but, on that topic,” he breaks eye contact with Mal and looks up at the ceiling, “I do have something to tell you all.”

6:19 pm – Women’s Restroom in the Castle

Some women stare at her, but Evie holds her head high. All she’s doing is washing her hands, but she catches the subtle glances and head nods in her direction. It’s as if these girls don’t know how a mirror works. One or two of them had known who she is as soon as Evie walked in and by the time she was out of the stall, women were choosing to watch her instead of do their own business.

It’s all fine. Evie is use to stares. Some for the beauty of her face and others for the ugly of the Isle. She twists the faucet off and turns quickly with a smile that’s the perfect blend of sweet and challenging. All of the other women drop their gazes quickly or suddenly find the floral wall paper far too interesting.

Evie pulls down a paper towel, dries her hand and the whispers begin behind her back again. She just needs to find her friends and the four of them will stick together and be invincible, just like always. And it will be enough.

She could have more though, Evie supposes. Not that she doesn’t love Mal and Carlos and Jay with every bit of herself because she does. But Evie knows she’s not tough like Mal, she’s not independent like Carlos, she’s not as confident as Jay. The truth is, Evie wants the people of Auradon to like her. She wants to have more friends and to not be stared at and whispered about.

She would like to not feel so out of place in a bathroom.

But she has three people she cares for and that’s all that matters. Evie tosses away her used paper towel and has a hand on the door knob before it swings open and hits her.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” A woman shouts as Evie presses a hand to her forehead. “I didn’t realize I was opening it so hard, are you alright?”

Evie nods, but doesn’t remove her hand. She looks up and her wrist blocks the face of the other woman, but Evie sees blue everywhere. Blue dress, blue jewelry, blue tiara and for a second, she thinks she has spun around and is just seeing her own reflection again.

Then Evie lowers her hand and her eyes can focus on a face that is definitely not hers. The woman before her has dark skin and dark eyes, black hair instead of blue and pulled back instead of in loose strands around her shoulders.

She knows this woman – Evie is sure of it – but she doesn’t quite remember how.

“I didn’t mean to do that, I’m terribly sorry.”

“Yes, I’m alright,” Evie peers closer at this woman. She is royalty. Real royalty, not like Evie use to pretend she was. “You didn’t open that quickly, I was more surprised than anything.”
Maybe she is looking in a mirror, Evie thinks, because her own curious expression is reflected on to this woman’s face.

“Have we met before?” The newcomer asks with a tilt of her head, her ponytail falling over her shoulder. The black hair cascading down a bronze shoulder has Evie thinking of Jay. This woman looks like she could be his mother, but Evie knows that’s not possible. They look so similar though…

Evie gasps. “You’re from Agrabah, aren’t you?”

The woman blinks, then smiles. “Yes. Law states that to be the sultana of the country, you must be a resident of it. Have you been there?”

No, but the father of one of her best friends tried to take over the country twenty years ago.

Evie gulps and looks at the tiara on this woman’s head again.

Royalty.

Agrabah.

Sultana.

Oh shit.

“You’re Jasmine, aren’t you?” Evie is just above a whisper

“I am. And if you know my name, it’s only fair I know yours.” The sultana grins.

“I have to go,” Evie whispers. She’s sure everyone else in the bathroom is still watching her, whispering and pointing and as soon as Jasmine realizes Evie is one of the villain kids, who knows what could happen?

“Please,” Jasmine’s face twists out of a smile and into a worried expression, “are you certain you are-?”

“Yes!” Evie dodges her hands and scampers out of the bathroom, ignoring the woman calling after her.

She has to find Jay.

6:22 pm – Dining Hall of the Castle

Ben stands before three shocked faces and tries to smile.

He fails.

“Wow,” Jay breathes, “you really meant…everybody is coming to this party.”

Ben nods. “Yes. Aladdin and Jasmine have been in town for a few days; their trip from Agrabah is a long one, they typically stay about a week. I’ve already spoken to Snow White and I need to speak with Evie about her.” He looks at Mal and tries to keep a neutral face. “Aurora and Phillip came early with Audrey. Roger and Anita Radcliffe arrived a while ago.” With a sigh, Ben claps his hands. “So, ahem, I just wanted to…inform the four of you.”

“We can avoid them right?” Carlos asks, cradling Dude. “There are enough people here that we can
avoid them for the whole party.”

“Yeah, we can definitely do that,” Mal nods. “I mean, I’ll be fine running into sleeping beauty and her prince,” she squirms and her face tightens. “I handled Queen Leah and I handle Audrey, I can handle the woman in the middle.”

Ben remembers how quickly Mal had faltered at Queen Leah’s rage. It had been the first time she wasn’t the confident, prideful daughter of Maleficent; she was a confused and embarrassed girl, surrounded by new faces and unfamiliar customs.

He knows Mal has grown, she is strong and she is use to the scathing comments. That hurts him, it pains Ben to look at her and Carlos and Evie and Jay and realize that the three of them have become accustomed to withering glares and hurtful words.

“I suppose, yes, you could avoid them.” Ben clears his throat, “however, I have spoken to Roger and Anita and the two of them would…like to meet you, Carlos.”

He risks a glance at the youngest of the Isle kids, sees brown eyes shoot wide and nimble fingers tighten in Dude’s sweater. “Me? Why?”

“They are very nice people,” Ben assures. “The princes and princesses here are kind. They are nice and selfless citizens.”

“So why did Audrey’s grandma nearly attack Mal?” Jay scoffs and folds his arms. “Not so nice and selfless to jump on her like that.”

Before Ben can answer, a blur of blue jumps into the group. “Guys!” Evie pants. She is flushed with giant eyes. “I just saw Jasmine in the bathroom!” She hisses and grabs Jay’s arm.

“We know, E.” Mal clicks her tongue. “Ben here was just telling us that all of the heroes from our parents’ stories are here. Roger and Anita want to meet Carlos.”

“Does that mean Snow White is here too?” Evie turns to Ben and a look of sharp betrayal is on her face.

He shifts. “Yes, Snow White is here as well. She…would like to meet you, Evie.”

She gasps, puts a hand to her mouth. “Snow White wants to meet me?” Her voice drops and an expression Ben can’t name is on her face.

“What about Mal and I?” Jay nudges Mal with his shoulder. “Aurora and her prince don’t want to meet her? Aladdin and Jasmine don’t want to meet me?”

“I’m sure they do!” Ben assures him. A fleeting look of terror takes over Jay’s face and Mal wears a baffled expression beside him. Maybe that’s not what they wanted to hear. “You can avoid them the entire night if you wish, but you four have history with the-.”

“Our parents have a history with them.” Mal scoffs and steps in front of Jay.

Ben puts his hands up. He’s seen firsthand how protective Mal can be of the others. “Regardless, it could be a good idea to meet them all.”

Three of them just stare back, Carlos wildly shakes his head, and Ben just sighs.

6:31 pm – North Wing of the Castle
It’s been a while since he’s spoken with Queen Elsa in person, Aladdin tries not to shiver when she shakes his hand. Agrabah needs ice, especially for when the summer comes around, and Elsa’s country has the product and the trucks to deliver it before it all melts in the Arabian heat.

Well, it’s really Elsa who has the product and her country just has the trucks, Aladdin supposes.

Jasmine returns just as Elsa is walking away, both exchanging polite hellos. She comes to his side and steals a sip of his drink. “Al, do we know anyone with blue hair?”

He shakes his head. Their entire country is filled with raven heads, like the two of them. “Why?”

“I just ran into a young girl in the bathroom. She looked so familiar,” Jasmine puts her finger to her lips. “Blue hair, brown eyes, she…Al, she looked terrified of me.” The sultana frowns. “She ran from me.”

“I don’t blame her. You can be pretty scary.”

She smacks his arm. “She looked petrified. She was only a child though, maybe one of the students from Auradon Prep?” Jasmine puts a finger to her lips.

“Probably,” Aladdin agrees. “Every student from Auradon Prep was invited,” he turns to her.

“What?”

“Well…that includes Jafar’s son too. He might be here.” Aladdin exhales slowly. He had never been against bringing Isle kids over. If anyone was to support second chances, it’s the former petty thief. He had been quite shocked when King Adam, the literal beast, was so against it. Though, Aladdin had been…hesitant himself. He and Adam grew up basically on their own, they had raised themselves in their solitude, and they had both turned out to be good men. But they had never been exposed to evil at such young ages, neither had been influenced by chaos and villainy.

He could have never written off the Isle kids as lost causes, but Aladdin had confessed to Jasmine one night that he has no idea who he would have been if she and the genie hadn’t come along and cared for him so deeply. Maybe he would have made something of himself, become more than just a thief. Maybe he would have grown worse.

Then again, he had been 18 when he discovered the lamp and fell for Jasmine. There was no adult that had been born on the Isle, only kids still. Jafar’s son is no older than 17, but Auradon Prep accepts students at 14. If there was time for Aladdin to still learn, there must be time for Jafar’s son too. At least, Aladdin hopes so. Outside of basic news coverage and gossip columns, he knows nothing.

Jasmine is watching her husband now. “I guess I’ve been so focused on our trip and visiting those in Auradon that I hadn’t thought about him.”

Him. That’s the only thing they can call Jafar’s son. All they know is the child’s father and gender. No mother, no age, no name. No information on Jafar’s son – or any of the villain kids – reveal their names, only their heritage.

“Should we…try and find him if he is here?” Jasmine takes a deep breath.

“Well, would you want to meet us?”

“I…have no idea,” she plays with her many bracelets. “I can only imagine what Jafar has told him about us. He might think we’re monsters.”
Aladdin nods. “We are to Jafar. We humiliated him, maybe his son hates us for ruining his family name.”

“Jafar did that.”

“I know that, but we played a role in it.” The sultan sips his drink. “So his son could hate us and be terrified of us.”

Jasmine twirls her hair and folds her arms, “or he could see that we’re not so bad.”

6:40 pm – Dining Hall of the Castle

“Stop looking around so much,” Mal hisses. “The dog people are not going to jump out of any corners!”

Carlos scowls. “I know that.” He twists his fingers in Dude’s fur. The group have found their way to the edge of the room, still not far from the dining table. Carlos has his back pressed against the wall, Evie to his left, Mal to his right and Jay just a bit further away, chatting up a blonde girl from their school with a charming smile.

“We don’t have to stay, right?” Evie quietly asks. “We can leave at any time and just go back to our dorms.”

“I have food hidden in our dorm,” Carlos offers and shifts his weight. “We can go back right now and have dinner in our room.”

“Yeah right. They chased my mother onto the Isle, they’re not chasing me out of a party.” Mal scoffs. “We have just as much a right to be here as anyone else. The king himself invited us.” She stands straighter and looks at Carlos and Evie. Mal is still perfectly fine with people in Auradon disliking her or even hating her. The less she has to be social, the better.

But she has a new plan in Auradon and the people need to not be afraid of her face (despite how much it thrills Mal to instill fear). They’re not here to steal the wand, they’re not here to unleash terror, they’re not here to take down the barrier. They’re here just to live.

Maybe, yes, down the line, Mal would very much like to rule Auradon. And every kingdom surrounding it. The oceans too – just to spite Uma.

But right now, she’s less concerned with her future and more concerned with the lives of the three she came here with. Evie is no longer so horribly thin and weary, Carlos’ face has been bruise free for months, Jay has finally come to understand that he doesn’t have to steal the food he eats, Auradon just gives it to him when he wants.

There’s no guarantee their lives will stay this good when (if) the barrier comes down and their parents are released. Cruella will still put her hands (and her feet and her nails and her cigarettes) on her son, the Evil Queen will still screech at Evie until the girl is crying, Jafar will stand before the mountain of gold Jay brings him and bruise his arms when the man yells that it’s not enough, it’s never enough, even in Auradon, Jay is not enough.

A small possibility exists that things would be better with everyone in Auradon. The Evil Queen could be content with Evie ruling part of the kingdom (because Mal will still need her right hand girl when she’s queen) instead of marrying a prince. Cruella could have so many fur coats, she’d be too happy to hit Carlos; Jafar could enjoy every piece of gold in the world.

No matter how much Mal would like for that possibility to be true, she can’t risk it. And as much as
she would like to rule over the world, Mal is willing to put it all on hold if it means she keeps her friends away from their parents.

The four of them are not leaving Auradon. Not now, not ever.

“We’re not going to be intimidated by anyone here. In fact,” Mal runs her tongue against her teeth as she grins. “We ought to seek them out.”

Carlos shakes his head and Evie’s mouth drops open.

“Come on! Just a friendly hello, show them we’re not going anywhere and we’re not afraid of them.”

“What if we are afraid of them?”

Mal rolls her eyes and snaps at Carlos, “then suck it up and pretend you’re not. Jay!” She yells.

He turns to their group and blows a kiss to the girl he had been talking to. “Bye Ally! What’s up guys?”

“We are the children of the four most evil villains in history,” Mal whispers and Jay tilts his head. “We have proven we are better than are parents, we have proven we are stronger than them. If these happy ending suckers want to meet us, let’s go.”

6:46 pm – East Wing of the Castle

“Anita!” Jane cheers. “It’s been so long, how are you?”

“Oh, Jane,” Anita pulls her friend into a hug. “It’s been far too long. How is Africa?”

“Beautiful. No matter how many years I’m there, it never ceases to amaze me.” Jane pulls back with a dreamy look. “How is the plantation?”

Anita laughs. “Big. Populated still. We’re great-great-grandparents now. Maybe even three greats! Is Tarzan here as well?”

“No, they still don’t celebrate Christmas in the jungle.” She shakes her head. “I’m not traveling solo, I’ve got one of the baby chimps with me. She’s currently in the animal hospital down town. Kala found her abandoned by her family,” Jane takes a deep breath and smiles sadly. “We think she has trisomy 22, similar to Down syndrome in humans. But she’s getting the best of care in Auradon now.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. You’re still doing amazing work, I’ve read all of your articles.” Anita grabs her hand and squeezes it.

“Thank you dear. How is Roger?”

“Did I hear my name?” A tall blond man steps away from the piano he was admiring and towards his wife. “Jane, hello! When did you get here?”

The women laugh and Anita pecks his cheek. “You have your own piano at home dear.”

“Yes, but this one’s a beauty! Porcelain keys and two of its original pedals still!” He grins widely.

“Say, where are the great-great-great grandkids? Didn’t bring any of them with you?” Jane asks, looking at their feet expectantly.
Anita sighs. “No, we would have brought one or two, but the king specified no animals for this get together.”

“Really?” Jane tilts her head. “I thought I saw a young boy downstairs carrying a dog with him?”

The husband and wife look at each other and shrug. “Perhaps a therapy dog?” Roger suggests. “Surely Ben would make an exception for that.”

Jane nods. “Possibly. He had a sweater on that matched his owner’s attire. It was quite cute, the two of them decked out in red, black and white!”

“Red, black and white?” Roger whispers. “No, those were always…” His face is twisted into an almost scowl and his fists clench heavily at his sides. “Ben never said her son has a dog.”

“Those were Cruella’s colors,” Anita remembers. She takes a deep breath and ignores the immediate worry in her chest. Many years have passed, she knows better than to jump to conclusions. “What did the boy look like?”

Jane purses her lips. “Oh, well. He wore a black suit, with some red and white. The dog was a little one, maybe a blond terrier of some kind?” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Oh, his hair was interesting though! Black and…white.” Jane finishes and notes both of the shocked faces before her. “What’s wrong?”

“Remember Ben’s first proclamation as king? To bring over children from the Isle of the Lost?” Anita prompts and pats her husband’s hand. “Cruella, the one who…” She trails off, but Jane nods – after Clayton, she, like the Radcliffes, had committed every animal abuser to her memory. “Well her son was one of the children to come over.”

“Oh heavens,” Jane puts a hand to her chest. “I had no idea. We really need to get cell phone range in the jungle.”

“We would very much like to meet him and he’s a friend of Ben’s,” Anita tries to smile but her lips can’t seem to fake it. “But we haven’t been able to do so yet.”

“You don’t think he would hurt a dog like his mother, do you?” Jane may have only met Anita and Roger after both of their shared horror stories, but she remembers the pain and the tears the couple had shed while retelling their tale. She can only imagine their worry at Cruella’s child having a dog with him.

Roger puffs out his chest. “If he does, I’ll hear about it!”

“Oh, Roger,” Anita points at him. “He very well could be a sweet boy.” She ushers. Only weeks after the king’s proclamation did Anita allow herself to think of what Cruella’s son could be like, but she can’t make judgements without meeting him first. “We know his name is Carlos, but that’s all.”

“So for all you know, he could be exactly like Cruella or her exact opposite,” Jane leads the couple to a recently unoccupied couch, takes a seat at the end. “How long have they all been in Auradon for?”

“About four months,” Anita answers.

“Has he caused any trouble?”

“He better not have!” Roger proclaims. “He is to be on his best behavior here.”
Anita scolds him again, twisting on the couch to face him. “We haven’t heard any news of any of the Isle kids misbehaving, but we haven’t really been keeping an eye on him. We’ve spoken to King Ben about being introduced but it…hasn’t happened yet,” Anita sighs and swirls her drink. “We can give him the benefit of the doubt. He…he could be a nice young man.” She doesn’t bother trying to fake a smile this time.

6:54 pm – Ballroom of the Castle

“That’s your step sister?” Jay whispers. “Total babe!”

Evie glares at him.

“I mean, for an old lady. You’re a real total babe, princess.”

“She’s not even Evie’s step sister,” Carlos mumbles and the other three turn to him. “What? In order for the two of you to be legally related, your mother had to have legal rights to Snow White before you were born. Technically, your mother’s relationship to Snow White ended after her husband, Snow’s father, died. And the relationship was completely severed after your mother went to the Isle.”

“Because she tried to kill Snow White.” Evie says.

“Yeah.” Carlos bounces Dude on his hip. “But I wasn’t going to mention that part.”

“Okay, okay,” Evie takes a deep breath. “I can do this.”

Mal grabs her shoulders, forces Evie to look at her. “You lived with your mother for 16 years. Snow White lived her for what, a year? Then she got taken out by an apple?” She snickers and for a second, Evie sees the Isle in Mal again, the cruel and vindictive side. She wonders how nervous Mal really is and how much of her confidence is just a show, then Mal smiles genuinely at her. “You are smarter than her and stronger than her. And we’ll be right here the entire time.”

“Okay,” Evie nods her head and narrows her eyes. “I am going to go meet my not step-sister.” She stands straight and holds her head high. Her heels click audibly on the hard floor and people move out of her way easily until Evie is facing hair as black as night. “Excuse me? Are… You’re Snow White, right?”

“Yes.” Snow White turns around and smiles up at her. Evie is greeted with a face that makes her ache. Snow is fair skinned, not a single blemish. Her lips are red, just as red as the apple that nearly killed her. Her teeth are straight, her eyes are big, her cheeks are rosy.

The Evil Queen’s pitiful reminiscing never quite honored the beauty of Snow White.

Even after spending every day of her life being told she wasn’t good enough, Evie has never felt as inadequate as she does now. She hadn’t even thought about checking her looks before coming over, she had felt so strong and empowered by Mal’s words and so supported by the boys, but now? Alone?

Evie runs through every make up disaster that she could be unaware of right now. Her eyeliner could be smeared, maybe she has bits of food left in her teeth, oh evil, what if her breath smells?

Her lips stay sealed. She doesn’t bother opening her mouth because she already knows her voice is gone and it’s not like anyone wants to hear her when Snow White is right here, sounding like a singing bird. Evie can only stare and hold her breath.

The princess – the actual princess, not the fake, lying one – tilts her head. “Hello. Who might you
Evie wants to kick herself. Just because she knows who Snow White is doesn’t mean that Snow White knows who she is. “I’m…Evie.” She whispers her own name and it even sounds terrible to her ears. “I’m, uh, I’m,” ‘don’t stammer, darling, it’s not attractive, go fix your lip gloss!’ “I’m the daughter of the Evil Queen,” Evie blurts.

Perfectly arched eye brows shoot up and full lips open in shock and Evie is so focused on the face, the true ‘fairest of them all’ to hear Snow’s response properly. “Huh? I mean,” she shakes her head and fights the heat rising to her cheeks, “I beg your pardon?”

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” she has a voice that is breathy and warm and sweet. “I’ve been very curious as to who you are.”

It was probably meant as a compliment, but Evie digs her nails into her palms. She knows all about Snow White – the pure heart, the natural beauty, the fair princess everyone fell in love with. This is the woman Evie has been compared to her whole life. “It’s nice to meet you too.” She is taller than Snow White in her heels, probably even without them, but Evie has never felt so small and insignificant before.

Her hands twitch by her sides and on instinct, or maybe for some familiar comfort, Evie dives into her purse, scrambles for what she needs because she had been so focused on the reflection of women gossiping about her and mocking her that she hadn’t even checked her own appearance. Evie pulls out her handheld mirror and when her reflection shakes, she still doesn’t notice her trembling hands. Her lipstick is smudge at one corner – why would she ever eat the bread Jay had given her, she knows crumbs can destroy an appearance.

“Are you alright?”

Evie hears the question but answering doesn’t seem important, she’s snatching her lipstick out of her pocket and she’s breathing so quickly that her mirror is fogging over. She holds her breath and pushes out her lips, corrects the hideous mistake easily, then coats her lips a second time in makeup. Evie puckers, she should have worn a darker shade of lipstick to bring out more color, but then it wouldn’t have matched her dress, but why the hell ‘are you wearing this shade of blue? It doesn’t match your hair or your nails, one of which is chipped. Go upstairs, start over, don’t come down until a prince would sweep you off your feet. Speaking of feet, those heels are fit for a stripper, not a princess, are you trying to look like a cheap whore or are you going to marry a respectable prince and get mummy off the Isle?’

“Sorry!” Evie gasps and shoves everything back into her purse. Her mother is yelling at her – so disappointed, always disappointed – but she tries to focus on Snow White, who is confused and judging her because ‘others are always judging you, darling, don’t forget that, don’t you ever let them find any faults’.

Snow White blinks and then smiles. “How…has Grimhilde been? Despite everything,” she looks away, her smiles falters, “there are days I do miss her. Who she use to be.”

Evie is pretty certain her mother has always been the same person, but she doesn’t say that. Instead, she says the first thing that comes to mind, “she lost five pounds right before I left! And she found a way to curl her hair without electricity!” It took about four hours and every used up bottle of hairspray Evie could find, but it held for a whole day.

“How…nice.” Snow White crinkles her nose. “And how are you? Auradon must be quite the change, I saw the dress you designed for Ben’s coronation. It was quite lovely.”
“You…you think so?” Evie whispers and looks away. None of her dresses ever fit right, none of them had a proper waist line and the stitching never was straight enough. Her mother didn’t need to point out flaws in her clothing before Evie left the Isle, she had become critical to her own designs over the years. There were days even Evie didn’t like the dresses she made. “You really liked it?”

“The purple one Ben’s girlfriend wore? Oh it was beautiful,” Snow gushes.

Evie smiles broadly for the first time since this conversation began. “I made it all myself!” She flushes. Mal had loved the dress, but Evie could never bore her with all the details of how she made it all. No one else had ever said anything about the dress she had worked so hard on. “Ben gave me a sewing machine and I brought over my own thread from the Isle. I made at least six different designs, but there was that specific shade of light purple, the not quite lilac. I told that to Jay once and he called it the lie-lac but he honestly doesn’t know any shades of any colors really,” Evie laughs. She had put so much time and effort into that dress, days and weeks of work into making it all perfect for Mal, who wore it beautifully and made Evie’s heart stop. There was so much thought behind it and while she explained it to the boys over and over again, neither of them truly appreciated all the details. “And once I started working with that material, I knew I had to go with the frills and the lace top. That neck piece, the half hood, that had been so difficult to work with.” She stops long enough to catch her breath. “You really liked it?”

She is so ecstatic, Evie misses the long look and tight smile her not-stepsister gives.

“Yes,” Snow White says, “It was…very nice.”

6:58 pm – Ballroom of the Castle

Mal is very intently watching from the corner, fully prepared to step in at the very moment Evie needs her to. She doesn’t have to look behind her to know Jay and Carlos are ready to do the same. It’s not that Mal doesn’t have faith in Evie, she does completely. She doesn’t trust Snow White. Audrey was one thing, but Queen Leah’s mockery and judgement has Mal on edge for any person of royalty, any good doer who may see her and her friends as less than the citizens of Auradon.

“It looks like it’s going well,” Carlos whispers. He’s on his tiptoes, holding onto Dude with one hand and clutching Jay for balance with the other.

“Maybe. Snow White totally rolled her eyes as Evie took out her mirror.” Jay grunts, but steadies Carlos.

“No one is in tears yet,” Mal says with less disappointment than she expected of herself. It would have been fun to cause a scene, but the last time she was at a royal event, all the anger and hatred had been on her and Mal can still feel the Queen’s intense disgust at her presence.

It’s whatever. Mal has handled way worse. She’s not afraid of some bag of bones queen and her insistence that Mal belonged on a dirty, dying island. Really. She’s not.

It was only when every person at Family Day agreed with Queen Leah that Mal began to feel the teensiest bit of self-doubt and panic.

“Are you Maleficent’s daughter?”

Mal jumps (because she’s shocked, not scared) and turns around and looks up at a very tall, dark
man. “Yes. I am.” If it gets her in trouble this time, she can handle it again, but she will not be ashamed of her heritage. “Who are you?”

“Prince Phillip.”

Well fuck.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, your highness.” Mal says politely, but does not curtsey. Next to her, Jay and Carlos are watching intently, torn between her and Evie.

Mal can take care of herself, she can handle a prince with a scowl. She nods to the boys and steps away; they need to be focused on Evie. “To what do I owe this pleasure?” Her voice is not shaking, not one bit.

“I’m keeping an eye on you.” He says without so much as a second of hesitation. Prince Phillip stands much taller than she does, but Mal does not cower, not even at his pitiful glare.

“What?”

“Your mother almost cost me the love of my life,” he grits his teeth and points a finger at Mal’s wide-eyed expression. “I was never so terrified as the day I thought I would lose-”

“You really don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

He continues as if she never spoke. “-Aurora, not even when I was fighting a dragon.”

“My mother.”

Prince Phillip scoffs. “Yes. I don’t know what your purpose is here, but I am watching you and all of your friends,” he doesn’t break eye contact with Mal as he points to Jay and Carlos, who are glancing at them while keeping an eye on Evie. “If any of you are up to any trouble, I will know about it. I will not stand to let someone else be hurt if I can prevent it.”

“Our purpose?” Mal seethes and blinks quickly. Now is not a good time for glowing eyes. “We’re here to learn, to have a better life. We’re here to be good like you supposedly are.” She hisses and pokes him in the chest when she would really like to take a swing at his face. “Chill out, there’s no master plan!”

Not anymore, at least. For weeks, getting the wand and taking down the barrier was their goal and they had only hesitated because of the better life offered in Auradon, away from their parents. It wasn’t until Ben had made a passing remark about getting other kids off the Isle that the four stopped to discuss what would be best.

As much as Mal hated to let Maleficent down – and evil, Maleficent hated that too – she had loved the safety and growth her friends have found here. And, in the darkest parts of the night when she found her way into Evie’s bed, Mal breathed honesty – a taste she is still unfamiliar with – and confessed that the lives of other Isle kids bothered her. Evie crumbled too; it tore her up to be away and never know who was bruised in the morning, who had new scars, which kids had slept on the streets because it was safer than sharing a roof with their parents. Mal had always known her friends shared a guilt for the younger children, especially Evie with her big heart and Carlos with his nightmares.

They had all decided that it is more important to bring over kids from the Isle than it is to prove anything to their parents.
That’s all Mal really wants for the rest of the VKs. Freedom from their parents, their abusers, and a safe place to sleep.

“Do not raise your voice with me!” Phillip shouts at her.

“Then don’t raise yours!” Mal snarls back, out of her memories and in the present again.

“This is exactly what I knew would happen. Maleficent has taught you no respect for authority, no manners, no discipline!” Phillip snaps and strangers around them are beginning to watch it all unfold. He’s taller and younger, but Mal sees the resemblance to his mother-in-law, feels the eyes on her again and the disdain at her very existence.

She had stayed quiet last time, took it in silence because she feared Queen Leah’s words were true and because the fierce anger had taken her off guard. But she is the daughter of Maleficent and Mal isn’t taking this embarrassment without a fight.

“Couldn’t find any dragons to battle, so you’re picking on someone half your age?” Mal spits. “How princely!”

“You are to be on your best behavior while here in Auradon, young lady!” The prince scolds her.

“You’re not my father!”

“If I was, you would know your manners and speak to me with respect!”

“Respect you haven’t earnt!”

Phillip rubs his eyes. He either hasn’t noticed or doesn’t care about the small crowd watching them. “I can’t believe Ben wants to bring over more Isle kids. You’re nothing but wild and chaotic!”

It really sucks to be the only person defending yourself and being surrounded by suspicious faces. Mal is tough, she is strong, she is not going to cower before these people.

But she’s not going to allow them to be belittle her either.

“Bite me,” she growls at the prince and pushes through the crowd. People part easily for her, put as much distance as they can from her. Mal keeps her head high and walks right toward the door.

She just needs to cool off.

7:03 pm – Grand Staircase of the Castle

Jasmine glares at Phillip’s retreating back. She couldn’t hear any words, just vague shouting, but he had caused quite a scene. She has met him multiple times and while Jasmine appreciates his strength and bravery, she also sees a warrior turned husband, still struggling to protect his wife and daughter from a villain he has already defeated.

Not that Jasmine doesn’t understand. She still has nightmares of sand filling around her and Jafar’s ultimate rage and power as a genie.

The girl with purple hair – Maleficent’s daughter, right? – stomps through the crowd and vanishes out on of the side doors. She has quite the fiery spirit and lively challenge that reminds Jasmine of herself. She makes a note to extend a friendly face to the young girl after meeting Jafar’s son.

She has a guess as to who he is too. There’s a boy with black and white hair off to the side and a boy with long black hair pulled back. It’s been a while since Jasmine has read up on Auradon’s villains,
but no one could ever forget Cruella De Vil’s famous hair. As far as Jasmine knows, it was two boy and two girls brought from the Isle, which means the taller boy about to follow Maleficent’s daughter must be Jafar’s son.

Jasmine starts down the steps – she had stopped halfway in the middle when she caught Phillip’s booming voice. Even if he’s going outside to speak with the girl, Jasmine doesn’t think she will find him again so easily in a party this crowded. She wants to catch him before he disappears from her sight, but Jafar’s son is stopped by Cruella’s. The two exchange words and for the first time, Jasmine notes the dog between them. Cruella’s offspring with a dog? She fights the unease in her stomach and reminds herself to keep an open mind.

Cruella’s son makes his way through the crowd with the dog in his arms. He quickly leaves, searching for his purple-haired friend.

Jafar’s son watches him leave, but stays against the wall, keeping his gaze on something Jasmine can’t see.

She moves slowly to him, dancing between people easily and smiling brightly at the other guests. He moves as she does, effortlessly and making eye contact with everyone. He hasn’t spotted Jasmine yet, but he’s moving toward someone else, a couple of girls off to the side.

Jasmine is close enough to touch him, reach out for his shoulder, but the boy speaks before she can. “Hello, beautifuls,” the boy sings, “I must have done something really nice this year to get you two as Christmas gifts.”

One of them giggles but the other hardly bats an eye and stays formal. “Hi Jay.”

“Hey, Lon,” he reaches out to twirl her hair around his finger, “I’ve never had a present so beautifully wrapped,” and his eyes move down her body.

It’s been more than 20 years since Jasmine has seen Jafar, but it’s like cold water is filling her veins and freezing her every muscle. With the words, the tone, the clear disinterest on a young girl’s face, Jasmine is stuck in her memories, her nightmares.

She had pulled away from Jafar, rejected his every advance and he pursued relentlessly until he finally stopped caring for Jasmine’s ‘no’s and took what he wanted instead. She is a full grown woman, an adult, but watching the scene has her feeling small and scared and pretending to be brave. She remembers being treated like property, sold off to Jafar when her poor father was helpless, she can even feel the heavy chains around her wrists to keep her beside him always.

Jafar’s hand – always too cold, too calloused – are on her again, pulling her chin to watch her, running through her hair and purring how she’s his gorgeous dessert flower. He’s touching her sides, caressing her face, saying she is his forever and ever and ever and-

Two decades later and Jasmine is seeing him all over again. Jafar’s objectification of women, his crude flirting, the arrogance he carried himself with – as if he was doing the world a favor by simply existing – it’s here, in the flesh.

Jafar is on the Isle, she knows this. She signed the papers herself.

But his son is standing right in front of her and Jasmine feels sand in her throat and cuffs on her ankles like she’s 18 again and being held hostage.

The boy slides up to the girl who is so easily charmed by him. “Jane, beautiful, I was so sad to hear your mother couldn’t make it, she works so hard at the school,” he shakes his head and pats her arm
sympathetically. “But when Santa said I would get no gifts this year, I was really bummed. But you
still coming,” he sighs and puts an arm around her shoulders, “more than make up for it.”

It must be different, Jasmine thinks, to have such forward flirting come from someone your age
instead of a man old enough to be your father. The girl grins up at Jafar’s son and tries to respond,
but she is pulled away by the other girl – Lon? – who says they have to go find her parents.

“You’ll be on my wish list!” He shouts after them.

Jasmine’s blood has gone from frozen to boiling in a matter of seconds. This is disgusting, nauseating
how he spoke. He put his arm around the girl without even hesitating, continued to call to them as
they walked away, held himself with such pride and confidence, like there was no possible way he
would be rejected.

She can’t find the words, but she doesn’t need to. Jafar’s son is looking at the two retreating girls and
blowing kisses their way and another familiar face runs into him.

“Jay!” A blue haired girl squeals. “I think she liked me! We talked for like ten minutes and I told her
about all of my dresses and designs and she didn’t even look bored!” It’s the girl from the bathroom
earlier – same blue hair, blue dress and metal necklace – the one that Jasmine hit with the door and
she still feels awful about that. “Snow White might have actually liked me!”

“Of course she did, Princess,” the boy, Jay, says. “How could anyone not?” He grins down at her
and slings his arm over her shoulders casually, like he can do whatever he wants and never face
repercussions.

“I can’t believe I was so-,” her eyes dance around the room, but she does a double take to Jasmine
and gasps. “H-hi.”

“Hello,” Jasmine says curtly. This certainly explains why the girl had been so scared earlier. She is
one of the other Isle children and if she’s meeting Snow White, this girl must be the Evil Queen’s
daughter. “How is your head?”

She tries to smile. “Fine. It’s, uh, fine.”

“What happened to your head?” Jay turns to her with his brows furrowed.

“Oh, nothing,” the girl flushes. “I just, uh, ran into, um…” she gestures back to Jasmine and Jay
turns to face her.

“Hello,” Jafar’s son sings and steps closer to her, looking Jasmine up and down like her purpose in
life is to be watched by him. “It must be Christmas and my birthday,” he bows his head, reaches for
her hand. She can feel familiar callouses and grits her teeth as he presses his lips to her knuckles. “It’s
not fair you met Evie first. I’m Jay.”

Evie must be the girl hissing at him. “Jay, this is the sultana of Agrabah, Ja-.”

“Sultana?” He interrupts her without thinking about it and looks between them. “What is that?”

“It’s the Arabian equivalent of a queen,” Jasmine shortly answers. Her irritation is high, she won’t
cower down to her old memories and fear, she will not cower to a child no matter how similar his
hands are to his father’s.

Jay grins up at her, cocky and self-assured. “Consider me to be your servant then, please.”
She is a grown woman, but his gaze makes her skin crawl.

“Jay!” Evie tries again. “This is Jasmine!”

He blinks and the slow realization shows on his face. “Oh. Like Aladdin’s wife?”

She is so much more than Aladdin’s wife. Jasmine loves her husband dearly, but they are equal in their ruler ship, she is a sultana with or without him and to be known because of her husband is an insult. She grits out a “yes.”

Shock and confusion jump across his face and the confidence falters. But only for one moment, then Jay is strutting up to her again with a wink. “Any chance he’s up for a threesome?”

7:08 pm – Outside of the Castle

“Go potty, Dude.” Carlos sets the dog down on the castle lawn. “Just don’t do number two please, I don’t have anything to pick it up with,” he whispers and Dude tilts his head. “Mal! I saw you come out this way!” Carlos calls. There are a handful of people outside, he’s trying not to draw too much attention to himself, but he can’t find purple hair anywhere. “Mal?” Carlos jogs up and down the lawn, peering over different heads and squinting in the dark. “Where is she?”

Dude chases after him, yapping about. A couple of people look over at his barks, but Carlos pays them no mind. “Mal!” There’s still no response. “She wouldn’t have left without us. That guy was such a jerk to her!”

He lets Dude walk around instead of carrying the dog. Carlos covers the entire front lawn searching for his friend. He shouts her name and avoids the few questioning guests, but after long, the cold of December sets in and Carlos shivers.

Maybe long pants wouldn’t have been so terrible with his suit.

“Come on, Dude,” Carlos sighs. “Mal will come back in when she’s ready.” He shuffles back over to the front doors, thanks the guards who hold them open. Once they are back in the warmth of the castle, Carlos picks Dude up again. “I hope she’s okay.”

He folds in on himself when people get too close, but Carlos dances around them. He can’t find Jay or Evie anymore, but he’s looking up on his tiptoes and craning his neck. The dining hall was to their left and he’s trying to get back that way without touching anyone. He’s so focused on finding his friends that Carlos jumps when a hand lands on his shoulder. Spinning around, he comes face to face with a woman not much taller than him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear,” she speaks with a slight accent, something British, Carlos suspects. “I hadn’t meant to frighten you.” She is perhaps just an inch taller than Carlos, but she’s wearing heels. Her hair is not quite blonde, not quite brown, somewhere in the middle that has him thinking of summer and she studies his face from a distance that is a little too close for his liking. There is a tall man standing behind her, watching the interaction carefully and his gaze makes Carlos anxious.

“It’s okay,” He holds Dude tighter, gasps when a cold nose finds his throat. Another look at the man behind her has Carlos frowning and the “what do you want?” escapes before he can stop it.

The woman blinks and the man narrows his eyes. Carlos takes an uneasy step backwards. That was rude, he knows it was and Carlos tries to have better manners than that, but this too close woman and this glaring man stopped him, clearly they want something. The lack of his friends has Carlos forgoing his niceties and reverting back to his Isle ways – the faster he can get someone what they want, the faster he can get the hell away.
“You’re Carlos, right?” She tries to smile again but Carlos can read insincerity easily and this woman has it.

He nods anyway.

“I’m Anita and this,” she turns and places a hand on the man’s chest, “is my husband Roger. We, well, we…”

“You knew Cruella.” Carlos states instantly. His mother only ever spoke of the dogs she wanted to kill, never of the humans involved in her tale, but Carlos knows how to research. He looked up the De Vil story on the Isle, committed Roger and Anita Radcliffe to memory as the only people more insane than Cruella; afterall, how could someone willingly take in 101 dogs and not be mentally ill?

At least, that was his thought process on the Isle, before he met Dude and fell in love with paw prints and dog breath.

These are the two of them though, the people Cruella terrorized and cursed (back when she had enough of a mind to remember them). Suddenly, Carlos feels jittery and high strung despite the fact that he spent the last ten minutes running outside, using up a fair amount of energy. “You were the owners of the 101 dalmatians.”

“Well…yes,” the woman nods. “That’s us. We’ve wanted to meet you for a while,” Anita says carefully, smiling gently as if she can sense his nerves. She probably can, Carlos can never hides his panic well enough. “It’s-.”

“Why?”

“I…beg your pardon?”

“Wh-why have you wanted to meet me?” Carlos stumbles. They couldn’t possibly give a damn about Cruella – Carlos is her own son and he certainly doesn’t. Or, well, he tries not to – and want to ask about her. He peeks behind them; they didn’t bring a pack of dogs to sick on him…

No! Carlos shakes his head. That’s still Cruella in his ears, still taunting him and playing on the fear he has overcome. He thinks he’s overcome it. He hasn’t met a dog much bigger than Dude yet.

They must want to yell at him like Phillip did to Mal. They want to cause a scene and belittle him. While that had been Carlos’ whole life on the Isle and he can certainly survive someone screaming at him for a night, he would prefer not to go through that again.

Anita has faltered at his question, taken back in shock, and can’t seem to find her answer. Roger steps closer and his glare intensifies. For a fleeting moment, Carlos wonders if they regret seeking him out already.

Ben had said the two of them wanted to meet him and Carlos had been very determined to not let that happen, yet here he is standing face to face with the Radcliffes who sent his mother to the Isle… and could very well do the same to him.

They look nice, but looks can be deceiving. If there’s anyone in Auradon who’s going to hate him, it’ll be these two and Roger’s intense look isn’t helping.

Carlos clutches Dude and ignores the chattering of his teeth. He backs away from Anita’s twisted face, stumbles over his own feet. “I…I gotta go,” Carlos stammers before turning around and running through the crowd, not stopping even when he bumps into people.
Ben knocks on the open glass door as a way of warning. Even if it is his castle, he knows Mal is out here to be alone and he won’t disrespect that if she’s still upset, which he knows she is.

She turns to look at him and the anger in her posture is gone and her eyes are terrifyingly blank, like she’s swallowing all of emotions down just like she was taught to on the Isle. “Your guards spying on me still?”

“I heard there was some trouble.”

“The entire castle probably heard it.” She sighs. “Prince Jackass is pretty loud.”

Ben chuckles. “He’s pretty scared of you too.”

“He didn’t act like it.”

“Mal,” he tries to start but if nothing sounds right in his head, how could anything sound right to her? Ben shrugs off his jacket, drapes it over her shoulders. He’s not sure where their relationship is anymore. He knows Mal gave him a love spell and then reversed it right before his coronation, he knows there is good in her and that she cares about him on some level.

But Ben also knows he is not first in Mal’s life. Or second. Or third. Hopefully he is fourth because Jay and Evie and Carlos are all tied for the first three spots. They are more than friends, but not quite siblings. The four of them are bonded in ways Ben can’t even begin to understand.

She accepts his jacket though and Ben counts that as a small victory.

“I didn’t start it.”

“I know.”

“He just started yelling at me.”

“I know that too.”

Mal hangs her head, clenches her fists. “This entire country is waiting for us to show we’re evil.”

“You’re not. I know that and you know that. I know that you all sacrificed your relationships with your parents to help out other Isle kids.”

She looks around, despite the fact that they are the only people on this balcony. “Keep your voice down!”

Ben laughs. “I won’t ruin your reputation.”

“Well…you haven’t thrown us in jail for plotting to steal the wand,” Mal mumbles.

He had known something was up long before Mal confessed. The way she kept her distance after giving him the anti-love spell as if there was more to her dishonest magic than a crush. But Ben remembers the day when Mal had looked at him and finally trusted Ben to be on her side. She took a risk to show what she was giving up in order to get the others free from their parents.

Mal is good. She may not want to say it, but Ben can see it in her. She is good, Jay is good, Carlos is good, Evie is good. They all are.
“You didn’t do it though. You chose to help me bring other kids to Auradon. That proves you’re not evil.” Ben reassures her.

“But we can’t tell people that because they’ll just hear the part about the wand and convince themselves that we’re still trying to destroy Auradon.” Mal grumbles. She runs a hand through her hair, wrecks her curls that Evie worked so hard on. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“There…there is something,” Ben swallows. “It’s not fair and it’s not…okay for me to have to request this, but,” he sighs, avoids Mal’s gaze as she watches him, “I need you to be nice.”

“I didn’t start it!”

Ben groans and scowls. “I know that. I know it and I believe you,” he turns to Mal and hates the anger behind her eyes. “But the rest of Auradon doesn’t know that. If Phillip comes yelling at you, which is wrong and inappropriate and I will be speaking to him about it,” Ben defends, “but if it happens again…you can’t yell back.”

“What, I just take his insults and deal?”

“…Kind of.”

“Ben!”

The king sighs. This is what being a leader is about, he supposes. Making hard decisions, making awkward requests, struggling to help the people his country would rather forget. “Mal, I know this request is unfair and horrible. But…if we want support to bring over more Isle kids… You can’t be seen as the aggressor. Ever. Even when someone else starts it.”

Her face falls and her nose twitches. “We don’t have to be as good as Auradon kids,” she sighs and turns away. “We have to be better because they expect so much less of us.”

“I’m sorry, Mal.” He places a hand on her shoulder, waits for the warmth of her skin to seep through his jacket and onto his palm, but it never comes.

She would rather stand in the freezing night than come inside and face Phillip again.

Ben slowly pulls her into a hug. He loves Mal, just like he loves Evie and Carlos and Jay. He loves them and cares for them more than the average citizen and it’s terrible to have to make this painful request of them.

Mal turns to him and even rubs her face into his chest.

Neither knows which of them is hurting more.

7:21 pm – Ballroom of the Castle

Even after tasting a poison apple and resting in a place between death and sleep, Snow White does not believe in evil. She believes in people capable of making good and bad choices. She believes in selfishness and hatred and wickedness, but not pure evil.

Evie is not evil, not even close. But she’s not quite good either. That’s terrifying.

The girl had pulled out her mirror and fixed her make up while Snow was in the middle of speaking to her! That’s far from evil, but it was an action that had Snow pausing, lost in the memories of a vain, wicked woman who often did the same.
For just a moment… her step sister looked into a mirror and Snow could have sworn it was her step mother she was watching.

That wasn’t even the worst part of it. Reapplying lipstick in a conversation could have been seen as a slight mistake, easily corrected with gentle words for any other child. Snow White could have shaken her head, come back to her senses, rid herself of the ridiculous fear that Evie is just a younger Spiteful Queen. She would have very gently corrected Evie with soft words and gaged her reaction.

Then the girl had spoken about her fashion line for the rest of the conversation, only stopping to catch her breath.

Snow White does her best to not think ill of others. Everyone was raised differently, especially Evie and the other Isle kids.

But goodness gracious, she has never met such a self-absorbed and spoilt child!

Evie had gone through every detail of her work, all the efforts she made and all of her accomplishments. She talked about her talent, her passion, her designs and ideas. She hadn’t stopped to ask even one question about Snow and her interests. The girl had spoken only of herself – her fashion, her looks – for the entire conversation.

It’s not Evie’s fault entirely, Snow knows. The young girl had only a Spiteful Queen as her role model but if she is half as vain as her mother, it’s a dangerous path already. She just needs a guiding hand, some gentle lessons about proper etiquette and manners. Evie is only a child after all, perhaps there is still time for her to learn better ways.

There’s still time to ensure she doesn’t fall down a wicked path and end up being just like her mother.

Hopefully.

Snow smiles at a few other guests, makes polite chatter as she drifts through the crowd. She knows better than to let her distractions show, she keeps a proper interest in others and is active in the conversation. She is here by herself. The dwarves aren’t really party people and David, her kind love, worries so much for them when they worked in mines during the winters. He stayed behind to fret over the little men, watchful and ready for any emergency.

As much as she misses them, Snow can get lost in her own thoughts again and contemplate who Evie might become.

Grimhilde had been a young woman when she married Snow’s father. Evie is nearly a young woman herself, old enough to attend Auradon Prep and live in the kingdom without a guardian, how long does she have before reaching the age her mother was when such cruelty and vain had taken over her heart? When will checking her reflection in a conversation become hunting down those she envies?

Snow takes a deep breath. Evie just needs someone to be a better role model for her, that’s all. Show her how to be kind and selfless, teach her that it’s not okay to be so obsessed with yourself. Evie needs to be saved from Evie. Or from her mother. Snow hopes there is still a difference between them.

And really, they’re sisters, aren’t they? Distant and only having just met, but sisters on some level. If teaching Evie is anyone’s responsibility, it’s Snow White’s.

She waves politely at Sultana Jasmine, who nods back to her. Yes, Snow decides, she is more than
capable of correcting her sister’s poor behavior. She can prevent Evie from becoming another Spiteful Queen.

7:23 pm – North Wing of the Castle

He hadn’t been entirely joking when he said Jasmine is scary. She’s fiery and passionate and determined and Aladdin loves her for those things, she drives him crazy in the best way possible. But she can also worry him sometimes.

“The way he spoke to women!” The sultana spits, “no respect, no boundaries. He’s entitled and arrogant and sexist! As if his mind was entirely focused on sex,” she hisses and throws her arms. “I will not allow there to be another Jafar in this world. Complete and utter disregard for women, treating them like his eye candy.”

“Jaz,” Aladdin holds her hands in his. “Calm down, please. You’re getting worked up.” They’re secluded in a corner upstairs, but people are everywhere in this party and Jasmine’s yelling has attracted more than a few looks.

She glowers at him, but settles down and takes a deep breath. “If that boy is like Jafar, I will not stand for him to be here. You don’t…” Jasmine’s voice breaks, “you don’t get it, Al. I know you were there for every step and your support means the world to me.” She squeezes his hands. “But Agrabah is still seeing women as objects, restricting us and looking down on us. You saw how much backlash my father received when he changed the laws for us to get married,” she cups his face.

Aladdin very much remembers the outrage over the previous sultan. He remembers how Jasmine had been the first woman in their country to publicly marry for love and how men in the city hadn’t understood what she meant.

“I know. I mean, I don’t know,” he stresses at her raised brow, “but I remember those time. I know what you’re talking about and I am so proud of all of the progress you’ve made. You have made amazing changes, you’ve gotten rid of arranged marriages and women are more empowered than ever in Agrabah.”

“We’re still behind,” Jasmine closes her eyes and breathes. “Compared to the rest of the world and I know it’s not a competition, but they are so many more advancements to made. Hearing him speak like that, like he was owed their attention and affection,” she crinkles her nose and swallows, “it was like everything we’ve worked for was erased.”

Aladdin shift uncomfortably. He’s about to say something that could turn her anger onto him. “Wasn’t it…just flirting though?”

She narrows her eyes. Shit. “It was more than that. It was how he so casually touched them, put his hands on those girls and played with them. It was disgusting,” she wraps her arms around her waist and Aladdin can tell she is lost in her memories.

“He’s just one person, one boy.”

“Who represents the ideas of his father,” Jasmine nearly gags on the word.

Aladdin missed the entire conversation Jasmine had with Jafar’s son, Jay. She had decided on her own that she wanted to meet him and left with a tricky smile and excitement on her face. A short while later, Jasmine had returned to him, choking on rage and seething.

He can’t judge someone he’s never met, but it’s been years since Aladdin has seen Jasmine so tense and furious.
Almost 20 years, actually.

“Jafar did so much to cage me, to imprison me. I cannot allow his way of thinking to be continued in Auradon through his son,” Jasmine continues. “This idea, the mindset,” she grits her teeth, “that women are objects. He thinks just like Jafar does.” She shudders and steps closer to her husband. “I will not allow him to disrespect women. I will not stand for it.”

7:24 pm – East Wing of the Castle

“Sorry, I’ll call later for updates,” Jane whispers into her phone before tapping the screen once, twice, three times before her cell recognizes the touch and ends the call. Technology never ceases to amaze her. “I’m guessing it didn’t go so well?” She asks with a look at Roger’s stormy face.

“He ran from us!” Roger waves his hands, “like some common hoodlum!”

“I think we overwhelmed him,” Anita sighs to Jane and rubs her temple.

“By saying hello?” The man scowls and crosses his arms. “All we did was introduce ourselves and he ran! Like he’s hiding something!”

Jane looks at Anita, the calmer of the pair and waits for her story. “We said we wanted to meet him and he basically turned and ran,” Anita agrees with her husband. “He hardly said a word to us.”

“You don’t run unless you’re hiding something,” Roger paces before the women. Jane ushers them to their former seats, away from the people watching Roger as if he’s batty. “The boy is up to no good, he’s trying to not be caught.”

“He looked so worried. Even scared.”

“He ought to be!” Roger nearly yells. “I’m onto him.”

“Shush!” Jane wags a finger at Roger and holds Anita’s drink, “keep your voice down unless you want to tell this story to everyone in the room. So you said hello and he, umm, Carlos, he just ran?”

Anita accepts her drink back from her friend. “We told him our names and he immediately knew who we were. We said we had wanted to meet him for a while and then he asked why-.”

“He interrupted you too!”

She swats at her husband, “and then turned before I could answer.”

“Was it him then? The one I saw carrying a dog?”

“Yes,” Anita nods, “that was him. That was Carlos.”

“I want to know who gave him that dog,” Roger glowers and keeps pacing. “He had to have got it somewhere here, who in their right mind would give Cruella’s son a dog?”

Jane gasps, “did he hurt the animal?”

“Well, no, he looked alright,” Anita muses with a finger to her mouth, “but how he ran…I don’t want to assume the worst,” she shakes her head and Jane nods in sympathy, “but it really did seem like he was hiding something. Or,” Anita puts a hand to her mouth, eyes widening. “Roger…you don’t think he…he hates us, do you?” She looks at her husband. “We sent his mother off to a place worse than prison.”
“She deserved it!”

“He grew up on the Isle because of us. He may hate us even more than Cruella does. Maybe he ran because he never wants to see us!” She turns between Roger and Jane, mouth fallen open in worry.

“You don’t know that,” Jane pats Anita’s hand. “Maybe he ran because…he was nervous?”

Roger halts his pacing. Cruella had been murderous, cursed their very names as she was taken away, swore her revenge. She was stuck on the Isle, but her son… “Cruella may have sent him to get even. The boy could be here to hurt the dogs!” He clenches his fists and gasps.

“Dalmatians don’t live 20 years, even Cruella must know that.” Jane clicks her tongue. She never met the woman, but Cruella’s mental state was widely known. “The puppies she wanted to harm are gone.”

“What if he’s here for the puppies we have now? He’s carrying that dog like he refuses to let it out of his sight!”

Anita swallows. “We…we don’t know that.”

“I agree,” Jane looks at her and turns back to Roger. “This is a boy you haven’t properly spoke to. He wouldn’t be able to take them back to the Isle.”

“We tried to talk to him!” Roger waves his arms. “We tried to speak with him, he ran! Like he’s up to no good. Even if he can’t get them to the Isle, maybe he’s working for his own clothing,” Roger shudders. He looks down at his wife, the worry in her eyes, the confusion in her frown. “I won’t let him act for Cruella. Whether he’s here for our puppies or any other animal, I’ll put a stop to it.”

7:27 pm – South Wing of the Castle

“You just went up to her and started yelling?”

“I did no such thing!” Phillip folds his arms the scowl on his face is the very same one their daughter inherited. “I told her that I was watching her and she began to yell at me.”

Aurora puts a hand to her head. She has not heard many good things about Maleficent’s daughter. She back talks teachers, mocks other students, practices magic without supervision.

She also stole Audrey’s boyfriend and embarrassed her in front of the school.

Well, really, that’s Ben’s doing, Aurora knows. Ben had made the choice to profess his love to another girl while he was still dating Audrey. He had apologized profusely since then, to Audrey and to them, and he’s too sweet of a boy to not genuinely feel guilty.

Maleficent’s daughter – Mal – has yet to say anything to Audrey about it. No apology, insincere or not.

Audrey hadn’t minded the incident though, she had bounced back with Chad and seems just as happy. In fact, she’s with him now at this party, strutting around like a little power couple.

Then again, Aurora’s mother had been less than pleased with the girl after meeting her at Family Day too. Aurora and Phillip had business to attend, their parents often went in their place for such things to stand beside Audrey.

Her mother had been devastated, torn and horrified to see Maleficent’s daughter in Auradon and
reacted in a similar manner to what Phillip had done. It had made their family the gossip of the school so quickly, Aurora had been secretly relieved to have missed Family Day.

Though, if she remembers the story correctly, Jafar’s son, the one who liked to catcall Audrey in the halls, had almost got in a physical altercation with Chad and most of the attention had been on him. Aurora wonders if any part of that fight had been over her daughter.

Regardless, it is not acceptable to just go scolding teenagers in public.

“Where did you see her last?”


“I’m going to go meet her myself.”

“Aurora,” Phillip grabs her hand and his eyes widen. “You have no idea what she is capable of.”

That’s part of her problem. “And I never will if I don’t go talk to her.”

“I’m only trying to protect you two.”

“I know, love,” Aurora cups his cheek. “You’re an excellent protector, you have always shown that. But you don’t need to go start battles just to prove that.” She knows his fear, feels it too. She doesn’t remember sleeping or waiting for her love’s kiss – she can’t remember it. There are weeks missing from her memory and the unknown of what occurred while she was unconscious is more terrifying than Aurora wants to admit.

Even after 20 years, she’s still a little nervous to know her tormentor’s child is here.

It’s because she doesn’t know Mal. Aurora only has what others have told her and her imagination fills in the rest. It’s not her presence (entirely) or her mother (fully), it’s that everyone but Aurora knows her already.

It’s just like the sleep all over again. Being kept in the dark while everyone else takes action.

“I wasn’t-.”

“You do not need to antagonize her.”

Phillip turns red. “But her mother-!”

“I know. Believe me, I remember,” Aurora sighs, “but we can’t go yelling at her and making enemies.”

“She’s Maleficent’s daughter,” Phillip turns up his nose, “I don’t think we have any other option.”

7:29 pm – Dining Room of the Castle

Jay scowls. There’s no way Mal is implying what he thinks she is. “So you have to take that bullshit he was yelling and just smile about it?”

“Basically.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Yeah, but that’s basically the tagline of our entire lives,” Mal rolls her eyes. “It’s whatever. He’s a
prissy prince, nothing I can’t handle. We show Auradon that we’re proper and polite, we get more support for other Isle kids.” She runs a hand through her hair, her curls are already fading despite the can of hairspray Evie used on them. “What have I missed? E, how was Snow White?”

The blue haired girl raises her eyebrows. “She was fine. Good, actually. Are you sure that you’re-?”

“Yes!” Mal snips. “Tell me, what happened with her? Was she rude? Did she say anything?”

“No, she was nice. She listened to me when I told her about my dresses, she said she liked the one I made for you!” Evie gushes with a giant grin. She reaches to her throat and fiddles with the necklace Carlos gave her. There is a small, smooth pendant she loves to play with. “I…I think it was a good first meeting.”

Mal nods in approval. “Okay, good. So Phillip will be the only person we need to watch out for.”

“Yep,” Jay stretches and smirks. “Jasmine loves me.”

“You met Jasmine?” Carlos and Mal ask simultaneously.

“Jay,” Evie sighs, “she looked furious with you.” She turns to the other two. “He proposed a threesome with her and Aladdin.”

“She was into it!” Jay ignores the groans. “I mean, she will be. I just gotta charm her a little bit more,” he casually says and puts an arm around Carlos, who demands to know what happened while he was gone. “She came up to me and Evie. Apparently Jasmine hit her with the door earlier?”

“It was an accident!”

Jay continues. “Evie introduced us, I was my charming self, practically swept her off of her feet-.”

“She was glaring the entire time at you!”

Mal rubs the bridge of her nose. “So Phillip and potentially Jasmine we need to avoid. The dog people, we don’t know about yet.”

“Actually…” Carlos squirms when three sets of eyes turn to him. “I kind of met them while I was out looking for you.”

“You’ve got to be fucking with me. And?”

Carlos looks away from Mal. “I…didn’t really talk to them. I just ran.”

“Can everyone just avoid everyone? No flirting with your almost mother, no running from dog people!”

“No more screaming matches with princes?”


“That might be more difficult,” Carlos looks around the room, “I think people are starting to leave.”

True to his observation, the room is less packed. Not by much, but enough to notice. Families are trickling out in small groups, reaching for their keys and waving to their friends.

“Dinner is in half an hour though,” Jay scoffs. The food is practically the only thing he’s focusing on.
right now. Well, that and making sure Jasmine likes him instead of wanting to remove his head.

“Hey,” Mal whistles at one of the servants bringing out a plate with a cover still on top, “why is everyone leaving when dinner is so close?”

The waiter sets his tray down. “The Christmas dinner is only for a select few. The king and his special guests, specific other royalties, those who have travelled far or made large contributions to the kingdom.”

“It’s not like…open to everyone?” Mal raises a brow.

He shakes his head. “Not to the entire kingdom, no. Just those that the king has invited. He has informed us that you all are his guests and you will be staying and he has requested that the four of you be seated together.”

“Oh, uh, thank you,” Mal says after a moment. She turns to her friends. “We might not even have to see any of them again if we can wait until dinner.”

“Snow White, Jasmine, Aladdin and Phillip and his family are all other royalties,” Evie points out. “And the Dalmatian plantation is considered one of the most historical places in Auradon for extreme selflessness of taking in so many dogs; it’s seen as a symbol of shelter and safety.”

“So, everyone who could act as a buffer between us and our parents’ enemies is leaving, but said adults are staying?” Carlos asks.

“That sounds right,” Mal groans. “Shit. Let’s just…everyone stay together, okay?” She looks at Carlos and Evie, both of whom nod. “Where’s Jay?”

7:33 pm – North Wing of the Castle

All it had taken was a friendly hug to a guard Jay pretended to know. The man was utterly confused when Jay asked about his wife and kids, slipping his fingers through a thick belt and unclipping a radio while the man stumbled out ‘do I know you?’ After that, Jay scampered away and brought the radio up to his lips, clearing his throat and asking if anyone knew where the sultan and sultana of Agrabah were.

“North wing, up the stairs.” A gruff voice responded. “Is there a problem?”

But Jay had already dropped the radio into a potted plant and kept walking.

Now, he’s taking the steps two at a time, looking over heads and peering at faces.

Looking back, maybe Evie was right. Flirting with a woman twice his age was hardly appropriate. Not that Jay cares about being appropriate, but he does care about being liked. He’s a people person, he’s found he likes hanging around people with fun personalities more than he likes slipping into pockets and stealing coins (and he still really enjoys being a thief). Jay is a natural flirt, it’s his instinct when he’s meeting someone for the first time. Most villains on the Isle are so obsessed with themselves that if he pretended to be in love with them too, Jay could get more from them.

He just has to show the sultana how ultimately charming he is.

Maybe a threesome with her husband is not the best path to that.

Jay looks through the crowd. Most people are heading toward the stairs, so he moves quickly. Finally, he spots brilliant blue (and he thanks the many years he spent trying to find Evie in crowds)
and grins widely. “Jasmine,” he greets loudly, then reconsiders. “Sultana!” Jay calls and she turns to him with shock, then with a scowl. “I’m terribly sorry if I made a fool of myself,” he bows before her and looks up through his eyelashes. “Pretty girls just make me nervous.”

She looks less than impressed.

“Sorry man,” Jay turns and takes in the man he knows is Aladdin. He tries not to let the surprise show on his face. This guy looks nothing like Jafar ever told: thin, ragged, dirty. Aladdin looks like a prince. Er, sultan. He’s clean, he’s healthy, he’s handsome – really handsome actually –and looking at Jay with something close to disapproval. “I’ve fallen in love with your wife.” Jay holds a hand to his heart, hears Jasmine’s scoff. He steps closer to Aladdin, “although, you’re easy on the eyes too.”

Aladdin’s eye brows shoot up and he blinks. “Thank you. I’m guessing you are…?”

“Jay, Jafar’s son.” He says clearly with an outstretched hand and watches the sultan’s face, which remains blank. Jay figures Aladdin has known who he is for a while. When the man shakes his hand, Jay tightens his grip and makes sure to kiss Aladdin’s knuckles in the same manner he did to Jasmine.

The sultan’s previously blank face is clearly shocked at the gesture. “It’s…a pleasure to meet you, Jay.”

“Not yet, it’s not.” He winks.

“Well, Jay,” Jasmine says his name like Jafar would when he was particularly displeased, but Jay has had years of practice to keep a straight face. “What can we help you with?” She asks between her teeth.

“There are a lot of answers I have for that.” Jay waggles his eyebrows at her and again he’s seeing all the piece of hanging jewelry on her. The necklace, the earrings, the hairclips, all so easily undone and slipped into the folds of his shirt. Before, with Evie beside him and the shock of meeting Jasmine for the first time, the urge had been easier to ignore. Now though, Jay’s fingers are twitching to unclasp her necklace and hide it in his pocket.

He must be on his best behavior though, Jay remembers. That way more Isle kids can come over and stop living a life where their next meal depends on what they can steal.

So he can’t pocket Jasmine’s jewelry or Aladdin’s (and Jay is somewhat comforted to finally see another dude in Auradon with earrings) and he has to make sure the two of them like him, so Jay just has to charm them both.

“Excuse me?”

“Jay,” Aladdin says quickly, “how are you enjoying Auradon?”

“So much better now that I’ve found you two.” Jay sighs and bats his eyes. Neither one of the adults is smiling back. “Uh, well, I also like the food. It’s all pretty good,” he gives his boyish smile, the one he learnt from Carlos and everyone awws at, even Jay.

What? Carlos is cute when he smiles!

“It must be very different from the Isle,” Aladdin says, but Jasmine runs a hand through her hair and her bracelets jingle and they’re all Jay can focus on. Most are gold, but there are a few silver bands and they all have little jewels in them. They would go for so much, his dad would be so happy and he would do that thing where he rubs Jay’s back and ruffles his hair and says ‘good job, son’.
Jasmine’s eyes flicker up to him and narrow.

Jay freezes. He hadn’t realized he had been moving at all, but he had taken a step toward her, reached for her wrist. His hand is still outstretched and his fingers aching to touch the shiny metal against her skin. Jay pulls his arm back, stands straight and rigid. “Your, uh, your bracelets are cool. Really pretty.” And valuable. They’re worth so much, Jay can only imagine.

But he doesn’t need to worry about that here in Auradon, where food is free and no one has to earn their place to sleep.

The sultana thanks him curtly and keeps watching him.

Jay tries the cute grin he picked up from Carlos again.

She still scowls at him.

“So what’s Agrabah like?” Jay tries. He shuffles back, folds his arms and tucks his hands against his armpits in order to keep them from snatching anything.

“Agrabah.”

“Yeah, Agrabah.”

“No,” Aladdin shakes his head again and gives Jay a curious look. “Agrabah. Draw out the Ah and roll your R. Agrabah,” he says again slowly.

Rolling his eyes would be considered to be rude, wouldn’t it? Jay opens his mouth to try it, but he’s cut off by a knocking to his right. It sounded like it came from the window, but they’re on the second floor and there’s no way-.

“Genie!” Jasmine shouts and runs to the glass. Her excitement catches the attention of a guard who comes over to properly unlock the window to let in…a floating blue man. The genie.

This is just getting better. More challenging, but since when has Jay ever shied away from a challenge?

“Al! Jazz!” The genie yells with a grin. He leans down to the guard who opened the window and points at the small name tag pinned to his chest. “Robert! I’ve missed you most of all!” The genie sweeps the guard into a giant hug and lifts him into the air.

“Genie! You made it to the party!” Aladdin jogs over to the hovering blue man, who is patting a coughing guard on the back. “We didn’t think you’d come!”

“Al, look at me. Do I look like a genie that would pass up free food?” He rubs his stomach. “Ahem, I mean… Do I look like I would miss you two lovebirds! Not a chance!” With Aladdin in one arm and Jasmine in the other, he lifts both of them and squeezes the couple.

With the sultan and sultana laugh, Jay watches the scene from a few feet away. A real, live genie? The genie that his father used to climb to power? His shock has glued Jay to the floor.

It doesn’t matter though because a blue face is right before him, cupping his cheeks. “Did you two pop out a sultan junior without telling me?” The genie awes in Jay’s face. With a snap of his fingers, a cap is on top of Jay’s head and a binkie is suddenly between his lips. “Cootchie cootchie coo!” The genie takes a picture – where the hell did his camera come from? – and the photo develops immediately. Another snap and the cap, binkie and camera are gone; the genie holds up the picture
next to Jay’s face and wipes a tear away. “They grow up so fast.”

“No, genie,” Aladdin walks up behind him, “this isn’t our son. This-.”

“I know, I know,” a blue hand waves him off. “I just saw you two a few months ago, you don’t get busy that fast. Maybe you do. You know what, don’t wanna go there, la la la la!” He sings while covering his ears. The genie lowers his hands and slides up to Jay with an arm over his shoulders and a microphone up to his mouth. “Who’re you, kid?”

“I’m…Jay.”

“Uh huh, where’re you from, Jay?”

“The Isle of the Lost.”

“Oh, the Isle of the Lost, mmhmm, I hear it’s beautiful this time of did you just say Isle of the Lost?”

The genie speaks so smoothly, it takes a moment for Jay to realize what he’s asked. “Yeah, I did.”

“Where King Adam rounded up all the villains?”

“Yes.”

“And sidekicks?”

“Basically, all the really interesting people,” Jay hums.

“And he booted them off to the Isle of the Lost with a magical barrier to keep them there?”

“That’s my hood.”

With a pop, the genie disappears from Jay’s side and reappears behind Jasmine and Aladdin with a set of glasses on his nose, a pen behind his ear, a calculator floating beside him and a book in his hand. The genie licks his fingers, flips through the pages, mumbling to himself. “Al, I’ve run the numbers and nothing is adding up!”

“Genie,” Jasmine calls gently, “don’t you remember Ben’s proclamation? About bringing over children from the Isle?”

A silver bell pops up in front of the genie’s face. “Yeah, that rings a bell.”

“Well this i-.”

“I’m Jay!” He calls over Jasmine’s voice and ignores the side eye she gives him. If anyone should introduce him, it ought to be Jay himself. “I’m Jafar’s son.”

The genie’s jaw drops all the way to the floor. Literally. Then, just as quick, it rolls up. “Jay, dear, please excuse us for a moment,” he smiles politely and ushers Jasmine and Aladdin further away and hisses, loud enough for Jay to hear, “did you two know about this?”

“Relax, genie,” Aladdin pats his arm, “we just met Jay tonight.”

“Has he tried to imprison anyone?”

Aladdin shakes his head.
“Take over the country?”

Another shake.

“Enslave humanity?”

“I was saving that for tomorrow!” Jay yells. What few guests are still lingering turn to him and Jay flushes. “I can hear you, you know!” He huffs and walks over to the three. “Look, I’m not here for world domination,” partly because he’s pretty sure that’s still Mal’s goal somewhere down the line, “I’m just here to have a good time,” he starts at Jasmine’s feet and works his way up toward her face, where she is sneering at him. “I promise I’m much better than my father.”

“You clearly seem to think so.” Jasmine snaps.

Aladdin clears his throat. “We should really get going downstairs for the dinner. Queen Belle doesn’t like for anything to start late.”

Oh, yes, food sounds wonderful. Jay holds out his elbow and gives a small bow. “May I escort you to the table, sultana?”

“Why I’d be delighted,” a voice that is clearly not Jasmine’s says. The genie, still with his goatee, is now wearing a dress and headpiece similar to the sultana’s. He grabs Jay’s elbow and slides up to him. “Such a gentleman!”

Jay laughs and tries to pull away, but the genie doesn’t let go of him.

“You two go ahead. Me and my darling will follow right behind.” Genie shoes Jasmine and Aladdin ahead, waiting for the two of them to start down the stairs before changing back into himself. “Alright, kid, let’s walk and talk. What are you doing in Auradon?”

“I’m here-.”

“Here to have a good time, I heard that. Really, what’s the game plan? Trying to steal magic? Get your old man of the Isle? Conquer Agrabah?”

Jay furrows his brow. “Agrabah.”

“What?”

“Say it again.”

“It again.”

The boy groans. “Ugh, no. Say Agrabah.”

“Agrabah.”

Has he really been saying it wrong for so many years? Jafar never corrected him. Not that the father and son ever really spoke about the country. “Ah…ger…bah.”

The genie stops on the step they’re on, turns to Jay fully. “You don’t know how to pronounce the country you’re from?”

“I’m from the Isle,” Jay points out, “that’s where I was born.”

“Yeah, but…your heritage is still Agrabah. That’s where your family is from, it’s where you should
have been born.” Genie says with a head tilt and Jay doesn’t stop his eye roll. Yeah, he should have
been born in Agrabah, but instead Auradon doesn’t give a shit about kids of villains. “You should
know how to say it correctly.”

His cheeks burn and Jay steps away. “Dude, whatever.” He wants to say something much more
impolite and with a curse or two thrown in, but he’s supposed to nod and smile and keep his damn
mouth shut. Jay settles for grinding his teeth and hopping down the steps with the blue man watching
his retreating back.

7:36 pm – Dining Room of the Castle

“First Jay, now Evie,” Mal groans as she watches blue hair weave throughout the crowd. “It’s just
you and me, pup.”

“Actually…” Carlos shrugs when Mal turns to him. “I have to go give the kitchen something.”

“What?”

He reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out a bag. “I brought dog food with me for Dude, but
you’ve got to heat it up. I need to make sure the kitchen has a bowl for him and that they have a
microwave.” Dude sniffs at the bag and tries to bite it, but Carlos pulls it out of his reach. “No,
Dude!” He laughs, “it’s not dinner yet!”

Mal groans again. “Fine, go talk to the kitchen people. I’ll wait here and keep an eye on Evie.” She
looks back to the crowd, but Carlos doesn’t move. “What?”

“It’s just…that was our plan last time and that’s how we all got separated.”

“I will not move from this spot!” Mal shoes him away, “go!” She sighs at Carlos’ retreating back.
He’s easy to keep track of since most people have left, but she loses sight of his black jacket when he
turns the corner. When she turns back, Evie is officially lost in the ballroom. With all the guests
leaving and the ballroom being closest to the exit, most people are congregated there.

Mal rests her head on the wall behind her, closes her eyes. It’s been a horribly long night so far and
her head is starting to pound with the soft thrum of so many voices.

“Excuse me? Are you Mal?”

As much as she would love to tell this person to fuck off and leave her be, Mal cracks open an eye.
“I am.”

“I’m Aurora, Audrey’s mother.”

Her headache doubles.

MAL plasters a giant, fake grin on her face and straightens her posture. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,”
she sings even though it’s clearly not.

The princess doesn’t even blink. Her skin is smooth and her teeth are straight. She has skin just a
little darker than Audrey’s and black hair that poofs around her crown. “I heard you and my husband
had an altercation earlier,” she exhales. “I came over to-.”

“Don’t start this again.”

“I beg your pardon?”
“Nothing, I said nothing.”

“Listen…Mal,” Aurora says like she’s still questioning the girl’s identity. “I’m sorry for my husband’s behavior. I heard that he came down here to talk to you and that his words were…not thought out.”

Mal bites her tongue. Phillip came to yell at her, to embarrass her in front of all of these people. But she doesn’t correct the princess because the last thing Mal wants is for more people to be staring at them. “It’s fine,” she coos, “it must be hard to go from slaying dragons to living a peaceful life. That’s why he tries to start fights with students.”

Aurora noticeably swallows. “Phillip is very protective, he loves our family very much.”

“Clearly.”

“He’s just so frightened of anything happening to any of us again.”

Fear is an excellent motivator, Mal knows. It’s why she is so set on bringing over more children from the Isle. She will never ever admit it out loud, but watching Dizzy shrink in size when she ought to be growing and seeing Freddie delve into dark arts that terrify her to please her father and Gil show up with bruises the size of Gaston’s fists horrify the daughter of Maleficent. Mal may have considered herself to be evil at one point, but she considers herself to be a leader above anything else. Sitting in comfortable Auradon and fretting over the kids she left, letting her imagination come up with what their lives are still like…

It’s awful.

Mal sees fear in the others too. Hell, it radiates off Carlos. He has grown so much in the few months they have been here, body becoming less sickly and more filled out like he ought to look for a 16 year old. But a one mention of his mother or a single shout and he regresses to a frightened child cowering at her feet. Evie – still petrified of her own appearance no matter how many times Mal holds her and says she is beautiful, you are beautiful – layers on make up when she’s nervous, fixes her hair when she feels challenged. The constant horror of never being good enough lingers in her mind. Mal’s oldest acquaintance, her longest friend, still shocked at the trinkets he finds in his pockets. Jay has paced his room in worry more than once, fidgeting with the items he has stolen without meaning to, grinding his teeth as if any moment, someone will kick open his door and throw him back to the Isle, to Jafar.

She understands fear, more than Mal will say. That doesn’t make it any easier to smile and say it’s okay.

“Mal?”

The girl jumps. She has trailed almost all the way back to the Isle even though her feet haven’t moved an inch. “What?”

“Again, I’m very sorry for how Phillip acted to you.”

Mal nods.

Aurora doesn’t move.

They sit in another silence before Mal realizes that the princess is waiting for her to accept the apology. Right. “Please tell your darling husband that it’s fine that he caused a scene and yelled at me in front of all of these people,” Mal wipes away a fake tear. “I don’t know how I’ll ever get over
a hotheaded prince, whom I’ve never met, not falling at my feet, but I think I’ll survive.”

“From what I heard,” Aurora clasps her hands, “it wasn’t just him causing a scene.”

“You think I wanted all those people staring at me?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time you made yourself the center of attention.”

“What was that?”

Aurora’s smile is gone and she looks less like a princess and looks more…familiar. “You caused the break up between my daughter and her boyfriend.” Oh, Audrey. Aurora is beginning to look more like her daughter.

“Ben wasn’t happy with Audrey, any fool with eyes could see that.” Mal snaps and immediately pulls back. Their voices are an appropriate level, no one is paying them any attention and she would like to keep it that way. “Besides, she hopped over to Chad pretty quickly.” She says softly.

“Chad hadn’t humiliatted her in front of the school.”

Mal never thought she would feel guilty at that. But after being belittled by Queen Leah, she had maybe grown some disgusting sympathy for what she had put Audrey though. Though, interacting with Queen Leah and Prince Phillip and now Princess Aurora, Mal feels justice has more than been served. In fact, she should probably get to publicly embarrass Audrey again to settle the score better. “Sounds like something you need to take up with the king.”

“I didn’t come her for another fight.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“I came to apologize for my husband’s behavior.”

“Oh you did. Don’t suppose you’ll apologize for your mother’s too.”

Aurora narrows her eyes in a very princess-y glare. “Phillip and my mother were acting to protect our family.”

Perhaps it’s fitting for Mal to look at Aurora and finally understand her own mother’s bitterness. Had Maleficent stood before the people who had hurt her, isolated her, just for them all to make excuses for their cruelty?

Is this the behavior what made Maleficent so mean?

“I can’t imagine why they think you need protecting from me.”

“They see your mother in you.”

“Of course they do,” Mal scoffs, “that’s all anyone in Auradon sees.” As if Mal is not her own person, her only noticeable trait being her mother. She’s not a teenager, she’s not a student, she’s not ever going to be anything other than the daughter of Maleficent.

A soft noise escapes Aurora and has Mal looking up. The princess’ face is less hard, more shocked. “I’m sorry,” she says again with sincerity. “I know… I don’t know actually. But it must not be fair for everyone to assume you’re just like Maleficent. That’s…awful.”

Mal blinks and her jaw hangs open. She has never been on the receiving end of sorrow, she’s never
been looked down on. No one has ever pitied her.

“Get that sad look off your face!” She hisses and the princess steps back. “I don’t need your apologies or your sympathies. I don’t need your pity.” Mal spits and she feels the outrage and fury stir in her stomach. “If this entire country wants to see a villain, fine! But don’t you dare-!”

Aurora screams.

Mal jumps again as do several other guests. People turn to them immediately, some gasp and some are just as confused.

“You eyes!” The princess shouts and points with one hand as the other flies to her mouth. She staggers backwards. “They’re just like hers!”

Fuck. Damnit. Mal blinks rapidly, takes in a deep lungful of air. She can feel the slight sting in her eyes, the burning behind them that warns her of her emerald eyes.

Aurora is still moving and tripping over her dress, watching Mal in horror. The girl tries to take a step forward, opens her mouth to say something, anything, but Aurora shouts. “You stay away from me! You stay away from my daughter! You stay away from my family!”

“I wasn’t going to… I didn’t mean to!” Mal rubs at her eyes with her palm, hard enough to hurt.

Queen Leah had scolded her in front of other students.

Phillip belittled her in front of an entire room.

Aurora…is looking at Mal with an expression of pure horror.

In the midst of the chaos, Mal has just enough mind to think. This settles it. She has no desire to ever be like Maleficent, to have someone look at her with such fear and anguish. What pride Mal had on the Isle for the little terror she instilled is nothing compared to the chill that has settled in her stomach, the one that makes her nauseous and light headed. This feeling is worse than even the fear of disappointing her mother.

Forgetting her promise to Carlos, Mal ducks out of the crowd, shuffles past the group that is tending to a panicked Aurora, and runs out of the room.

7:37 pm – Ballroom of the Castle

Mal and Carlos are talking, but they’ve faded out of earshot already. Evie takes one last look back at them before stepping further into the crowd. “Snow White!” She calls with a wave of her hand. “Snow!”

The woman perks her ears up and looks around, catches Evie’s ecstatic wave. “Hello, Evie.”

“Hi Snow White!” Evie takes a deep breath and smiles broadly. “Dinner is in a little bit. I was… wondering if you would want to sit by me?” She asks with a little shoulder shrug, as if trying to say Evie couldn’t care less where Snow sat but a twitch of her lips reveals that Evie cares very much where Snow sits. “I noticed that you’re alone here, so if you didn’t have anyone else to sit with…”

“Thank you, Evie, that’s quite considerate, but, ahem,” Snow White leans closer and whispers in Evie’s ear, “it’s not polite to point out if someone is at a party by themselves.”

Evie blinks and flushes in a way that clashes with her hair. “I-I know that, I promise I know that. I’m
“Sorry, I don’t know why I said that.”

“It’s alright,” Snow smiles just a little bit.

The girl tries to smile back, but Evie knows it doesn’t reach her eyes. “I was thinking…I could tell you about some of my other designs if you’d like.” One screw up is okay, Evie thinks, she can fix it. She’s still excited about having someone to talk about fashion with. Someone who will appreciate her hard work and her creativity.

“Sure,” Snow White says slowly and Evie bites her lip. “But, Evie, how is Grimhilde doing? How was she as a parent?”

“Well…you had her as a step-mom, right?” Evie tries to laugh. Her mother is a topic she prefers to not have with Snow White. Or anyone really.

“But…would I be correct in assuming that Grimhilde didn’t take the time to teach you things like manners?”

“What? Of course she did,” Evie steps back and a sudden pout is on her face. “Why would you say that?” Manners had been one of the thing mother was very picky about. Sit up straight, don’t speak unless spoken to, never correct a man. Silverware is used from the outside in, don’t even open your mouth to breathe if there is food in it, interrupting a host is certain death. “Is this because of what I said? I didn’t mean to ask you about being here alone, I don’t know why I said that.” Which is kind of a lie. Evie had been fretting that Snow would reject her offer and that worry is creeping back.

Why would a princess want to waste her time with some Isle kid?

“I didn’t mean to sound so rude, dear. I remember Grimhilde quite well. I don’t believe she ever sat me down and tried to teach me anything. To be honest…I don’t remember her having the best of manners herself.”

“My mother taught me many things,” Evie quickly defends and there’s a heat under her skin. Maybe they didn’t have the best relationship, but she will not allow anyone to insult her mother. “I know how to cook and bake and how to clean. I can apply mascara in my sleep. She taught me to never waste, I’ve used old lipsticks to make a new color and a full tube! I can sew and patch up anything, I always make my own clothes and I can…”

Snow reaches for one of her hands and speaks softly. “Evie, I’m not criticizing you. But,” her smile drops, “I have noticed that you don’t seem to…have your manners fully developed. I don’t blame you for that at all.” She says soberly.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, I just asked you about your mother and you still ended up talking about yourself.”

Evie feels her mouth trembling, her lower lip shaking. She clenches her teeth together (‘don’t do that! You’ll ruin your teeth and if can’t smile, what good is your face?’) and swallows. “I…I was talking about what she taught me.”

“It’s okay, dear. It is her job to teach you these things and Grimhilde didn’t.”

“Yes she did!” Evie blinks. “She taught me everything I know.”

“Evie, please,” Snow White practically whispers, “I lived with her too. I know Grimhilde didn’t care very much for, well, being selfless and kind. It’s not your fault if she never taught them.”
All Evie can really focus on are the words ‘your fault’ running through her mind faster than she does in her heels. She pulls away from Snow and twists her dress nervously – ‘look at the wrinkles in that shirt! Go upstairs and iron it!’ – before soothing it. “I don’t understand, I thought you liked me.”

‘With that hair, it’s a wonder she spent five seconds with you!’

“I do, Evie! I’ve been very curious as to who you are and I want to spend more time with you,” Snow White says. “But I’m your older sister, it’s my job to teach you what Grimhilde didn’t.”

“Like what?”

“Come,” Snow pulls her over to a few chairs against the wall and Evie doesn’t even register her moving feet before she plops down into the seat. Perfectly manicured hands are on hers and Evie’s look so large and clumsy next to petite fingers. She pulls away and tucks her hands under her thighs. “I think you’re a good person, dear. I’m not trying to, well, villainize you. But I’ve noticed there do seem to be some things your mother never taught you.”

Evie doesn’t make a noise, but nods her head.

“I want to help you with these things, Evie. I want to make sure you…”

“Aren’t a villain?”

Snow pauses, sharply inhales and pats her knee awkwardly. “I hardly think that’s a concern,” she looks up with two enormous, sparkling eyes, the color of honey. Evie closes her own and keeps them shut. She always thought her own eyes were the color of dirty water. “But you see my mother in me?”

“No!” Snow denies and maybe it’s just that Evie isn’t looking at her, but she sounds too quick, too defensive. “You are so far from being like your mother. She is a vain and wicked woman, she was so obsessed with being beautiful that it made her ugly. I wish things had been different and that she had chosen differently, but…are you alright?”

“I’m fine!” Evie whispers. “Excuse me,” she turns from Snow, cracks her eyes open to dig into her bag again because the sickening sensation of not being good enough and comparing herself to others and constantly failing is back. Evie clutches her mirror like a lifeline, pulls out a pretty tube of mascara that trembles between her fingers.

She opens the mirror, takes note of her reddening eyes and pink cheeks and the strand of hair that is out of place and her fingers twitch to rip it out of her head. Evie swallows and blinks rapidly (‘don’t you ever cry with make up on, it’ll run down your face and look disastrous!’), holds her eyes open until the shaky mascara wand is up to her eye. A steady hand should always be used for makeup, especially when applied to the eyes, but Evie can’t wait that long to compose herself. She looks wretched now and if she pokes her eye, that’s fine, she just needs to make sure that her face is flawless, the pain won’t matter if she’s pretty.

“Evie!” Snow grabs her wrist and Evie stiffens (‘if you can’t do it right, I’ll do it! Stop flinching, darling, you need to look nicer than this’). “Stop, this…is what I was talking about. It’s impolite to fix your make up in the middle of a conversation.”

“I have to do it now though,” Evie snatches her hand back. She goes back to primping her eyelashes.

“Why right now?”
“Because I’m not ugly!”

“I didn’t say that you were!”

Evie blinks at the mirror, deems her lashes thick and long enough. “You said wanting to be beautiful makes me ugly, so now I’m going to fix that.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder, curses herself for not adding the extra hair spray that she considered. “My lipstick is still okay, I fixed my eyes, I’m…I’m still pretty.”

“I didn’t…” Snow has a curious expression, brows furrowed and lips pursed.

“Don’t do that,” Evie says before she can stop herself, “that kind of face will give you wrinkles.”

Snow narrows her eyes and exhales. “Evie.”

She didn’t mean to say that. Again. Why would she open her mouth and say that? If Snow has wrinkles, she’ll look old and weary and she’ll get crow’s feet around her soft, honey eyes and then Evie will be definitely prettier even with her dirty water eyes and then she can truly call herself the fairest, why would she advise the princess against wrinkles?

“Appearances aren’t everything.”

“Oh, that’s easy for you to say,” Evie crinkles her nose and smacks a hand to her forehead. She had just warned Snow White about wrinkles and here she is causing her own premature aging! “Not everyone can look like a fairy tale princess!”

“Beauty is on the inside,” Snow huffs, like the moral lesson is too obvious for an explanation to be necessary.

“So what, just because my manners aren’t as good as yours, I’m not beautiful?”

“That’s not what I said!”

There’s a horrible heat on Evie’s cheeks, another flush that makes her look unladylike, sweaty and twitchy. She snatches her bag again, finds her mirror easily and her concealer shortly after.

“Evie, we’re having a conversation here!”

“I can listen and fix myself at the same time!” She inspects the mirror, every detail she can see in the small glass. Eyelashes are still full, lips are still plumb. Her hair is horribly out of place, why would she ever straighten her hair, curls are so much nicer. She needs to correct her eyeshadow and oh, ew, ew, eww! Little hairs between her eye brows are the first stages of a unibrow and Evie just plucked earlier this week.

Nothing about her appearance is right, everything is a mess and ‘you must redo it! How dare you think you can go out in public looking like a mess! Are you trying to scare everyone off and humiliate yourself?’

As she lowers the mirror, Evie catches a flash of light. Her necklace, the metal one that she knew and even Carlos knew doesn’t match with her dress. Blue and scratched silver? Why would she do that, how could she allow herself to clash so terribly, what is wrong with her?

“I have to go.” Evie stands and clutches her mirror so tightly that it could shatter if not for the magic protecting it.
“Evie, where are you going?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Evie grabs her purse. ‘To spend all night in the mirror and even then you won’t be the prettiest girl at the party!’ She shakes her head, ‘I’ll see you at dinner!’

Without another word, Evie rushes from the room and ignores the weight of honey-colored eyes watching her.

7:38 pm – Kitchen of the Castle

“He kind of likes it crunchy, so maybe put in a little less water,” Carlos shifts Dude in his arms, “like a quarter of a cup? Then heat it in a microwave safe bowl. Er, uh, I guess that part is obvious,” he chuckles and the waitress before him looks no less confused. “For about a minute. Please. Thank you. I promise I’m not weird.”

She looks at the bag of dog food Carlos has given her as if she doesn’t quite believe that. But she nods and agrees, turning back into the swinging doors of the kitchen.

Carlos sighs and drops his head. “The things I do for you, buddy,” he whispers to Dude and scratches his ear. “Let’s go find Mal. She tends to start trouble when she’s left unsupervised.” The two turn back around and Carlos has gotten less than five feet from the kitchen doors his path is cut off. He steps back and clutches Dude, wraps his fingers around an old, worn collar for comfort.

“Hello, Carlos,” Anita smiles and thankfully doesn’t try to close the distance between them. “Please don’t run again.”

If he could, he would. But behind him is the kitchen (which he’s not allowed in despite insisting that he ought to be the one to prepare Dude’s food) and in front of him are two people Carlos had been hoping to avoid.

Well, maybe he wouldn’t run this time. It’s never helped him in the past. If someone bigger wants something, they take it and even if he didn’t want to, Carlos still gave it. Postponing the inevitable only made it worse and he ought to know that.

For a moment, the bright walls of the castle fade into the dreary gray of Hell Hall. The kitchen behind him is a closet, the dog in his arms in an incomplete list of chores and the adult before him has hair like his and an angry scowl.

Carlos shakes his head and takes a deep breath. “Okay.”

“We didn’t mean to frighten you last time,” the woman says, “I’m so sorry if we did. We honestly just want to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

Anita blinks, as if she’s surprised that okay seems to be the only word Carlos knows. She’s unsure of what to say next, but it doesn’t matter because Roger speaks. “Why did you run from us earlier?”

Carlos flushes. “I, uh, I…” He bounces Dude in his arms, notes the way his ear twitches every time Carlos exhales. “I was,” scared, “surprised is all. I didn’t….expect to see you two so early.”

The blond man makes a noise like he’s not satisfied with that answer at all.

“Who’s your friend?” Anita asks and steps forward with her hand outstretched for the dog to sniff, but Carlos steps back. She’s too close already and a dead end is at his back so whatever distance is
between them is sacred and he can’t risk losing that.

“This is Dude,” Carlos mumbles as the adults give him peculiar looks.

“Is he…yours?” Roger asks with a raised brow.

Carlos nods, then shrugs.

“You’ve only been in Auradon for a few months, that’s quite early to already have a pet.” Roger says slowly. “Where did you get him?”

“Dude is the mascot for Auradon Prep.” But he sleeps in Carlos’ bed, eats at his feet, chews up his socks. Dude is his.

“So he belongs to the school?”

Carlos nods.

“Well do you carry him around then?”

“Because he’s my friend. I like having him with me.” Carlos isn’t stupid, despite what Cruella loved to tell him. He knows what these two are thinking, he can detect the suspicion in their voices. “I’m not going to hurt him.”

“Of course not, dear,” Anita reassures with her hands up. “We didn’t think that you would,” she looks pointedly at her husband. “We only wanted to come and properly meet you.”

“We’ve met. Can I leave please?”

Roger puffs out his chest and frowns. “We’ve only been speaking for a few minutes, what’s the hurry?”

“I have a friend waiting for me,” Carlos explains quickly. Mal should still be in the dining hall, against the wall. She is in between a gold vase on a table with a scuff mark on one of its legs and a hanging portrait of Queen Belle with a portly man, approximately 41 feet away from the corner Carlos turned to find the kitchen.

“One of the other Isle children?”

Carlos grits his teeth. Mal is much more than an Isle kid. She’s brilliant and determined and funny and she’s safe. But talking back to adults gets him nowhere except for his mother’s closet. “Yes.”

Neither of the adults move.

His chest is constricting and Carlos stops petting Dude long enough to pull at his bowtie. Someone must have turned up the heat in the castle, his hands are clammy and slick. “Is there…something else you guys want?”

“We only want to talk.”

“Then talk,” Carlos heaves. His skin feels too tight and his lungs hurt. “You two are just standing there, what do you want to talk about?” They don’t want to talk, that was a lie, which means they’re hiding a secret and something is wrong and when something is wrong, he’s always the fault and this is why Carlos tried to avoid them. He hasn’t even spoken with the two for more than a few minutes and he’s already in trouble.
He hasn’t been punished in Auradon yet – Carlos is always on his best behavior. He’ll mess up though, he always does – but if it’s anything like punishment on the Isle, he’s not looking forward to any of it. Ben said they don’t hit kids here, but what if they take away food? Do Roger and Anita have the power to do that? Or what if he has to go and clean their house? A home for 101 dogs surely must be larger than Hell Hall!

“Cruella and I were old friends for so long,” Anita takes a step forward again and Carlos takes a step back. The delicate space between them is too precious to lose, but his back hits the wall, “I would like to get to kno-.”

A sharp yelp cuts her off and Carlos gasps. Dude is squirming in his arms so violently that Carlos drops him, sinking to the ground just in time to prevent any injury from a too high fall. “Dude!”

“What did you do to him?” Roger demands and his voice booms in the hallway.

Anita crouches down. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine!” Carlos says, still on his knees, “I…oh.”

She hadn’t been asking him. Anita is reaching for Dude, running her hands down his flank and checking him over. “That was quite a loud cry, what’s wrong?” She murmurs, taking care to press her fingers gently into his sides.

“What did you do?”

“I-I must have squeezed him too tight,” Carlos scrambles to stand. Roger looks even taller from the ground. “I hadn’t meant to!”

Anita scoops the dog into her arms, lifts him high to assess him. She looks at the boy, then back at the dog, holding Dude close to her just like Carlos had done the whole night.

“I’m not going to hurt him!”

“You just did!” Roger points a finger at Carlos, who shies away and jumps at the wall to his back again. “I knew that you were going to be like Cruella.”

“I’m not like her!” Carlos yells back. He’s not. He’s not crazy, he doesn’t hurt people for fun, he has never wanted a fur coat. His mother is a horror show and she’s psycho and Carlos isn’t insane, he can’t be, he can’t be, he can’t be. “Give him back!”

Anita steps away and suddenly the distance between them is too far and Carlos just needs her to be closer so he can take back his dog. “Carlos, calm down.”

He steps toward her, reaching for Dude, but Anita backs away and Roger stands in his path. “Don’t take another step.”

“He’s my dog!” Carlos shouts and he’s not going to cry, he’s not going to bawl and be weak and spineless and everything Cruella always said he was. “You can’t just take him!”

“You said he belongs to the school.” Roger doesn’t budge.

“He does, but he’s mine.” Carlos shakes. “Ben said I could take care of him!”

The Radcliffes look at each other. “The king?” Anita murmurs.

Carlos nods, takes a deep breath. He’s not stupid, he knows how to play this to his advantage and he
doesn’t even need to lie…that much. “Yes, Ben gave me permission to take care of Dude for the winter break as did Fairy Godmother. Not only is that permission of the headmistress of Auradon Prep, the legal owner of Dude, that’s an order from the king!”

The husband and wife look at each other and, ever so slowly, Anita places Dude back onto the floor.

“Come here, boy!” Carlos calls and Dude bounces over, jumping onto him quickly. With eyes on the adults, Carlos buries his face into warm fur and exhales, “I’m so sorry I hurt you, buddy.”

“The king really gave you permission?” Roger eyes him warily.

“Yes.” Carlos nods and hold Dude close.

The man sighs, “alright then.” He turns to his wife, “come dear, we wouldn’t want to be late for dinner.”

With a final glance back at Carlos, the pair walk away and turn the corner. As soon as they’re out of sight, Carlos releases a shaky breath and slides down to the floor.

7:45 pm – Women’s Restroom in the Castle

The door opens so quickly that Evie jumps, but the purple hair is a welcomed sight, even with the angry “fuck” that is hissed.

“M?”

“Evie!” Mal looks up and blinks. “What are you doing?”

She bites her tongue. “Just, uh, fixing myself before dinner.”

Mal rolls her eyes. “You look as pretty as you always do.”

It’s a compliment, Evie knows, but it stings. She isn’t very pretty at all right now and to hear that this is how she normally looks makes Evie want to stick her face in a bag for the rest of her life.

“Thanks.”

“How’s Snow White?”

“We won’t…be having sleepovers and braiding each other’s hair anytime soon.”

“What did she say?”

Even facing the mirror, Evie can pick up on the anger. She sighs. “We’re just not as close as I thought we would be.”

“You’ve only met twice.”

“How about I give you the run down after dinner?”

Mal groans and leans back against the bathroom door. “Dinner, crap. We were specially invited to that, we can’t bail. We would look like chickens.”

“Who said anything about bailing?”

“I just met Audrey’s mom. She’s as nice as her mother, daughter and husband.”
“The entire family’s out for you?” Evie turns away from the mirror to face Mal with a full pout. Then her mother’s voice is ringing in her head about early wrinkles and Evie relaxes her face. “What happened?”

“How about I give you the run down after dinner?” With a small laugh and a smile she shares with Evie, Mal pushes herself up off the door and drags herself over to her friend, where they hold hands. Mal’s fingers are cool and delicate while Evie’s are warm and inviting. For a moment, they stand quietly, taking in the little familiarities of each other and using the peace to breathe easy.

Evie lets her head drop and rest against Mal’s. It’s rare for the daughter of Maleficent to allow such intimacy and it worries Evie to not be pushed away. “We just have to get through dinner, right?”

“Right,” Mal nods a little, laughs when Evie’s head moves with hers. “And we can’t react if anyone says anything stupid, we have to behave.”

“I know that.”

“Yeah, but I…may have forgotten it.”

“Because of Aurora?”

Mal nods again.

“It’s alright,” Evie sighs and pulls back. “I kind of agitated Snow White. We just have to stay quiet.”

“Especially for dinner where it’s just a few of us. Everyone there will see if we make a scene.”

“We can’t ever look like the bad guys.”

Mal runs a hand through her hair. “We just gotta stick together. The four of us can go through anything. We stick together, this dinner will go fine.” She hums, then looks are Evie. “What happened to your necklace? The one Carlos made you?” Mal nods to her bare throat. “You wore it here.”

“Oh,” Evie brings a hand to her chest as if searching for the missing jewelry. “It…uh, it broke,” she laughs and pats her bag. “The clasp, it came undone and I couldn’t…figure out how to put it back.”

“You gonna have Carlos fix it?”

“Yeah, after the party.” Evie nods and reaches for the door again, ignores the strange look Mal gives her. “Let’s go find him and Jay.”

7:47 pm – Ballroom of the Castle

Once Carlos had found the older boy, he clung to Jay and followed him like a lost puppy. Even though he was still irritated at the genie and Jasmin and Aladdin and whatever stick was up all of their asses, Jay’s mood improved considerably with Carlos by his side.

“Don’t ever run off like that again,” Carlos glares and doesn’t allow Jay to move more than a foot away from him. “We didn’t know where you went!”

“I’m just charming the delightful people of Ah-Agrabah.” Is he still not saying it right?

Carlos doesn’t make a comment. “Let’s find the girls and sit through dinner and then leave.”

“Were the dog people really that bad?” Jay raises a brow.
The crowd is thinning, most people leaving in groups. Nearly everyone is toward the entrance hall, trying to leave at once. Only a handful remain and Jay keeps an eye out for blue and purple hair, but he doesn’t spot either of the girls.

“I… Kind of.” Carlos looks down and Dude sniffs his ear. “They don’t like me having Dude.”

“What did they say?”

Carlos blinks up at him. Jay’s tone is sharp and clear, one he doesn’t normally take with the younger boy. “Don’t worry about,” Carlos assures him, “I got Dude back, it’s okay.”

“Back?” Jay growls. “As in, they took him from you?”

“Jay,” Carlos grabs his elbow and steps closer than he probably needs to. “We must behave, okay? I’m alright, Dude is alright. We just have to get through dinner, then we can leave and probably never see any of these people again.”

“Fine,” Jay huffs as he throws his arm over Carlos’ shoulder. “But if they say one word at dinner…” He pulls his friend tighter.

“You won’t say anything back!” Carlos pokes him in the side. “We sit, we behave, we don’t start anything and we don’t contribute to anything. Then we leave. Deal?”

Jay pouts.

“We can trash talk everyone on the way back to the dorms tonight, okay?”

That sounds better. “Okay.”

Carlos smiles that cute smile again and has Jay grinning back. “Let’s find the girls and get this over with.”

“Speak of the devil,” Jay looks over Carlos’ curls to spot two familiar faces. He whistles, catching the attention of several other guests, and waves. “Hello, gorgeous. Hello, beautiful,” Jay nods at both of them.

“I’m guessing the physical affection,” Mal gestures to the way Jay is still holding Carlos, “means that all of us are ready for this night to be over?”

The boys nod.

“Good. I’m sure we all have horror stories to trade tonight. We sit through dinner, smile,” Mal plasters a phony grin on her cheeks and speaks in a higher voice, “say please and thank you and go home. Well, back to the dorms,” she remedies quickly.

“Sounds wonderful,” Evie breathes.

Carlos tilts his head. “Where’s your necklace?”

Evie blinks and touches her chest again. “Uh, the darn clasp broke. I’m sorry, pup. It’s in my bag,” she places a hand on her purse and doesn’t turn to look at Mal’s pursed lips.

“It broke?” Carlos knits his brows together and he shifts Dude. “Like, it came undone by itself or it’s detached from the chain?”

“I’ll show you after dinner,” Evie promises without a smile. “Shall we go find our seats?”
The four took their seats with their assigned place cards. Mal and Carlos sit side by side with Jay and Evie across from them. Several others have taken their seats already as well. Evie notes that Snow White is to sit beside her. Even though that had been her original request, she twists the napkin in her lap every time she thinks about spending the rest of the night beside her not step sister.

They’re toward the head of the table, where Ben will sit. King Adam will be to his right and Queen Belle to his left. There are a few empty seats, then the four Isle kids.

Mal peaks over and sees Cinderella will be sitting next to her (which could be worse. Jay and Chad seem to have formed some weird, bonding over tourney), but past her is Aurora. Okay, she can work with this. Old Cindy is going to be a buffer whether she likes it or not.

“Ben invited us here as his guests to show everyone that Isle kids aren’t so bad,” Carlos mumbles. Dude is resting on the floor at his feet. “So we just use our manners and smile. That’s all.”

Evie nods. “For silverware, you start from the outside,” she touches the fork furthest from her, “and work your way in,” she points to the utensil closest and Carlos nods. “Napkin goes in your lap,” Evie gestures to where she has laid her own, “and you don’t start eating before the host.”

Carlos takes a deep breath and relaxes with the instructions. “Okay, outside in, napkin in lap, wait for Ben. Got it.”

“You’re gonna do great, pup,” Jay nudges him under the table. “Just follow, princess,” he winks at Evie.

The four look at each other and talk softly until a loud boom interrupts everyone. “I am starving!”

Jay ducks his head. He’s not prepared for this guy again.

“Oh, Rosita!” The genie hugs a random waitress and peers at her nametag, “you know your cooking is my favorite, that roast beef you made last year,” he kisses his fingers, “mwah! Was to die for!”

Rosita blinks at him and doesn’t respond.

“We’re sorry about him,” Jasmine comes from behind, touches the waitress’ shoulder lightly, “Genie is a lot to handle.”

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry,” the genie groans a places a hand over his face, “is this why you and Al say you can’t take me anywhere?” His tone suggests he’s not sorry at all. He pops his head back up and looks around the room. “Where do we sit? How about…” Genie spots Jay toward the head of the table and appears right behind him, “with our new buddy? Jay, my man, it’s been far too long since we’ve seen each other, how have you been?”

Mal looks between the two. “You know him?”

“We met like 20 minutes ago,” Jay gets halfway through an eye roll before he catches himself. “This is the genie. From, my father’s, uh, story.”

“I’m far more than that!” The blue man cries. With a snap of his finger, a curly, white wig appears on his head and two flags in his hands. “I’m also the president of the Alasmine Shippers Club!” His props disappear and he takes the seat open by Jay’s side. “Mind if I sit here?”

“Sorry, man,” Jay sighs dramatically, “but the seats are reserved. You gotta find the one with your
name and I don’t think you’re…” he leans over to read the name card, “Ariel.”

A quick point of his fingers and the ink jumps around the form ‘the most handsome and talented genie to ever grace our presence’. “Nope, I think this seat is mine!” Another point at the seat next to him and a seat across, next to Carlos, and Jay can guess whose names are on those now. “Al, Jazz, come sit!”

The sultana clenches her teeth and walks over with her head high. She takes a seat by Cruella’s son, who she had watched earlier from the staircase, and nods to him. Aladdin sits next to the genie and everyone is in an awkward silence.

“I thought magic wasn’t allowed in Auradon?” Mal asks with a glance at the genie.

“Kid, I spent my entire life being restricted in the lamp,” the plate in front of his morphs into a miniature gold lamp that the genie picks up, “I’m not spending the rest of eternity by adhering to more rules. Ow!” He looks at Jasmine, “magic doesn’t mean invincible! I have very delicate shins, you know.”

“What he means,” Jasmine leans forward to look at Mal, “is that he ought to be respecting the rules of Auradon while in the country, right, Genie?”

“What’s the-? Oh, right,” he looks over at the four teenagers watching him and his blue cheeks turn pink, “uh, follow the rules. Obey laws. Listen to adults,” he wags a finger at all of them seriously. Mal scoffs and leans back.

“As hungry as I am,” Jay says and leans toward Jasmine, “I don’t think anything on this table looks as good as you.” He doesn’t say anything and Jay frowns. He had thought that was quite smooth!

Jay turns to Aladdin, winks at him past the genie, “and there can be no dessert that is as sweet as you.”

The sultan’s eyes widen. “Uh…thank you.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Genie puts his hands up, “kid, are you hitting on them?” He raises his eyebrows. “You know these two are double your age.”

“Just means they’re more experienced,” Jay winks at Aladdin, who turns away and makes a point to not look back. Fine, prude. He turns to the genie and bats his eyes, “unless you think you could handle me, magic man?”

While Jay continues to make bad decisions, Evie is next to him, fluffing her hair and watching her glass. The Evil Queen had long ago taught her than nearly anything can be used as a mirror and should be utilized as such.

Her hair is straight and proper, her lipstick is perfect (Evie has her makeup in her hand, ready to fix after every bite she takes. She can’t risk a smear in front of Snow White), her eyeliner is sharp. Everything is okay. Not good because it’s never good, but it’s okay.

Evie still jumps when Snow White takes a seat beside her. “Hi.” Evie smiles a little bit.

“Hello again.”

So far, so good.

“I am sorry I ran away from you,” Evie says – not because it’s true, but because it’s expected and
Evie knows how to live up to expectations better than she knows how to apply foundation. “I apologize for being rude.” Sound regretful, show she’s sweet and good, prove that any child of a villain can be polite.

Snow White makes a soft noise, like she’s clearing her throat even though she doesn’t want to speak. “I… I hadn’t meant for anything I said to come off as insulting, Evie. I only want to help you.”

The girl nods. “I know.” She bites her tongue at the words that threaten to spill out.

*Isle kids are just as good as you are.*

Across from Evie, Carlos watches her and Jay, bends down to scratch Dude. His food should be out at any minute, Carlos had used his best *please* to ensure Dude would eat dinner at the same time as everyone else.

He catches the attention of a waiter setting down more flowers and Carlos very softly says, “excuse me?” When the man turns to him, he points down to Dude at his feet, “I gave someone else some dog food earlier to be brought out to him. Do you know when it will be ready?”

The waiter laughs. “That explains the smell! Yeah, I’ll bring it out in shortly. But, uh, just so you know, he can’t eat it by the people food,” he nods to the plates on the table, “he has to eat it away from everyone else. It’s a health code violation. Even if we’re not a restaurant, Chef Bouche takes that kind of thing pretty serious.”

Carlos’ shoulders drop. He had not planned on spending dinner away from Dude. “Okay, where can he eat?”

“I’ll set up a little thing closer to the kitchen. I’ll bring you over his food when it’s done, alright?”

“Okay. Uh, thank you.”

“No problem, man,” the waiter turns on his heel and moves back into the kitchen.

Mal has been watching the conversation with just a little bit of interest. She spotted the Radcliffes down the table from them a while ago and she’s doing her best to keep Carlos from noticing, less he work himself into a panic.

When she turns to face her empty plate again, she catches Aurora and Phillip down the table, just past Cinderella and Prince Charming. The four royals are engaged in conversation – after hearing that their kids left together, she remembers Chad and Audrey are still dating – but she catches Phillip’s eye and they scowl at one another.

8:00 pm – Head of the Dining Table

Ben rubs his palms on his thighs to get rid of the sweat. Poor reports had been coming in all night – several guests were upset that the Isle kids were considered as his special guests instead of a family they felt was ‘more deserving’. That’s what being king is all about, his father had once said, trying to make everyone happy and only pissing them off. On top of that, guards had been reporting everything. From the entrance of the genie (who Ben would never turn away, despite the fact that he had not responded to the dinner invitation) to a lost radio to the second scene Mal had been involved in.

It’s not fair, Ben knows and his parents are beginning to realize, that the four of them are being treated like they are their parents, but it takes time and patience to overcome fear and prejudice. Roger and Anita are insisting they must speak with him, rumor has it that Aurora wants Mal off the
face of the earth and even now, Ben can see the true frustration on Jasmine’s face as she next to Jay.

He had specifically asked that none of the Isle kids be seated directly next to any of the adults from their parents’ tale, but Jay doesn’t seem to mind the change (and Ben has no idea how he got seated next to their guests from Agrabah). Evie had requested to be seated by Snow, but now she looks like she’d rather be anywhere but here.

“Ahem,” Ben clears his throat and stands at the head of the table. “Welcome everyone!” He shouts and quickly the chatter dies down. He had been king for two months now and it still startles him how adults all look to him. “Thank you all for sticking around for this dinner. I know distance makes it rare for everyone to get together like this. I enjoy seeing all of these familiar faces,” Ben smiles at his guests.

Down the table, Mal, Carlos, Jay and Evie are watching him and they all give little waves when his eyes fall to them. For right now, everything is okay.

“Most of you know each other, but if you see a face you don’t recognize, please introduce yourself! I promise that every person here is someone I genuinely enjoy and know to be a good person.” Is that too obvious? He hopes not. “This dinner is to thank you all for the support and grace you have shown me as a new king. I do my best to serve all of you and I hope you would all agree with that.” A few people laugh and Ben claps his hands. “I’ll stop talking now and let you all enjoy your food.”

He sits back down and his mother and father smile at him. Ben relaxes.

“How do you think this is going, dear?” Belle asks him as servants begin to bring out trays.

Ben drums his fingers on the table. “Not smooth like I had hoped, but as well as I had expected.”

“Those bumps that you hit, what are they due to?” His father asks like he already knows the answer. He has warmed up so much to the Isle kids, particularly Carlos who reminds him of a young Maurice, and despite his original fury at their presence, King Adam now welcomes them into his home. He’s rather wary of all of the problems that arise from them though.

“People were unhappy with the guest list.”

“Everyone in the kingdom was invited though,” Belle questions.

“Yeah,” Ben nods, “that’s kind of the problem.”

His mother reaches for his hand. “Go take a breath, dear. You look wound up. The dinner will be fine if you’d like to step outside for a moment.”

Ben hesitates. He would very much like to have some time without the low hum of so many voices, a minute to properly breathe and not worry about his posture and his tone and his words.

A glance down the table shows Ben that his four special guests are fine. Carlos and Mal are chatting. Evie is not speaking next to Snow, Jay is gesturing wildly with his hands to the genie. They’re all okay.

“Yeah,” Ben nods and pushes his chair back, “I think I will. I’ll be back in just a moment.”

8:07 pm – Dining Hall of the Castle

Their first meal in Auradon had been quite the catastrophe. Jay and Carlos shoved food down their throats without a single chew, Mal hoarded her food and ate it just as quickly, Evie had even
forgotten the manners her mother had always taught her and slouched over her sandwich, sure someone would come to steal away food that was so fresh.

This meal is better. By a margin.

Jay is making lewd gestures with his food, Mal is picking at her fruit with her fingers instead of a fork, Carlos slips broken biscuit pieces to Dude and Evie checks her reflection after every bite, making good use of her sparkling glass.

She notices Snow White watching her and Evie makes sure to keep her shoulders back and dab at her mouth. She eats quickly, silently, eager and desperate to leave and spend the rest of the night in her dorm with Mal and the boys.

“Slow down, Evie,” Snow White says earnestly, “you don’t want to choke.”

*You don’t want to eat too much or too little. Princes don’t like balloons or twigs. Be mindful of what you eat, some of those food will have your teeth falling out and then you’ll be hideous!*

The tone is so different, much more gentle and less humiliating, but a criticism is a criticism and for one horrible moment, Evie feels her mother sitting beside her instead of her not step-sister.

Her fork slips from her hand and clatters to the plate. It draws the attention of Mal and Carlos, who watch, and Jay next to her, who turns back once he asses that Evie is okay. “Right. I know,” she picks up her fork once more, very carefully stabs her salad and slowly munches on it.

Under the table, a soft pressure against her shin has Evie looking up and meeting Mal’s eyes, curious and familiar. Evie nods her head – I’m fine, everything’s okay – and Mal glances at Snow White before going back to her own dish, silently watching and listening.

A waiter comes up to Carlos, the same one as before, with a bowl in his hands that emits a foul smell, even though it’s covered. “Here you go, sir,” the waiter hands him the dish, “if you’d like to follow me toward the kitchen, I’ll show you where he’s eating.”

“Okay, thanks. Come on, Dude,” Carlos pushes his chair back and follow the man, Dude at his heels. “I’ll be back in a couple of minutes,” he tells his friends and from behind Jasmine, Carlos points at Jay and mouths *be good*.

The older boy just grins and waves him away. “Sultana Jasmine,” he sighs, “I’m really starting to get the feeling that you don’t like me.”

“You’re fine, Jay,” she snaps.

“I know I’m fine,” he laughs and places his chin in his hand, “and so are you.”

“If that is an assessment of my appearance,” she crinkles her nose, “it’s not appropriate.”

“I can’t appreciate such beauty?”

“Young words and your tone imply more.” It would be wrong to cause a scene and Jasmine’s not about to yell at a boy half her age, but the urge to wipe the arrogant smirk off of his face has her hand twitching. She sees Aladdin and Genie giving awkward looks and they both, thankfully, know to let her handle her own problems instead of playing the knight in shining armor.

Jasmine is her own knight.
“I’ve already offered to show you,” he waggles his eyebrows. “Your husband can join in too.”

“I don’t care,” she hisses and all of the males around her jolt back, “for your disrespectful tone and attitude. You’re not cute or charming or anything else. You’re-!”

“Just one kiss and I’m sure I can change your mind.”

The feeling of prickly facial hair on her lips and a slick tongue against her own has Jasmine feeling sick. “You’re just like Jafar!” She nearly shouts it at him and several guests turn her way, but fear and disgust and rage are all wonderful distractions.

Jay’s demeanor changes almost immediately. “Wh…What?” He shies away from her and blinks, like the reprimanded child he ought to be.

“Your tone, how you speak to women, this arrogance you carry yourself with,” Jasmine seethes and her voice is low enough that everyone returns to their meals. “You are exactly like your father and you should be ashamed of yourself!”

There’s some relief at how pink his face gets and the way he squirms in his seat, as if there is some shame for his actions finally. “I’m not…” His voice fades and Jay looks away from her, back at his food.

“Listen lady!” A voice beside Jasmine snaps and she turns to see a girl with brilliant purple hair glaring her down. Maleficent’s daughter, that’s right. “I don’t know who you think you are bu-.”

“I’m the sultana of Agrabah!”

“Hot shit,” the girl rolls her eyes, “you don’t get to yell whatever you want at people. Jay is nothing like Jafar!”

Jasmine’s chest twists. How many men on the Isle are like Jafar, like his son? “However he has spoken to you two in the past,” she glances at Evie a few seats down, “is not appropriate and you have every right to report him to the school.”

“What?!”

She does not look at him, she doesn’t want to see Jafar on his face, the narrow eyes and broad shoulders and demeaning expression. “If he has ever-.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Evie seethes over her own food. Her pretty face is more twisted and hurt than when Jasmine hit her with the bathroom door just hours ago. It’s a look of pure anguish that has Jasmine gasping. “Jay is an amazing person and he’s never been rude or disrespectful to us! For you to say that he’s like Jafar,” she spits, “is horrible!”

“Evie!” All heads turn to Snow White who is watching the blue haired girl with a serious expression. “It is not at all appropriate for you to speak to an adult in that manner,” Snow reprimands.

“But she was-!”

“Sultana Jasmine is well within her right,” Snow White nods to the other woman, “I’ve been listening to their conversation and he,” she looks at Jay, still and quiet in his seat, “needs to learn his manners. Regardless, it is not ever okay for a child to yell at an adult like you just did. That you ought to know.”

Evie grimaces and settles into her seat and doesn’t say another word.
“She was defending someone,” Mal scowls, “I thought you Auradon people were all for defending others!”

“You don’t need to defend him,” Jasmine says with a plea in her tone. How have these girls been treated if they think the blatant disrespect is normal?

“If you’re attacking him, yes I do!”

“Everyone take a deep breath,” Aladdin leans forward past Genie to be heard. “No one needs to be attacking anyone right now.”

Mal bares her teeth. “Tell that to your wife.” She reaches for Jay across the table, takes his hand in her own. “Jay, look at me.”

He does so, very slowly. His eyes are dim and unblinking and damn near pitiful. He doesn’t say anything, but Mal can see the shame on his face, she picks up on the life and joy missing from his body language.

“Don’t listen to her, she’s an idiot.”

“Excuse me?”

“Shut up, lady!” Mal doesn’t bother looking anywhere else. It’s been a while since she’s seen Jay so tired and small. He’s never looked smaller than her. It’s scary to see her second in command, her right hand guy, be so…so not Jay. “Listen-.”

“I’ve heard quite enough from you!”

Mal turns to the new voice and groans.

Prince Phillip is scowling at her, just behind Snow White’s chair. He’s standing full height and from her seat, Mal feels even weaker. She pushes her chair back and stands at her own full height, still a foot shorter than the prince.

“You are completely out of line!” He points a stern finger at her (and Mal notes that it’s more manicured than any of her fingers have ever been). “You owe everyone at this table an apology!”

“Me? I didn’t start anything!”

“You have not shown an ounce of respect to any adult at this table and you’re causing a scene!”

“You’re the one shouting!”

“Phillip, please,” Aurora hisses from her seat, “this is neither the time nor place.” She doesn’t stand, but she isn’t quite sitting either.

“When will it be the time?” Phillip turns to his wife. “When she’s burning down our country?”

Evie pushes her chair back and glares at the man. She’s closer in height to him than Mal is, but still so small in comparison. “How dare you accuse her of doing something like that! Mal has done nothing wrong.”

“You will watch your tone speaking to me, young lady.” Phillip turns to her, “I have seen and heard enough of how you all speak to adults,” he points at Evie the way he did Mal.

Snow White reaches for Evie’s sleeve, pulls her down, but a hard slam on the table stops everyone.
“Lay a single finger on her,” Mal seethes to Phillip, who is far too close to touching Evie, “I fucking dare you.” Her eyes are a brilliant green, Mal knows from the sting and from the scared gasps all around her.

If this pompous jackass thinks he can touch one hair on Evie’s head, he has another thing coming and Mal will burn him to the ground before he can even think about it.

Thankfully, his hand drops from the air in front of Evie’s face and Phillip gropes at his side for a sword he stopped carrying long ago.

Almost the entire hall is silent watching the two of them.

Up until a sharp crash of a shattering dish and a cry from Carlos.

8:18 pm – Kitchen of the Castle

“Almost done, buddy?”

Dude doesn’t answer, just keeps his face in the bowl while Carlos sits next to him. Very few people pay him any mind, Dude gets some curious looks, but it’s quite peaceful to sit on the floor and wait for the dog food to be gone.

The waiter had a water dish set out as well with a small vase and a single rose. Dude didn’t appreciate it, but Carlos had laughed at the fancy dinner setting.

With a final lick of his chops, Dude wanders back to Carlos. His owner cranes his head to see the empty bowl and rub Dude on his chest. “All full? Can I go eat now?” Carlos scoops the dog up and carries him with one arm while his free hand grabs the half full water dish to bring back to his seat. “Let’s go watch Jay crash and burn, hmm?”

Carlos walks carefully to not spill any water. He keeps to the wall to stay undetected, but as he travels, he notices how quiet people are and how their attention is not on him. Looking forward, Carlos sees Mal on her feet and a tall man across from her whom he doesn’t recognize, but if memory serves correct (which Carlos’ always does), it’s Prince Phillip.

Oh boy.

Mal has never needed anyone to defend her, but that doesn’t mean Carlos won’t rush to her aid when she’s cornered. His nerves are so high though and the yelling is turning vicious and the entire room feels too small, like he’s back in the closet, surrounded by fur coats that suffocate him.

There’s only one voice clear enough for Carlos to turn his attention from Mal, a man just a few seats in front of him.

“Look at this! It’s not just us having a problem!”

“Oh, Roger, I…I’d never say to send them back, but there are so many issues with them staying here.”

Carlos feels his face heat up. He knows the voices and he’s not keen on sticking around the Radcliffes for the third time today. He sticks to the wall again, hopes to pass by without either of them noticing…

“I promise, I am speaking to the king and making sure that dog is taken away from him.”
There’s a sharp gasp that Carlos doesn’t recognize as his own and he’s so determined to wrap Dude as tightly as he can that the water bowl drops from his hand and to the ground, shattering on impact.

Everyone’s eyes are on him and no one is speaking – even if Carlos can’t breathe, he knows better than to let his guard down, he has to be aware of everything at all times – but he has picked a single spot on the floor to stare at as everything comes to a grinding halt.

Another second passes and he makes some kind of strangled noise that is horrible enough to shock Carlos back into his senses. He turns, faces Roger and Anita, who are wearing matching expressions. “You want to take Dude away?” His own voice sounds so muffled, so far away.

Roger blinks and stands. He doesn’t take a single step before Carlos is stumbling backwards.

A horrible pain settles in his stomach, one that is churning and icy and nauseating, and Carlos thinks that he could puke maybe. He won’t do it though, he knows better than to waste food, even the little salad and bread he ate, because he never knows when he’ll get to eat again and no matter what Auradon says, you can’t guarantee a next meal, you just can’t. The dining hall is so big, so long and his friends are so far that their absence causes another pain in his chest.

At least, they had been absent the last time Carlos took his eyes off Roger. Mal is beside him instantly, waving a hand in front of his face and waiting for his eyes to focus on her before she grabs him. “Carlos,” she calls and she doesn’t seem muffled, “what’s wrong?”

Fear must be etched into his features (because it always is because he’s weak) for Mal to see so his distraught so easily. Well, that and the broken glass under her heels.

“They…they want to take Dude away,” he says and his teeth chatter. “They said…they said…”

“Who? Who said?” She holds both of his shoulder. Behind her, Evie is rushing toward them, having crawled under the table to get to their side, and Jay had stood on his chair and jumped over to reach them.

“We did,” Roger answers, still at his seat and watching the two of them. “I do not believe it’s appropriate for him to have a dog.”

“Why the hell not?” Mal barks.

Roger falters for a moment before stumbling over his words. “Earlier this evening, he-he hurt that dog!”

There is a chain reaction of whispers.

Mal rolls her eyes and turns from Carlos. “Bullshit.” She takes a step forward and doesn’t back down when Roger does the same. “There is no one in Auradon who loves that mutt more than Carlos does.”

“It’s true,” the woman behind Roger stands from her side of the table. Mal assumes she is Mrs. Radcliffe. “I saw it, he hurt the dog.”

“It was on accident.” Carlos’ voice breaks and his eyes are so wide, they look as if he’ll never blink again. “You can’t take him, I promise I take good care of him, I promise, I swear on anything, you can’t take him. You can’t,” his voice hitches and his chest hurts and the room starts spinning.

“Come on, guys,” Jay’s quiet voice breaks through. It’s the first thing he’s said since shutting down around Jasmine. He places a hand on Carlos’ back, “everyone is staring.” Jay pushes forward, ushers
their little group out of the dining hall and into the ballroom, glaring at every inquisitive eye.

Soft hands find freckled skin even as they walk. “Hey, Carlos,” Evie holds him steady. There’s an aura about her, one Carlos has noticed since she first sat by him in Dragon Hall all those years ago, that demands everyone’s attention whether you want to look at her or not. “Carlos, breathe. No one is taking Dude from you.”

“They said they would talk to Ben,” Carlos babbles as his feet move. “They said they would make him take Dude away.”

“Carlos, if anyone in this castle or even in this country think that taking Dude away from you,” the dog wiggles at hearing his name, “is a good idea, they’re crazy! No one here will ever care for him as well as you do!”

“He can live on the plantation!”

“Did you actually follow us out here?” Mal sneers at Roger. “Get away!”

“I will do no such thing!” Roger declares. “If that dog is in harm’s way, I’m not going to stop until he’s safe.”

“How heroic,” Mal drawls. “Go find a puppy with a thorn in its paw, why don’t you?”

She stays fiercely in front of her friends before Roger, so Mal can see more adults come through. Every person they have tried so hard to avoid follows through the wide doorway. Jasmine and Aurora are the next ones in with the genie behind them. Anita and Snow White enter together, Aladdin and Phillip behind them. Mal holds her head high, glares at every person who crosses through.

The four of them are sticking together this time. No separating, no going off on their own. They will stand side by side.

“You,” Phillip snarls and steps up with Roger, points a horrible finger at Mal again, “you are not staying in this kingdom, you are a threat to every person here.”

Mal opens her mouth, but a warm hand on her wrist is pulling her back and Jay steps forward.

“Relax, man. She hasn’t done anything.”

“Oh believe me,” Phillip growls, “I’ve heard you the entire night too. Jafar Junior, right?”

The other three teens can’t see his expression, but Jay’s silence and rigid posture imply that his face is red and his mouth is tightly shut.

“How are we to know you’re not all just like your parents?”

“How do you know we are?” Evie tries not to glare because she can see Snow White looking so pretty and fair in all this chaos and she’s not going to make it any easier by giving herself wrinkles.

“We have a witch, a womanizer, and an animal abuser all in front of us.”

Evie can’t prevent the way her lips curl back to reveal her teeth. “You watch your mouth!” Oh, if the Evil Queen could hear how her daughter spoke to this prince, she would keel over and die! “You have no right to speak about them that way, you don’t know anything about us, you arrogant… jerk…bastard!”
Snow White gasps and she marches forward. “Evie!” She scolds, “you apologize right now! That is totally unacceptable language!” She keeps moving forward, close enough for her anger to be seen in the crease between her brows, the shock in her eyes, the disappointment in her lips.

“Speaking out of turn, correcting a prince, swearing. Get in your room right now, we’re going over your lessons again and we will do it until you get it right!”

Evie winces and for the second time tonight, she looks at lovely, fairest Snow White and sees her mother and even though there’s no blood relation between the two, they seem so familiar right now.

“I thought I was done with you,” Evie whispers and she hasn’t even realized she has spoken until Snow White tilts her head.

“You apologize to Phillip,” Snow White orders. She sure has a powerful voice for a small woman. “Now, Evie!”

“Straighten your eyeliner now! Fix your lipstick now! Do it now, you’re hideous!”

Evie blinks rapidly, struggles to breathe fully. She’s not right, she’s not proper, everything she does is a mistake, why did she ever leave her dorm? Why did she think she was good enough to go out in public? She’ll never attract a prince, she’ll never attract anyone with her recklessness, her stubbornness, her ill manners.

“E?” Mal calls her and Evie realizes her feet are moving.

“I need a mirror!” She squeaks. Running to Carlos’ aid probably ruined her hair and is she sweating anywhere? Not to mention she crawled under the table like a common peasant earlier. She’s so stupid.

Distantly, she hears Mal swear, but Evie is so focused on getting back to the dining hall for her bag that she doesn’t respond. She’s past all of the adults (she’s shoving her way through and not even excusing herself, what a mess) and starting back to the dining hall. Only two steps into her journey and Evie is stopped by a hand on her wrist.

“Evie!” It’s Jay and he’s holding her firmly, but loosely. “Evie, what’s wrong?”

“You get your hand off of her!” Jasmine demands, but neither teen pays her any attention. She’s storming up to them and fully prepared to reach out for the boy’s shoulder and tear into him all over again, but she stops when Jay reaches to cup Evie’s face.

“Hey, look at me. Breathe, princess, breathe.”

Jasmine stops. The blue haired girl looks terrified, choking on sorrow that came from nowhere. Jay holds her gently, leans closer to look into her eyes and the entire scene is so shocking and out of character, the sultana can only watch.

“Not…not a princess,” Evie chokes. Why is she such a wreck in front of Snow White, why can’t she keep it together? “I’m not a princess, I’m ugly and stupid and out of control,” and crying, crying, crying. She’s ruining her mascara, she’ll look like a horrible slob and her cheeks will be all red and puffy and why won’t Jay let her go?

“Evie,” he pleads with her. “Look at me, please.”

She tries to breathe, to explain. “I can hear her, Jay. She’s-she’s-she’s in my head and she’s always yelling at me. I don’t want her to be d-dis-disappointed in me.”
Oh evil, she’s an ugly crier, Evie knows, her mother would always tell her. She stumbles over her words gracelessly and hiccups and coughs and it’s disgusting and terrible but it fits the theme because “everything about you, your hair, your wardrobe, your nails, it’s all wretched!”

“Evie,” Jay nearly shouts and shakes her a little bit, rubs little circles under her eyes. “You’re not a disappointment.”

“Ye-yes, I am!”

“No, no,” he shushes her, “you’re beautiful,” Jay’s hands on her face tighten, he rests his head against hers, “you’re gorgeous. You are smart. You are funny. You’re amazing.”

She shakes her head, but his hands don’t fall.

“You don’t need a mirror to tell you how you look because I’m telling you that you’re wonderful and beautiful,” one of his hands travels up to find her hair, runs through it and she wants to punch him and yell at him for ruining it, but he pulls her in for a hug. “You are beautiful, you’re so beautiful. If your mother can’t see that, she’s a moron.” Jay squeezes her, “you’re perfect, Evie. Perfect. More perfect than Snow White or any other princess here.”

Jay steals but he doesn’t lie and Evie knows that. He’s an honest thief and he’s gorgeous himself with a dazzling smile and dreamy eyes and a deep voice.

But more importantly, he’s here and he’s real. Her mother is on the island, just a voice in her head and Evie doesn’t know when she will stop hearing that anger and disgust, but Jay is still murmuring into her hair that she’s wonderful and he’s not saying a single thing about how her running makeup stains his suit.

He is all she can hear, blocking out her mother’s screeching, and all she can smell and see. Evie sobs fully and falls into him, letting Jay hold her up when her legs don’t have the strength.

For a moment, he shushes her and Evie can catch her breath.

Then she hears the yelling still happening and Evie remember that there are other people in the room. She pulls away, wipes her face and scoffs at the black smudge on her palms.

Jay laughs and holds her hands, looks at her face. “You are so beautiful, E. I promise you.”

She trembles and makes a harsh noise, like a cough and a snicker, but when she looks up, Jay is still smiling at her. “Okay. I…thanks.”

“No problem, princess.”

Evie looks away, and for the first time tonight, she doesn’t even notice Snow White in front of her. Instead, her eyes find Mal and Carlos who are still yelling with Phillip and Roger, both of their wives joining in. Mal is red in the face, but her eyes must not be glowing if no one is trembling in fear, and she’s snarling at the adults. Carlos, having moved from behind her to stand at Mal’s side, clutches Dude and glares. Even from her distance, Evie can see the way his lips tremble and his rigid posture.

“This is shit,” she groans and Jay follows her gaze. “We don’t deserve this. Do we?”

Jay blinks at her question. “No. I don’t think so anyway. We didn’t do anything.”

Evie nods. “Well this isn’t helping anyone’s reputation. We need to leave. I’m going to get my things,” she wipes her face again, “I’ll grab whatever else we left at the table.” With that, she turns.
back to the dining hall and walks with a purpose, head high and mind set. Whatever lingering self-doubt she has, Evie ignores it for the sake of her friends.

He watches her leave before turning back to his other two friends. Jay moves quickly to stand beside them, ignoring the weight of the sultana’s gaze on his shoulders.

“Quit talking about the damn dog!” Mal screams at the couple. “You’re not taking him!”

“You do not get to make any rules right now! Or ever!” Prince Phillip hollers and steps forward. “If the creature is unsafe, he will not stay with the boy.”

“He’s not unsafe!” Carlos snaps back and scratches Dude’s chin. “I take care of him!”

“You have to understand our concern, especially after the events of tonight.” Anita stands beside her husband with a frown on her lips. After everything she’s been through, the safety of an animal is not something she or her husband takes lightly and if there is the smallest chance of this dog being in harm’s way, it is her responsibility to stop it. “We can talk about this and if you’re truly capable of caring for him, we’ll give him back.”

Mal growls. “You can’t give him back because you’re not taking him! What’s so damn hard to understand about that?” She moves in front of Carlos and stares the woman down.

Roger mimics her actions and steps before his wife, “the dog is safest with us!”

“Bullshit!”

“You need to watch your mouth!” Aurora yells and, to her credit, she doesn’t flinch when Mal turns her gaze to the princess.

“Suck a cock.”

Every adults’ eyebrows shoot up and their jaws drop down. Mal takes more than a little joy at how stunned everyone is at her words.

“You little brat!” Phillip shouts and it’s not the worst thing Mal has been called. Not even by Maleficent. Still, the smallest jolt of fear takes her when this man, towering over her and more muscular than even Jay, the same man who put a sword through her mother, moves closer with his arm outstretched and fingers flexed as if he were prepared to grab her, but Mal is pulled back as quickly as the prince moves.

“Keep your hands off of her!” Carlos snarls, surprising everyone at the fierceness of his tone and shocking them all further when his hands find their way to a broad chest and he shoves the prince back.

Phillip hardly staggers. Carlos had more of less just pushed himself off of him, but it’s enough for Dude to yap at his feet. His focus is so evenly split between Phillip in front of him and Mal behind him that Carlos doesn’t see anything coming from the side.

After everything with Cruella, Roger has experienced enough violence for a lifetime and so has Anita. With tensions so high, the last thing they need is this situation escalating into a physical fight.

Roger acts quickly, faster than he thought he could at this age, and wraps his arm around a bicep that is surprisingly thin under a deceiving black jacket. His thumb and fingers almost touch when he has his hand entirely around Carlos’ arm, but that’s only for a second.
As soon as he grips the boy, Carlos yelps and flinches violently, dropping to the ground and cowering at everyone’s feet with his arms raised over his head. “No!”

Roger freezes instantly. Everyone in the ballroom does.

“Get away from him!”

“Back off!”

Jay and Mal shout at the same time. The girl drops just as quickly, slowly reaching for Carlos even as he pulls away from her. Jay stands guard before the two of them, teeth clenched and fists balled, putting a much needed barrier between Carlos and Roger. “Don’t touch him, you don’t ever put your hands on him!” He snarls in Roger’s face.

“I…I wasn’t going to…”

“I know, dear,” Anita touches her husband’s shoulder, bringing him back to her. “You weren’t going to hurt him. I know you weren’t.” Her voice is soft and shaky and her eyes move from her husband’s shocked face to the boy on the floor, still shaking despite the gentle cooing at him.

“Carlos,” Mal breathes. Her hands touch his arms and he recoils. “Carlos, it’s me.” She tries again. Dude scampers over, licks at his owner’s face, but Carlos whines and his breathing picks up.

“Not now, dog,” Mal pushes him away, scoots closer to Carlos. “Hey, pup,” she whispers and is surprised to hear how loud her voice is in the silence of the room. “It’s okay, it’s just us.”

“She…she…” He looks around so quickly, Carlos ought to have whiplash. His eyes dance from face to face, trying to find his nightmare, recognize the hatred, smell the thick smoke in the air. “She’s furious with me.”

It’s no question who he’s talking about. Or trying to talk about. Roger Radcliffe is definitely a man, not a she, and Mal knows exactly who would cause this type of reaction in him before. “She’s not here, remember? We’re in Auradon, she’s still on the Isle.”

There’s a sharp gasp and Mal can’t tell who it’s from, but she knows that everyone understands who she’s talking about. No use in hiding it anymore.

“Carlos, we left Cruella on the Isle.” He still won’t look at her, he’s too busy searching for his monster. “She’s not here, she can’t ever get you again.” It’s been months since he has curled up so small to her, months since he trembled before her. There’s a pain in Mal’s chest. Maleficent hadn’t been exaggerating when she said friendships were a weakness. This is awful.

And enlightening. If this nauseating ache is what Phillip had felt when he first saw her, Mal kind of understands why he reacted the way he did. She wants to stand up and punch Roger’s teeth out and the man hadn’t said anything to her.

Jay, standing guard as always, wouldn’t stop her either. He keeps his eyes peeled and lips back, warning everyone else to keep their distance.

When his gaze flits over Jasmine, Aladdin and the genie, they’re huddled together, watching the whole scene with horror, jumping from him to Carlos. Maybe some of his actions do scare others – maybe they’re right to see Jafar in him – but Jay doesn’t give a damn about making friends now. He just has to know Carlos is okay and Mal is safe.
He doesn’t take his eyes off of anyone, not even when he hears the fast *click* of Evie’s heels.

“What happened?” Her voice rings out through the silent room, vibrates off of the walls. Evie runs toward them, dropping just as quick as Mal. “Carlos?”

“I’m sorry,” Roger chokes out and his own face is freakishly pale. “I hadn’t meant to frighten him.” He takes a hesitant step closer.

“Dude, I’m not kidding. Stay away,” Jay growls and sizes the man up while Evie sneers at Roger.

“Hey!” Mal grabs her, draws Evie’s attention back to her. “Focus on Carlos. Help me out.”

Prince Phillip overcomes his shock and steps toward Jay, who is still baring his teeth at the Radcliffes. “Listen, here, your friend was not in danger and although he’s frightened, you are not to threaten any-!”

“Keep your voice down,” Jay hisses without hesitation, “you’re just going to scare him!”

The adults turn their gaze back to the three on the ground, but Jay doesn’t bother. He’s seen this scene too many times, he knows what’s happening behind him.

Carlos, gasping, has his hands over his ears and his eyes squeezed shut.

“Pup?” Evie calls. “We’re sorry we yelled. You know we’re not mad at you, right?”

He whimpers. “I-I-I-.”

“Calm down,” Mal brushes her hair back. “No one here is going to hurt you. It’s just E and I. Cruella’s not here.”

“She’s not here, she’s not here,” Carlos babbles mindlessly.

Evie winces. He’s saying what he thinks they want to hear. That’s what he always did with Cruella to get out of more trouble. “Look, pup, look,” her quivering hands reach for her purse, but it’s not for her mirror or lipstick. She finds cold metal and gently pulls her necklace out. It’s tangled now, but she clutches it in her fingers. “Look, the necklace you made me,” her voice cracks. “I’m putting it back on.”

Carlos cracks his eyes open, watches her cautiously, then blinks as he seems to recognize her face. “I thought it was broke?”

“No…I lied.” Evie shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Carlos. I know you worked so hard to make it for me and I love it. I was stupid and I took it off because…” she feels Snow White staring at her, “because I was stupid. And self-conscious. But I’m putting it back on and I’m never taking it off again. I love it so much because you made it and you have to know,” he *has* to know, after all these years, Carlos just has to, “we’re not ever going to let anybody hurt you.”

Carlos nods and he only has eyes for her. “Yeah. I-I know.” He swallows. “I won’t let anyone hurt you either.”

“No kidding,” Mal snickers. “You were like a knight in shining armor for me.”

The girls smile with Carlos as he lowers his defenses, relaxes on the floor next to them.

“Are you okay?” Mal asks. There’s no point in keeping her voice down. The entire crowd is still so silent. She is hyperaware of every eyes on her, but Jay’s standing before them and Mal trusts him to
take care of her while she takes care of Carlos.

“Mmhmm,” Carlos hums and sighs.

“Alright, let’s get up,” Mal tries to push herself up, but a hand in front of her face has her stopping. As much as her pride protests, she grabs Jay’s hand, lets him pull her to her feet.

If it’s going to be the four of them against a country, they better be united.

He helps Evie next and Carlos hops up onto his own feet before Jay can get to him. The teens share a long heavy look between each other before facing the quiet adults and Ben, standing behind them all. He must have come in after Carlos had fallen. “Mal,” the king says in a tired tone that’s not fair because he didn’t just get berated and humiliated.

But there’s not an evil bone in his body, Mal knows just as well as the other three know. The king is a golden boy, not so much as a single ill intention in him. He’s trying and if anything goes wrong, it’s because of his naivety.

“I…I…” He’s at a loss for words. There’s never been a situation like this before, so it’s probably okay. Ben moves through the crowd and the adults part for him wordlessly. “Are you…?”

“We’re leaving,” Mal answers. Her voice is small and soft, not hard and determined because this has been the longest night at Auradon she’s ever had and her resolve crumbled when Carlos did. “I don’t think we can do this.”

“Do what?”

“Sitting here in silence and being yelled at for things we didn’t do, for the things our parents did. What the hell is the point of Isle kids coming to Auradon if we’re just going to be treated like criminals?” She swallows the hot anger and regret in her throat. Mal doesn’t mean that, not even a little bit. This is the worst day they all have had since arriving in Auradon, but it still beats the best day on the Isle. She's gotten soft from the good life in Auradon, too comfy and cozy, that she's willing to give it all up just because of some assholes.

It doesn't matter because Ben can’t answer her question and looks down in stead. “You’re hurt though.”

Mal blinks, follows his gaze to her bloodied knees, with shredded skin and dark bruises forming from where she dropped beside Carlos on the stone floor. “I’m fine.” Or, at least, Mal thinks she is.

“I understand why you’re leaving. I’ll call you a coach.”

“No,” Evie says firmly. “That would take too long. We’re fine walking back.”

“It’s December!”

“It’s our choice, we did it before, we’ll do it again.”

Ben opens his mouth, but Mal cuts him off. “The only way we’re not leaving at this very moment and walking back to the dorms is if you lock and board every door and window in here.” She sighs, swallows heavily. “We’ll talk this week and work on...on fixing everything, okay?” Mal does not wait for Ben to agree. She turns back to her friends, takes in Carlos’ red face that he tries to hide in Dude’s fur, Jay’s stoic features, Evie’s hardened eyes.

Mal walks forward and they move with her. She takes a final look back everyone and her eyes find
Phillip and Aurora, both watching her.

8:39 pm – Outside of the Castle

Jay sighs. It’s like he can finally breathe now that the castle walls aren’t suffocating him anymore. No one speaks as they descend the steps quickly, the winter air is hardly anything new to them. He moves in front of them and forces the group to stop.

Evie looks worn and Carlos won’t lift his face from Dude’s neck. Mal hardly looks at him, dazed and out of it. Blood is still running down her shins and onto her heels because she didn’t change back into her sneakers yet. Jay looks back to Evie, sees she has both her and Mal’s things, but it doesn’t matter.

“Is everyone okay?” He asks.

“No.”

“I don’t know.”

“Does it matter?”

Jay runs a hand through his hair. “Let’s get back to the dorms. We’ll all crash together, okay?” Everyone nods and moves forward. If Jay weren’t so used to noticing every detail and being away of his surroundings, he would have missed Mal’s flinch at her first step. “Get on my back.”

“What?”

“Let me carry you back to the dorms. You look exhausted. And your knees are fucked up.”

“Sorry,” Carlos pipes from Dude’s fur and he trembles, “for, you know, my freak out.”

Evie puts an arm around him, pulls him to her and nuzzles his cheek. “It’s okay, pup. Everything is alright.”

“Really?”

She laughs, “well…everything will be alright.”

Jay smiles a little bit and crouches down before Mal, turns his back to her. “Hop on.”

“No.”

“I’ll just throw you over my shoulder.”

“I’ll incinerate you.”

“It’ll be worth it,” Jay decides. He looks back at her face, how Mal sways on her feat like she could collapse with the weight of the night on her shoulders. He’s never seen that look on Mal before. She took charge for everything, she led every comfort, every defense tonight and Jay can never fully express his gratitude for her. But he can offer his own care. ‘Come on, Mal. We can carry you too, you know. Just for tonight.’

There’s a heavy sigh from behind him and a small weight on his back. Jay stands slowly, tucks his hands under Mal’s legs and her arms wind around his neck.
Evie, arm looped over Carlos’ shoulder, smiles at the two. “Let’s go.”

8:42 pm – King’s Office

“Yes, please,” Ben says into the phone and keeps his attention on the conversation at hand rather than the small crowd of adults in the room. “Find them, offer a ride and say you will take the straight back to the dorms. If they refuse, accept that and leave. If they look hesitant, try to get them in the car. Thank you.” He hangs the phone up (his parents still insist on landlines rather than cell phones for offices) and takes a deep breath. “I’m assuming you all want to talk about the Isle kids?”

When the arguments broke out and the voices were raised, Ben had been outside trying to breathe. His father stayed at the table to distract the guests and keep them occupied while Belle organized a search party for her son. Ben had come rushing into a silent crowd, all watching as Mal and Evie tended to Carlos as Jay stood tall in front of them.

Everyone is just as quiet now as they were then.

“Gaston has three sons,” Ben blurts without meaning to. The adults looks up at him. “Two of them are a set of twins who are older than I am, the third is a boy probably a few months younger than me. They are next on my list of Isle kids to bring over,” if he can get the support of the council. Goodness, it’ll be difficult after tonight.

He meets the eyes of men and women twice his age, draws on the pain he felt in the looks of his newest citizens tonight. “I told my parents and they were both furious. They remember how Gaston tried to kill my father and how he stalked my mother. It’s been 20 years and they still fear him. I’ve never met the man, but...even I am afraid of him.” Ben grips the side of his desk. “We fear a lot of people on the Isle. They’re there because of horrible crimes and traumatizing offenses. They are murderers and abusers and power hungry rulers. And every child on the Isle lives with all of them.”

Ben stands straight. He still has everyone’s full attention, even if some of them are looking at the floor. “I cannot guarantee that some of those kids aren’t like their parents, but I can say that the Isle is no place for someone to be born and raised and I... I think some of you know that now.” He looks at the Radcliffes, holding hands tightly.

“Cruella...she’s put her hands on her son, hasn’t she?” Anita whispers. “He acted as if we were going to beat him.”

“She’s done worse than that,” rings in Ben’s mind, but instead he says, “I’m not able to discuss any of their histories, medical, personal or other,” with a sigh. “But, I also believe tonight’s actions speak for themselves. I do not know every detail of every event tonight,” he clears his throat and narrows his eyes, “but I think I’m right in saying that some of the actions taken by Mal and Jay, Carlos and Evie were done in defense.”

“Ahem, King Kid,” the genie says with his hands up. “I think a lot of them are still too out of it to be scolded properly. Maybe let them take some time to punish themselves first.”

“What did Maleficent’s daughter mean by fixing everything?” Aladdin asks and he’s the only one to look at Ben.

“You are not the only people who have opposed the Isle kids being here. I asked them all to be on their best behavior, even if they didn’t start anything. If he four of them can show good behavior, I figured more citizens would support my proclamation.” Ben turns pink. “They all seemed to have their actions under control...for the most part,” he adds at Aurora’s look. “It did not occur to me that they would not let each other be attacked though. They are quite protective of one another.”
Snow White sighs. “They certainly are.”

“They had to be,” Ben murmurs and he knows everyone hears him. “No one else was going to help
them.”

The adults are all silent. They will all probably be like this for a while.

“I am going back to dinner,” Ben says, but omits that his presence is to control the damage done
tonight, “if any of you wish to speak to me,” instead of stand in silence, “you may contact Lumiere
and set up a meeting. Excuse me.” He walks through the people and holds the door open.

The adults file out, whispering to one another. Ben closes the door behind Phillip and locks it. He
speaks and tries to convey the same tone his parents took when he was young and had done
something wrong – disappointment and weariness. “If none of you return to dinner, and this is the
last time I see you tonight, I wish you a good night.” With that, the king turns around and moves
back to dinner.

“So, show of hands, anyone else feel like a giant jerk?” The genie asks and raises his hand bashfully.
“Anyone?”

“You’re not the only one,” Jasmine closes her eyes. She can still picture Jay holding Evie so tightly,
proudly proclaiming how amazing he finds her and treating her gently, as if he truly cares for her.
The sultana’s heart had broken for the girl and how poorly she spoke of herself. “She said she could
hear her mother’s voice in her head. She didn’t want to be a disappointment.” Jasmine says and
Aladdin looks at her with a brow raised. “Evie. The Evil Queen’s daughter.”

“Oh,” Anita hums and grabs her husband’s hand, “is that who the blue haired girl is? I couldn’t place
her.”

Snow White nods. “I heard that too,” she says to Jasmine. “Evie was crying so hard. She was
fidgeting with her appearance the entire night, I never thought…” the Evil Queen would torment her
own flesh and blood like that. Snow had seen the signs of low self-esteem and only criticized her
step sister, the girl who sees herself as ugly and stupid and out of control. “She seemed so scared.”

“I think they all were,” Anita squeezes Roger’s fingers. “And Carlos…he…that poor boy.”

Roger coughs, his throat is constricting too much. “I wasn’t going to hurt him,” he promises the
others. “I wasn’t. I would never.”

“I know, love.” Anita pats his chest, “I know that.”

“I just didn’t want him to start a fight and then he…he…” Roger sighs and covers his face with a
quivering hand. “He thought I was going to strike him.”

“He was willing to put himself in harm’s way for his friend. The one with purple hair.”

“She was not in harm’s way!” Phillip snaps, then pulls back when he sees the shock on Anita’s face.
“I wasn’t going to hurt her,” his tone sounds so similar to Roger’s, “I just couldn’t believe she had…
said those words. She has quite a mouth.”

Aurora rubs her husband’s back. “Her name is Mal,” she tells Anita. “She’s undisciplined and vile,
but she’s a feisty one. A tough one. Our daughter, Audrey, was dating Ben a while ago before the
Isle children came along. I had been so angry when I heard Maleficent’s daughter caused their break
up.” A few people around the room tilt their heads. It’s hard to keep up with Auradon Prep events
without a child attending. “I was so angry,” how could she not be? Audrey is her baby, no matter
what how old she is! “But I wanted to give her a chance. Then I saw her eyes glow and all I could remember was sleeping and not being able to do anything. I was…” The princess hesitates. “She’s not like Maleficent though. At least, not where it counts.”

“Has your daughter said anything else about them?” Snow White asks.

Phillip nods. “It’s never anything good. They tend to antagonize other students. Not many people in the school like them.”

“How many of the second generation are acting like we did, though?” Anita puts a hand to her chest. “Acting in fear and assuming the worst?”

“Jafar’s son,” Genie sighs, “he can’t even pronounce Agrabah.”

“Well,” Phillip looks at Aladdin and Jasmine and shuffles, “a lot of us can’t say it properly.”

“I noticed that too,” Aladdin nods to the genie and turns back to Phillip. “But Jafar was one of the most powerful people in our country for almost a decade. How can his son not know how to say it?”

Jasmine frowns, runs a hand through her hair and drops her head. “I don’t think education was high on his list of priorities.”

“Not high on his list or not high on Jafar’s?” Snow ponders out loud.

“Audrey says he does not pay attention in class. She doesn’t think his grades are well. But Cruella’s son,” Aurora says with a look to the Radcliffes, “he’s passing everyone in his classes. He’s getting put ahead into high math and science courses. Many teachers suspect him of cheating. He always has the dog in class with him. He never goes anywhere without it and teachers have complained about that as well.”

Phillip leans onto the desk. “Ben tends to favor them all though. He has the dog written as a therapy animal for the boy.”

“Carlos.” Anita says firmly and her brows knit together. “His name is Carlos.” He had the dog as a therapy animal, hmm? If that’s true, it explains a lot. It also means she tried to have a therapy dog taken away from someone.

Anita hopes that isn’t true.

“I was surprised he stood before…Mal,” Snow White tests the name on her tongue. “He’s so much smaller than the rest of them. I wouldn’t have expected him to do so. Then again,” she grimaces, “I hadn’t expected Evie to comfort him as she did. It was like…he was the only person in the room she could see. Oh,” Snow White winces. “I feel horrible.”

“I hadn’t expected Mal to do so either,” Aurora whispers. She slouches against the nearest wall and lets her proper posture fall. “She dropped to him so quickly and…she was so gentle with him.”

“Jay wouldn’t let anyone near them,” Genie floats above everyone on his back. “He may be inappropriate, but that boy is a great protector.”

Roger covers his face. “He, Carlos, he look terrified. They kept repeating to him that he wouldn’t be hurt and Cruella wasn’t here. Oh, Anita,” he hugs his wife and she returns it, “I can’t believe I frightened him so.”

“I can’t imagine what she’s done to him to cause such a horrible reaction,” Anita hugs Roger back.
“I had never thought she would hurt her own child, only the dogs.” She nearly whimpers, “are we fools for not seeing it?”

“You wouldn’t be the only ones,” Snow blinks quickly and forces her eyes to dry. “I can’t believe I didn’t think Grimhilde would have been so harsh with a child. I saw the bad behavior in Evie and assumed she was her mother instead…the child raised by her.”

“So what now?” Phillip asks. “We go from seeing them as their parents to seeing them as mentally scarred kids?”

“No,” Aladdin shakes his head and steps closer to Jasmine. The genie sinks down to float next to them and rests his hand on Aladdin’s shoulder, “that’s not any better.”

**December 22nd**

**7:17 am – Mal and Evie’s Dorm Room**

Carlos yawns against Mal’s thigh. He had slept against her the whole night and her hand had only fallen from his head when she became too wary to continue playing with his hair. He cautiously sits up, ensuring to not touch the bandaged knees he slept so closely to and looks at Mal, dozing against Evie’s shoulder, and Jay with his arm stretched over both of them.

There’s a faint buzzing that must have woken him. Carlos pushes himself off the bed, stumbles over to the table where Mal’s phone is going crazy. They all have flip phones – Ben hadn’t wanted to overwhelm them with an up to date smart phone – so he glances at the caller ID. “G’morning Ben.”

“Uh, Carlos?”

“Yeah.”

“Good morning to you as well. How are you?”

“Is there a right way to answer that?”

Ben sighs over the phone. “Are you four alright?”

“Well last night is what I actually wanted to talk to you about.”

“I figured as much,” Carlos breathes. Dude is watching him from the bed and Evie is stirring awake. She glances at him, huffs, and closes her eyes again. “How much damage did we do?” He whispers and leans against the wall furthest from the bed. Carlos just wants to process the information on his own right now, not wake up his friend and ruin their morning as well as their night.

“Yeah, we’re fine. We’re not gonna run scared from a couple of princes and princesses when we spent our entire lives on the Isle.” With their parents, with murderers, with rapists, with abusers. “We’re okay.”

“Well last night is what I actually wanted to talk to you about.”

“I figured as much,” Carlos breathes. Dude is watching him from the bed and Evie is stirring awake. She glances at him, huffs, and closes her eyes again. “How much damage did we do?” He whispers and leans against the wall furthest from the bed. Carlos just wants to process the information on his own right now, not wake up his friend and ruin their morning as well as their night.

“You did none.” Ben’s tone surprises both of the boys. “You four did not do the damage. The damage was done to you.”

“We’ve had worse.”

The king breathes slowly. “I know you have. And…everyone from last night knows that now too.” Carlos chokes on his laughter. Maybe he’s not laughing, he can’t really tell. “Oh, of course they do.”
He doesn’t know how much of his freak out Ben had seen, Carlos hopes it wasn’t a lot. “So what now? They wanna throw us back?”

“On the contrary…they want to apologize.”

He does laugh this time. At least, Carlos thinks it’s laughter now, he’s more certain. Mal jolts awake and sits up, jostling Jay and Evie, both of whom groan. She looks at him and Carlos thinks he probably looks crazy. His jacket and shorts on the floor, he slept in his fancy shirt and boxers and his hair is sticking up because he never washed the product of last night out. And he’s definitely laughing now. He keeps eye contact with Mal and watches her reaction. “You say the adults want to apologize, Ben?”

Mal’s eyes go wide before sliding shut. “Fuck.”

“Yes, that’s right. I was hoping that we could all meet for breakfast today?”

“Breakfast today, where all of us meet them again?” Carlos says loudly. Mal shoves Jay and Evie, who swat at her. “Boy, that sure sounds fun!”

“I know and they know that you four owe them nothing,” Ben pleads on the phone. “But Roger and Anita would like to apologize to you in person.”

“That’s really not neces-. Hey!”

Mal snatches her phone from his hand. “Ben? They want to meet us for breakfast?” She purses her lips and hums, then rolls her eyes at whatever Ben says, “I had no intention of making anyone grovel.”

Carlos snickers.

“Mmhmm,” she glares down at him. “You’re damn right we owe them nothing.” She snaps into her phone, “but would this-. It would?” Mal shifts her weight.

It’ll help the case for more Isle kids, Carlos assumes. Especially if the adults feel bad.

“We get to decide when and where, then.” Mal pauses and bites the inside of her cheek. “Can you get the school cafeteria open for us?” She nods and shifts her weight, snaps her fingers at Evie and Jay, who had fallen back asleep in a tight cuddle. Dude is up and pawing at both of their hair. “Yeah. Tell them to be there at 8:30.” She closes her phone with a solid click and looks at everyone.

“We’re meeting them again?” Carlos sighs and hangs his head. “Why?”

“To show we’re not scared and we’re not running. We’ll be better prepared this time.”

He stretches, “if it’s to help more Isle kids, then yeah.” He had not agreed with Mal’s words last night ‘What the hell is the point of Isle kids coming to Auradon if we’re just going to be treated like criminals?’ He would much rather be seen as a criminal than be beat and burnt on the Isle, but that doesn’t mean he like either option. “Do we have to?”

“It’s on our terms this time. We pick the time, we’re bringing them to the school, our grounds.”

“Since when is anything in Auradon ours?” Jay grumbles, peeking his eyes open from where he lays on Evie’s chest.

“Auradon Prep wasn’t started until all of them were out of high school,” Evie yawns and tangles her
fingers in Jay’s hair. “None of them are as familiar with the ground as we are.”

“So when they start shouting at us again, we know where all the weapons are.”

Evie flicks his head. “The plastic forks and knives here hardly pierce skin.”

“Yeah, but I know where all the tourney equipment is kept and those tourney sticks hurt like a bitch.”

“We’re not attacking anyone!” Mal snaps. “Ben said they want to apologize.”

Jay arches his back, cracking the joints that ache from his uncomfortable sleep position. “How about we just drop the whole thing and forget about it?”

“Because the four of us are representing every kid on the Isle. Fuck Uma but she doesn’t deserve those crazy shifts Ursula always has her doing. Think about kids like Dizzy, doing the bidding of her grandmother all day.” Mal sets her phone down, reaches for the bathroom for first shower. There’s no way Jay and Carlos will retreat back to their own dorm room just yet, which means at least one of them will clean up here. “We can’t give the impression that we’re scared and weak or worth giving up on.”

“If it’s going to help more kids get off the Isle,” Carlos stands and shuffles over to the bed, “we can’t really say no to this, can we?”

“Everything will be okay,” Evie still lays on her back, twists the hem of Jay t-shirt that she sleeps in. She reaches down to pet Dude’s ears. “We have each other. We got through last night, we’ll get through this morning and then everything can go back to how it was.”

“Then we can go back to ignoring all of them?” Carlos asks.

“Evil, I hope so,” Mal huffs before she closes the door and yells from the bathroom. “Throw away all the crap we wore last night!” She strips and turns the water on. “We’re going to this thing looking like ourselves.”

8:34 am – Cafeteria of Auradon Prep

“Oh, please don’t sit there!” Ben waves his hands in front of Aladdin and Jasmine. “I know that they will want those seats.”

“These…specific seats?” The sultana asks warily, but moves away.

“Yes, they tend to feel more comfortable when they can see the doors of a room.” Ben pauses. Mal, Evie, Carlos and Jay will feel uncomfortable enough already. “And it is best if the four of them sit together.”

Aladdin nods and to the other side of the table. He remembers the days of needing to see every opening for a fast exit. It’s a habit he still hasn’t fully grown out of, despite his years of a better life.

“How ya feeling, Al?” The genie asks from above the sultan’s head. He’s a miniature version of himself, hiding on top of Aladdin’s turban. He had begged and pleaded to come to the breakfast as well, though Jasmine said so many people would overwhelm the kids. So Genie had snuck along, perched in the cloth, no bigger than a mite.

“I’m not sure,” Aladdin says. Everyone is so busy talking amongst themselves that they don’t notice him. Jasmine steps takes the seat beside him. “I guess he might hate us now.”
“No one can hate you, you’re adorable!”

“Genie, you saw him last night.”

Jasmine runs a hand through her hair. “He didn’t look angry or hateful. He was ready to fight and defend but...he just looked tired.”

“Oh dear, they’re still not here,” Snow White, sitting next to Jasmine, looks at the clock above the door. “You’re sure they said they would come?”

“Relax. If she’s not with us, Audrey is at least 15 minutes late to any event.” Aurora drums her fingers on the table. The princesses sit side by side, with Phillip to the right of his wife. She finds the tardiness rather rude and maybe a little worrisome herself, but she’s quite certain Mal would prefer to face them head on rather than hide.

“Yes, Snow,” Ben stands off to the side and offers her a smile, “they will be here.”

The entire cafeteria is empty, save for them and the tables pushed together. All the students were home for their break, but Auradon Prep remained open to the few who chose to stay, the cafeteria catering to them within selected hours every day. Ben had pulled some strings and used more than a little of his influence to have the cooks prepare them a breakfast, laid out on the table before them all.

Roger and Anita sit off to one end, across from each other. They had decided, without words, that Anita would be the one to sit next to Carlos, with Roger diagonally from him, to the left of Jasmine. “He’s going to be terrified of me.”

As much as Anita wishes to deny that and comfort her love, she’s a realist. “If he does, we’ll work through it.” She pats Roger’s hand.

On the other side of the table, Aurora does the same thing to her own husband. “She’ll come, dear. She’s too stubborn to not meet us.”

“I suppose she’s a bit like Audrey in that way.”

“Don’t let Audrey hear you say that. She would never forgive you,” Aurora laughs with Phillip.

It only takes a few more glances at clocks and watches and phones when the doors to the cafeteria open. Every head turns to see the guests of honor.

“Sorry we’re late,” Mal says. Gone is her soft, violet gown from the night before; its place has been taken by her dark leather jacket, hair falling around her in a mess. Her favorite purple pants are torn and stained, her black boots are worn, but she has never felt more confident. “The boys took forever.”

“I couldn’t find my hat,” Jay touches his red beanie. His hair is unbrushed and wild beneath it, the opposite of his formal bun last night. His leather vest is zipped up just enough that Fairy Godmother would glare, but not scold him.

Evie rolls her eyes as they walk into the room, muttering “evil forbid we leave without your hat!” Her make up is more subtle than it was last night, but no less perfect. Her favorite heels, the ones with too many scuffs for Auradon, but looked brand new on the Isle, click on the floor. Against her chest is her necklace; she had kept it on all night.

Carlos is quite proud of that. He had been reassured many times that Evie loved her gift. He follows, holding Dude just as protectively against his chest. He’s decked out in his favorite jacket, the one
“If they want to apologize to Isle kids,” Mal had said before they left, taking care to put knots in her hair, “we’ll make sure they know what Isle kids look like.”

“It’s not a problem,” Ben smiles at them and gestures to the table. “We’re just happy you could make it.”

“You didn’t think we were going to bail, did you?” Mal lifts a single brow with her question, looking from Aurora and Philip to Ben, but continues to lead her group toward the table.

“Of course not,” Ben reassures, “I knew you would come.”

Mal grins at him, teasing and warm and challenging all at once. Not for the first time, Ben wonders if there’s any part of her that still cares for him, even if it’s not as much as her friends. Because if it meant that Mal would look at him like that more often, Ben might be okay with falling behind Evie, Jay and Carlos on her list of priorities.

“Where’s the grub?” Jay takes his seat where he assumes he is to sit: across from Jasmine. He’s not avoiding her eyes, but he’s also not looking at her at all. Okay, maybe he is avoiding eye contact. “I’m hungry.”

Carlos sits beside him and Anita, warily glancing at the two. He is confident they won’t try to take Dude with Ben right here, but he scoots his chair closer to Jay.

Evie takes her seat on the other side of Jay, across from Snow White, and Mal sits in between her friend and an empty seat. She is across from Aurora and Philip.

“Ahem, uh, yes, please dig into the food,” Ben says after noticing Jay has already done so. “We have some of everything, help yourselves.” The adults continue to watch him, but the VKs immediately reach for food. Jay already has his plate piled with pancakes, he turns to Carlos, who won’t let go of Dude, to ask what he wants. Mal reaches for the fruit, specifically, the bowl of strawberries Ben had requested for her, while Evie carefully chooses french toast and some of her own blueberries.

Aladdin and Jasmine look at each before slowly following the lead and helping themselves to food with the rest of the adults while the teenagers begin to eat quickly.

Ben falters, stands behind his chair next to Mal. He waits for everyone to have their food before clearing his throat again. “So the purpose of this… Meeting? Get together? Meal? “Of, well, this is to clear the air about the events of last night. There were many things said that weren’t appropriate.”

“I’ll say,” Mal mutters.

“And apologies are owed,” Ben continues. “So whoever would like to begin…”

“I’m sorry,” Jasmine blurts. She hasn’t touched any of her food yet. “I’m sorry for how I behaved last night. You just,” she looks at Jay and takes in his…unprofessional appearance. She had never seen Jafar look so disheveled but the boy looks entirely at peace with his torn clothing and unkempt hair. “You reminded of your father.”

“Well he’s not,” Mal snaps from the down the table. “He’s not Jafar and you should be able to see that.”

The sultana sighs. “You’re right. You’re not Jafar,” she says and maybe it’s her imagination, but Jay’s eyes widen and he sits straighter. “He never would have done some of the things you did last
night.”

“We owe you an apology as well, Mal,” Aurora says and watches at the girl’s eyes barely flicker to
her. “Our actions last night were hostile.”

“Mine were,” Phillip looks at her and Mal glances at him again, “I should not have cornered you as I
did in the beginning of the evening.”

Mal hums, turns back to watch Jay, but her ears strain when she sees Anita speaking to Carlos.

“…We acted in fear last night. We take the safety of any animal very seriously and we jumped to…”

Carlos isn’t focusing on a word she says, though he makes sure Anita doesn’t move any closer. He’s
busy paying attention to Jasmine, still speaking to Jay, and Phillip, trying to catch Mal’s eye. His ears
wriggle to hear the other adults over the Radcliffe’s, he’s aware of every movement Jay and Mal
make.

Snow White, as the only person who showed up by herself, has not begun speaking yet. She thinks
she ought to begin her own apology to her step-sister. She has quite the lovely speech planned about
showing Evie how to love herself and always being there for her and willing to listen without
judgement this time, but it’s clear the blue haired girl isn’t interested in her.

At least, not anymore. Evie had smiled and looked away when she sat down, but never turned from
Snow White. Now, she’s looking between her friends and the adults at the table so quickly, Snow
feels dizzy.

A short glance at the Jay and Carlos to Evie’s right and Mal on her left show that they’re all doing
the same thing. Not one of them is paying attention to the adult speaking to them. Instantly, Snow
White finds it disrespectful and standoffish.

Then she takes a moment to reflect on their actions from the night before and, horribly, it all makes
sense.

“Aurora,” Snow whispers, “Jasmine!” Both of the women look at her, “they’re not listening to you.”

“I…” Aurora glances at Mal, facing her but far away. “Mal?” The girl doesn’t so much as look at
her.

“They’re paying attention to each other,” Jasmine murmurs. If Jay has noticed she’s stopped
speaking, he doesn’t show it. Aladdin has caught on as well, watching the teens, and moves over to
mumble to Roger.

Slowly, the voices settle and everything is quiet again.

“What?” Mal asks.

“You are all focused on what is being said to each other rather than what is being said to you,” Snow
White looks at the teenagers and truly sees them as teenagers this time. These are not adults sitting
before her, no full grown antagonists with body counts and minions, but they are not children either,
weary and hardened in ways that suggest they grew up before their time.

She shakes her head just a little bit. “Perhaps we should discuss matters one on one with them.”

“No.” Mal narrows her eyes.
“If you want one of us,” Jay continues for her, “you get all of us.”

“No one on one.” Mal finishes. The same look as last night in her eyes is back, an angry, challenging gaze, but it’s less malicious and scary and more…defensive and mistrustful.

Snow White supposes they all deserve that. “Okay. Well, perhaps we should go one at a time.” She takes a deep breath, “Evie,” the blue haired girl looks at her and sinks back into her seat. “I behaved foolishly last night and I apologize. I saw you as a… I thought you were self-centered after our first meeting and I know that to be wrong,” Snow quickly says as she sees Mal open her mouth. “I had… thought you were arrogant and self-absorbed and I assumed so much without properly speaking to you.”

“Why…why did you think that?” Evie asks softly. No one else says anything and she feels so imperfect before these people. She clenches the sides of her chair and two hands find hers. Under the table, hiding from the adults, Jay has wrapped his hand over her left and Mal has done the same to her right.

“I- The way you spoke about your clothing and your designs. It’s so silly,” Snow looks away. “And how you checked your make up constantly. I know now that it wasn’t because you are self-centered.”

“No one has ever liked any of my clothes before.”

“What?” Mal snaps and her hand on Evie’s tightens. “I always wear the stuff you make me.”

Carlos leans forward to be seen. “Yeah, Evie, your stuff is great.”

She flushes under their praise. “I know you guys like what I make you, but you never really appreciate all the little finesses. The extra stitching Jay has, the green accents in Mal’s jacket. I just… I got excited when someone I didn’t know enjoyed what I made. And I…” Evie exhales, “I just don’t like when my makeup is messed up.”

That’s most likely not the truth, Snow White knows. Even without the events of the previous night, the echo of Evie’s horror at being a disappointment, Snow can tell from the Isle kids and how the other three all turn to Evie. “Regardless, I was so critical of you last night. I promise I only meant well, but I didn’t understand some of your behavior. I didn’t even try to understand that last night.”

“You think you understand it now?”

Snow looks at Mal. “Not entirely, but some pieces of the puzzle are coming together.”

“Well… I am not a puzzle,” Evie furrows her brow and tries to not grit her teeth. “I’m not something for you to solve or for you to…to put together until you like what you see.” Her fingers lock with Jay’s and Evie turns to Mal, seeking reassurance, support, comfort. Things that are unfamiliar with Auradon, but found so quickly with Mal. “I…I’m not…”

“I am sorry,” Snow says again and resists the urge to reach out. “You’re not a puzzle. You’re a person. A person I would like to get to know better – not to solve, but just to know. You are my sister, Evie,” she smiles, “you’re a beautiful personal and I’m sorry I couldn’t see that. I so much want to be a part of your life in Auradon. If…you will let me. I’d like to know you, not the version of you I created last night.”

Evie stays silent for a long moment.

“You can tell me no,” Snow White offers, even though it hurts. “You have the option of never
seeing me again after this breakfast and I would not blame you. But we’re family.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I know that you deserve better than what you had.” The princess says firmly and Evie tilts her head. “I know that because I know I deserved better too.”

Brown eyes widen, then soften. “It wasn’t the same for us.”

“I know. I will probably never know your story, but I would love to listen to you if you ever needed me. If you ever wanted someone to talk to or confide in or to vent to, I will be here,” Snow White wants to reach for Evie’s hands, hold them in her own and squeeze them. “Even if you never take me up on it, I’ll always be here for you. I’d even love to hear more of your fashion ideas.”

Evie laughs, which catches everyone off guard. She calms herself quickly, but the amusement remains on her face. She turns to Mal and gauges her expression before turning back to Snow. “I…I would be okay with that.”

Off to the side, Ben clears his throat and gestures to Evie.

“Oh, I, uh,” she looks away for a moment and nods to herself. “I accept your apology.”

Snow White breathes relief and smiles back at her step-sister. “I’ll make sure to give you my number before we leave. Unless you want to talk today! Or show me more designs right after breakfast?”

Evie grins. “Maybe. I, um, I’d like that.”

“Okay, your not step-sisterly love fest is over,” Mal groans even as she squeezes Evie’s hand. “Who’s next?” She looks down the table, makes a show of not facing the prince and princess next to her.

Jay whistles and gestures for her to turn around. “I think you just volunteered yourself, Mal.” He sits with his chin in his hand and a smile on his face when she glares at him. “Please, ladies first.”

Mal leans back in her seat, turns to Phillip and Aurora without a word. She does her best to look like an Isle kid – slouching, avoiding eye contact, huffing. If they want to apologize to her, it’ll be to the real Mal. Not the Auradon version with a fake smile and polite chatter, not the daughter of Maleficent with a high chin and a constant smirk.

Just Mal.

“You certainly took care of your friends last night,” Phillip says and all eyes turn to him. “It was very heartwarming.”

Eww. Not a word Mal wants to be associated with. She crinkles her nose. “Well, yeah. No one else was going to do it.”

It’s weird because she had just said that because it’s true. Mal knows it, her friends know it, the adults know it. She hadn’t said it to be spiteful or hurtful, but an anguished look flits over the prince’s face.

“You should not have been in the position to protect your friends. You should not have needed to be protected at all.” He says and sits straight. “We had not meant to come off as so forceful and angry. I…” Phillip grimaces, “those days I worried over losing Aurora were the worst of my life,” he slips his hand over his wife’s and turns to her, staring deep into Aurora’s eyes. “I spent so long worrying
for her and that desire to protect her has never faded.”

Mal looks away. This feels less like an apology and more of an intimate moment she’s not supposed to watch. Phillip keeps his eyes on Aurora, looking at her like he’s still dedicated to memorizing every one of her features and dimples, while she does the same.

Whoever her father is, there’s no doubt Maleficent never treated him so preciously, but Mal wonders if her other parent loved her mother. Whether it was for her power and confidence or because the line between adoration and fear is a tricky one, Mal tries to imagine anyone looking at Maleficent so sweetly.

She can’t.

Aurora notices Mal’s distance and her distraction. “You are your mother’s child,” she says and Mal looks back at her. “I don’t mean it like a bad thing. It was wrong for me to expect you to act like you were any…Auradon kid. And then it was wrong of me to expect your mother. I only saw two extremes and neither was right.”

Mal nods. “Okay.” That’s pretty much like saying she accepts their apology, right?

“I am sorry for acting in fear the way that I did,” Phillip says. “I accused you when you had done nothing wrong.”

“Yeah, you did.” She huffs. “But it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay,” Phillip rubs the bridge of his nose. “Nothing of last night was okay.”

Dinner sucked and Mal would prefer to never go through something like that again, but it was far from the worst thing she has suffered. “I promise you, it’s not that big of a deal. We…we’re good.” Mal waves her hand between them. Normally, she would have loved the squirming and writhing of adults, but everything about this situation is awkward and unfamiliar and she just wants it to end.

“It’s a very big deal for us to have acted so irrationally,” Aurora purses her lips and grips her husband’s hand. “That never should have happened.”

“You didn’t hit me,” Mal shrugs, “you didn’t steal from me or try to hurt me. You just yelled.”

“That’s…that is what makes it okay? Because we didn’t hit you?” Phillip closes his eyes and exhales. “That’s not…” He trails off, but Mal hardly notices with the way Aurora looks from her down to Carlos, who flushes under the princess’ gaze.

“It wasn’t like that!” Mal snaps. “Maleficent didn’t…” she shakes her head because her mother was awful, but she wasn’t Cruella De Vil awful. Damn. “You have the wrong idea.”

Aurora takes another look at Carlos and she doesn’t stop making him feel uncomfortable right now, Mal is going to sock her. But the princess turns back to her and Mal breathes a little easier. “You must know it’s not okay for anyone to speak to you in the manner we did. That’s never okay.”

“Remember the whole you expected me to act like an Auradon kid? Because you’re doing it again,” Mal scoffs. “Things are different on the Isle. Much different. If the worst thing that happens in Auradon is getting yelled at, that’s okay. Because the worst thing on the Isle is way worse.”

The husband and wife share a look. “What…was the worst thing that could happen on the Isle?” Aurora asks softly.
Mal smiles even though she feels like doing the exact opposite. “Not anything that should be discussed over breakfast.”

For a long moment, no one speaks.

“So it’s okay.” Mal says again. “I get that you feel bad or whatever, but don’t. I’m okay.”

“Why do you look so unhappy then?”

“That’s just how my face is.”

The two look at each other again and Mal sighs. “You,” she speaks to Phillip, “called Jay Jafar Junior. That was fu-messed up. That was messed up.”

“I’m fine,” Jay calls from the other side of Evie.

“We’re not talking about whether you’re fine, we’re talking about whether I’m fine. I’m not.”

Phillip coughs a little and turns to face Jay, several seats away. “Uh, Jay,” he says the boy’s name for the first time, “I am sorry I referred to you as your father. I know you are not him.”

Jay shrugs and then gives a thumbs up.

“Good,” Mal sits back in her seat and watches the two in front of her. “Now we’re good. I promise.”

“Still, again,” Aurora looks at Mal, “we are so sorry for how we behaved.”

“Apology accepted. Who’s next?” Mal looks behind Evie at the boys and raises her brow.

Jay and Carlos look at each other, but not at the adults before them.

“If you don’t mind,” Roger looks at Aladdin and Jasmine to his left, “I would like to apologize to Carlos.”

“Of course,” Jasmine nods and waits patiently.

“Carlos,” the man turns to the young teen, who doesn’t look up. He keeps his face hidden in the fur of the dog on his lap. “Carlos?”

“He’s listening,” Jay tells Roger. “Just because he’s not looking at you doesn’t mean that he’s not listening. He is.” He looks at Carlos and Carlos looks at him. Jay moves, does something Roger can’t see under the table, but Anita can from the other side of Carlos. The two boys are now holding hands.

Roger nods and takes a deep breath. “Carlos, last night, you must know I was not going to hurt you.” He sounds broken and pitiful, so much that Anita hurts for him. “I had worried a fight was going to happen when you pushed Prince Phillip, I just wanted to prevent any more damage. I had not meant…to cause more.”

Carlos nods.

“And we’re terribly sorry about not thinking you were good enough to take care of Dude,” Anita murmurs sweetly. “We were so terrified because of, well, Cruella. Not that that excuses our actions at all, but… Well,” she sighs and fiddles with the table cloth. “I guess there is no but. Our actions should not be excused. We acted in fear and we judged you without knowing you.”
“I don’t blame you,” Carlos says in a small voice. “Fear of Cruella makes people believe crazy things,” he smiles down at Dude and nuzzles the fur on his head like there is a secret joke between them.

Anita winces. She doesn’t know how to respond to that and it causes a knot in her throat she can’t swallow. She has so many questions running in her mind and the one that escapes her, Anita already knows. “You were afraid of Cruella too, weren’t you?”

Carlos finally looks up at her and meets her eyes and she sees him – the son of Cruella. The real son. Not an animal killer, not a child lacking manners. She sees the hurt in his eyes, the distrustful glance, the strength that says he’s taken more than just a hit and he still stood back up.

“It’s different.” He says.

She can only imagine. “I had wanted to meet you for so long. I wanted to know if you needed anything in Auradon or if you just wanted someone outside of Auradon Prep. I wanted…to know if you resented us.” Anita chokes out and puts a hand to her throat.

“Resented you?”

“We’re the reason your mother is on the Isle. I was worried you would hate us without meeting us but I guess I…we did that to you.”

Carlos shuffles in his seat and Jay’s hand clenches his. “I don’t hate you. Either of you,” he looks at Roger for a fleeting moment. “I just…”

“It’s okay,” Jay whispers to him before either adult can say anything. “You can tell them whatever you want.”

“What if I don’t want to say anything more?”

“Then don’t.”

“I remember,” Roger says, looking down at his plate. It’s as if he doesn’t realize he’s speaking, “how it felt to have the puppies taken. How scared we were for them, not knowing where they were. I can’t believe I almost did that to someone else.” The blond man whispers and looks up at Carlos, who keeps eye contact. “I became your version of Cruella. In more ways than one,” his voice cracks, “I am so sorry.”

From down the table, Evie speaks up. “Carlos takes great care of Dude. He walks him every morning and even has schedule of when to feed him.”

“Oh yeah!” Carlos stands quickly, sets Dude down in his chair before diving into his pocket and shifting his shorts, bringing out a ball of white…toilet paper? He grabs his food and turns to Jay. “Can we share a plate?”

Jay sighs and nods. He knows exactly where this is going. “Sure.”

Carlos slides the pancakes Jay had given him back onto the latter’s plate and grabs his ball of toilet paper, carefully tearing it open.

“You could have asked for a bag, you dork.”

He doesn’t look at Mal when he responds. “I didn’t think you had one!” Carlos carefully pours the contents onto his empty plate, dog food clattering on the porcelain and spreading out quickly. “Here
you go, buddy,” he lowers the food to the floor. Dude jumps off the chair and almost onto the plate, making his owner chuckle. He scoots the plate further back, and returns to his seat, bashfully balling up the toilet paper back into his shorts.

Roger shares a look with Anita and he smiles slightly. “You certainly are the best person to take care of him…Carlos. I’m sorry that I couldn’t see that. And I…I will make it up to you. Somehow.”

“If you could ever find it in your heart to forgive us for scaring you and the nasty things we did, we would love you,” Anita holds Roger’s hand, “to be a part of your life here in Auradon. Even if it’s nothing more than joining you two at the dog park once in a while. We want to make up for…” your life, your childhood, living with Cruella, “everything.”

Judging by his blank stare, Carlos doesn’t understand what she means.

“Cruella and I had been friends for many years and the reason we wanted to meet you originally was to offer you some sort of…relationship with other people in Auradon.” A tie to his mother – though Anita now assumes he doesn’t want anything like that – or a makeshift aunt and uncle, even just a friend.

Carlos looks at her, then Roger, then Jay, who whispers something in his ear. “Okay.” Carlos clears his throat. “I mean, I-I’ll think about it.”

Anita sighs. It wasn’t what she hoped for, but it was what she expected. She still offers a smile.

“That’s more than we deserve,” Roger says solemnly. “Thank you.”

Carlos bites his lip and nods. “You’re welcome.”

There’s another lull in the conversation. Jay hurriedly stuffs a bite of pancake into his mouth. It’s more than he planned and he tries not to choke when he’s jabbed in either side of his ribs.

“Your turn,” Evie sings to him and Jay pouts.

He looks up at Jasmine and Aladdin across from him and smiles around his mouthful of pancake. Jay thinks he probably looks cute – boyish and nonthreatening – but Jasmine looks at him for a long time, long enough for Jay to feel self-conscious and look away, swallowing his food quickly.

“You were quite the knight in shining armor last night.”

Jay frowns. “What?”

“For Evie,” Jasmine says and looks at the girl. “You really stepped up to help her.”

“Of course I did,” Jay scoffs. If it had been some random Auradon girl, he probably would not have stopped. No, he definitely would not have stopped. But it was Evie and helping Evie was a no brainer. Jay didn’t even think about it last night.

“That’s not something Jafar would have ever done,” the sultana shakes her head. “I am so sorry I accused you of being like him.” Her gaze drops from Jay’s face to his exposed arms; he’s the only one not wearing long sleeves. She hadn’t noticed when he walked in, but his arms are littered with faint scars, probably years old. The sight has her pushing her food away.

“Why?” Jay asks and he’s surprised at how steady his voice sounds. “Why did you think I was like him?”
Jasmine rids the thoughts of his scars from her head. “The way you spoke to women at the party. So flirtatious and forward, like…” She holds her breath. The four have proven how close they are to each other, how protective and defensive they can be. Jasmine is not afraid of the children, but she is afraid of herself. How hurting one would mean hurting all.

“It’s okay,” Jay just looks at her, not at his friends. “Just say it.”

“It reminded me of how Jafar felt so entitled around women. The way he acted as if he were owed something from them, like they were property.”

“That’s how he treated you.”

“Yeah,” Jasmine swallows and feels so small despite being a grown women. “Yeah.”

Jay shrinks back into his seat and if Jasmine feels small, she can’t image how he must feel. “I never realized my actions were like his.”

“They’re not!” Jasmine exclaims at the same time her husband does. She looks at Al with shock on her face.

“Jay,” he starts, “you are not like your father.”

“Why? Just because I haven’t tried to take over a country?”

“Well…yeah.” A faint voice says. “That’s a pretty big difference that works in your favor.” The genie, now just bigger than a mouse, lays atop Aladdin’s turban and waves at Jay and his shocked face.

The boy blinks. “Have you been here the whole time?”

“Sure have!”

“Jay,” Aladdin swats at the genie on his turban and ignores the little squeals. “There are many differences between you and Jafar. You took care of your friends last night, Jafar didn’t care for anybody.” The sultan scowls, then flushes. “I mean, he, uh, he didn’t care for any of us. Anyone in Agrabah, I mean.”

“No, man,” Jay grits his teeth and the hand not still holding Carlos’ finds its way against his forearm. “Jafar didn’t care for anybody.”

There’s no gasp or sigh, just Jasmine’s horrified voice. “He didn’t do that to you…did he?”

The scar on his arm has been healed for a while, sticking out against his skin in knotted, white tissue. Jay just trails his fingers against it and Carlos squeezes his hand. He had cried before his father when Jafar caused the wound, but he won’t now.

He doesn’t answer Jasmine.

“I-I thought…” She bites her lip.

“Even villains love their kids?” Mal asks.

“You’re the not the first person in Auradon to say that,” Evie squeezes Mal’s hand under the table.

The VKs don’t bother looking at the adults because they’ve seen the expressions before – the hurt, the anguish, the disbelief. All the same expressions on Ben’s face when he realized their lives were
so much different than he expected and on Lonnie’s and Chad’s and Jane’s. Instead, the four look at each other and shrug.

“Do you guys get why it’s so important to bring over Isle kids, now?” Mal asks when she can’t take the silence anymore. “Why we need your support to…” her lips twitch, “help them?”

“If we could get more Isle kids over, they’d have such better lives,” Evie fights the tightness of her throat. “We’re older than most of the kids. We can take care of ourselves, but there are other kids… who can’t.”

“Are they all… Do they all have lives like…yours?” Snow White questions and there’s a sick look on her face as she glances between them.

Mal narrows her eyes. “You’re not going to know our life stories. Not now, not ever, no matter how much time you spend with us,” she looks at Snow and the Radcliffes, “and you don’t get to know theirs. All you need to know is that the Isle is a rotting bunch of buildings and trash and no one deserves to live there.”

“Well,” Carlos pipes up from beside Jay, “none of the kids. Our parents are kind of there for… good reasons.” His mouth quirks up and the rest of his friends smile just a little bit, like there’s some joke about their parents belonging on the Isle that is too dark for anyone else to understand.

“If you all really want to make up for your actions, you can support Ben when he brings over more kids,” Evie sets her shoulders back. “He’s facing a lot of opposition and big names like yours backing him up can help.”

“We’ll support it,” Anita calls from the end of the table, craning forward to look at Ben. “We support you in whatever way we can.”

“Agrabah does as well,” Aladdin says and Jasmine nods beside him.

Ben puts his hands up and smiles brightly. “Well thank you, all of you,” he looks to Snow White, Aurora and Phillip, who had all begun to speak before he did, “and I would very much love to discuss my plans with you…at a later time. But this breakfast is not about me or about other Isle children. It’s about these four.”

“It’s all good,” Jay shrugs. “If you support Ben, everything is okay between us.”

“Really?” Jasmine raises a brow.

“Yes.”

“We will support bringing over more children regardless of what you think of us, Jay,” she says and sets her hands on the table. “If you hate us and never want to speak to us, we’ll understand that. I made very harsh accusations against you and you have every right to be upset with me still. If you are, it will not change my support for children of the Isle.”

Jay leans on his elbows and waggles his eyebrows. Whatever self-doubt and concern he felt earlier are replaced when Jasmine holds her chin high. “Sultana, I love strong women. Evie smacked me a couple of days ago and it was hot.”

“You were using my curling iron without asking me!”

“You are not the only long-haired person in this group who is allowed to have luscious curls!” Jay doesn’t even turn to his friend, keeps his eyes on Jasmine. “I mean, it was insanely hot. Her hitting
me,” he clarifies with a wave of his hand, “not the curling iron. That was hot too though. I burnt myself.”

“That’s what you get for messing with things that aren’t yours!”

Jay rolls his eyes. “Speaking of hot, sultan,” he purrs as he turns to Aladdin, “how are you doing?”

The look on her husband’s face has Jasmine coughing into her hand. His utter shock is a little funnier now. “Wait, so you like…” She freezes and tilts her head, unsure of how to continue. “Are you…?”

“Unable to keep it in his pants?” Carlos offers. “Yeah, that’s Jay.”

The other boy laughs and bumps their shoulders together. “I like hot people,” Jay tells the couple, “and hot people tend to like me.”

“Well if you like hot, Agrabah is one of the hottest countries in the kingdom.” Aladdin points out. “You should come visit sometime.”

Jay blinks, then laughs again, louder and holding his side. “Yeah, I guess I like hot place too.”

“I’m serious,” Aladdin reaches for his drink. “We talked about it last night and, if you’re willing, we would like to be involved in your life in Auradon as well.”

“Oh. Uh, okay,” Jay says dumbly. “I…uh-.”

“You don’t have to answer now, Jay,” Jasmine calms him, “you take all the time you want to think about it. Just please let us give you some way to contact us for if you ever need anything.”

His face pinkens. “I’m not your charity case.”

“Believe us, you have more than proven you do not need us or anyone in Auradon,” Aladdin quickly reassures. “We just want you to have a way to contact us if you ever want someone to…talk to.”

“Psst, hey kid!” A voice in his ear makes Jay jump. “Calm down,” the genie pats the shoulder he’s perched on. “I just wanna tell you, your old man is a piece of work. If there’s anyone who can understand how much he sucks, it’s these two. Plus, they really felt awful after last night. Jazz stayed up all night boohooing.”

“Genie!”

“And Al there just wants to make things right. Give them a chance!” With a snap of his fingers, the genie is gone from Jay’s shoulder and sitting carefully on Aladdin’s plate, tearing off a piece of his toast and munching on it.

Carlos leans over to his friend and whispers in his ear a very similar message to what Jay had told him when the Radcliffes made the same offer. “You can tell them no,” Carlos murmurs, “but remembering Jafar made you do crazy shit too.”

Jay scoffs and pushes him away. “Yeah, yeah, I know,” he groans. “I’ll take your phone number or mailing address or whatever you want to give,” Jay tells the two in front of him, “I don’t know if you’ll ever hear from me though.”

“We understand,” Jasmine says. “We will respect whatever you want.”

Next to them, Evie and Snow are gaining confidence in their own conversation. “My mother never
told me that you made your dress yourself,” Evie gapes.

“Oh, that was so long ago, I haven’t made any of my own clothes in ages,” Snow says after she swallows her eggs. “But I only did it out of necessity, I never had a passion for it like you do.”

“I started out of necessity too!” Evie grins, “I made everything I wore, I made a lot of Jay, Mal and Carlos’ stuff too. I had to salvage everything!”

“Well you did wonderful,” Snow sincerely tells her. “All of your friends looks well taken care of.”

Evie flounders under the praise and it’s a sharp reminder of just how little she has been complimented in her life. “Thanks. Carlos is such a hard one to make for,” she groans, “he only wear those three colors!”

“And I look good in them too!” Carlos shouts at her as he lifts Dude into his lap; his smile slips as he scooches forward, looking cautiously at Roger and Anita. He grips Dude’s collar and stays close to Jay. If his friends can talk and be civil, Carlos can try to do it too. “So, uh, h-how often does a dog need to see the vet? The school takes care of Dude, but I do-don’t really know.”

Roger immediately puts his silverware down and straights his posture. “Once a year is a good checkup rate. But any time he seems off, like he’s eating less, he’s sleeping more or a change in his behavior.”

“Okay,” Carlos nods, “how do I cut his nails? They’re getting kind of long and they’re scratching me when I sleep.”

“He sleeps in the same bed as you?” Anita asks.

“Yeah, he has his own dog bed, but he usually likes to sleep on my chest or on Jay’s.”

“I must know, does he have a set of pajamas that he lets you put him in?” Roger looks at Dude and the black sweater he has on.

Carlos nods again. “Yeah, Evie made them for Dude. And they match my pajamas too,” he smiles just a little bit and the entire scene is so precious, Anita has to hide her aww beneath her hand.

Mal watches from her other side of the table. She’s not trying to outright ignore Phillip and Aurora, but they’re also not her priority at the moment.

“Perhaps it’s too late,” Phillip begins and Mal looks at him, “for us to extend the same offer as everyone else, but we would like for you to have a way to contact us. It’s not a form of pity or charity,” he quickly tells her, “but just in case you need someone in Auradon, we would like you to have the option to call us.”

“Thanks, but you guys don’t owe me anything. Really.”

“We know we don’t,” Aurora says even though she feels the opposite. They owe Mal and her friends much more, but the girl has too much pride to hear that. “We don’t offer this because we feel bad or to make up for last night.” She sips her tea, “we offer this because we’ve taken an interest in you.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if Audrey has told you, but we kind of hate each other.”

“Audrey acts like she dislikes a lot of people,” Aurora rubs her temples, “please don’t take it seriously.”
Phillip chuckles. “We offer this to make sure you always have someone in Auradon to come to. You deserve to have someone here for you.” He reaches his hand out, fully intending to place it on Mal’s, but stops himself.

She knows what he was planning on doing and Mal tries to fight the blush in her cheeks. She turns back to her friends, lively chatting with the people they had thought they would never meet and she smiles to herself. “I already do.”
Deleted Scenes/Outline

Chapter Summary

Check out the thought process behind this story as well as some of the deleted scenes that I had to cut!

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the love you have shown me, I truly appreciate all of it! I have almost 300 kudos and 50 comments on this insanely long piece, I'm so glad everyone has enjoyed it so much.

There were a couple of scenes that didn't make it into the final cut however that I wanted to share with you guys, with an explanation of why they were cut.

Also, you can read the original outline I wrote for this story here too!

Enjoy :)

So Grin and Bear It (which was only called *My Christmas Story* up until the day it was posted because I couldn't come up with a title I enjoyed. Again, major thanks to tumblr user tothetardissterek for giving me the title) was thought of several months before I ever began writing it. I had some thoughts and ideas that were kind of random and not in any order, so I finally sat down and maybe an outline in a Word document which you can read right now! The entire thing was color coded: Purple text for Mal, blue for Evie, red for Carlos and yellow highlight for Jay, but I can't change colors on AO3, so just imagine it! Copied directly from the original copy of Grin and Bear It, here is my outline that I wrote back in November of 2017.

Exposition – VKs are nervous, but all is well! They try to stick together as a group for solidarity

Mal tries not to manipulate anyone, mimics Evie is how to be friendly

Evie smiles and is friendly, fixing her make up in reflective surfaces

Jay flirts and charms girls and boys, maybe steals something without realizing it

Carlos carries Dude with him and cuddles the dog

Rising Action – VKs are secretly watching the heroes of the parents’ stories, but those heroes are secretly watching them. Ben introduces everyone?

Mal remembers Queen Leah, she tries to avoid Aurora, but is eventually cornered by the
Evie tries to go say hi to her step sister. Snow is kind, but Evie is awkward and slightly jealous of Snow’s beauty.

Jay flirts with Aladdin and Jasmine. Jasmine just sees Jafar, Jay flirts more to charm her. Aladdin is undecided.

Carlos is approached by Roger and Anita. He assumes they hate him, but Anita assumes the same.

**Conflict – everyone hates everyone because communication skills are lacking.**

Mal is seen as selfish and wicked. Prince Phillip berates her and Mal and Aurora dislike each other because of this.

Evie is seen as shallow and competitive. Snow White ???

Jay is seen as a sexist jerk, just like Jafar. Jasmine hates him and wants Jay to not remain in Auradon, she in convinced he will treat women like his father did. Aladdin sides with his wife.

Carlos is seen as rude because he avoids the Radcliffes; he is worried of what they will think of him. Anita believes he could be seeking revenge for his mother, Roger talks about taking Dude away.

**Climax – VKs are not bad kids!**

Jay is yelled at by Jasmine for being like Jafar.

Evie says Jay is kind and caring, she is reprimanded by Snow for making the situation ‘about her’.

Evie panics about not being beautiful enough.

Jay calms Evie and reassures her, shows Jasmine he is a caring person.

Carlos panics about having Dude being taken away.

Evie comforts Carlos.

Mal yells at Roger, then is yelled at by Phillip.

Carlos defends Mal, then is grabbed by Roger and flinches.

**Falling Action – All of the adults feel like shit**

???

**Resolution – VKs get new families for Christmas!**

???

Did any of those notes make sense? Probably not! There are a couple of ideas that were abandoned.
as well as some role changes. For instance, originally, Mal was going to copy everything Evie did because Evie is more likable and friendly. This was going to show that Mal still struggles to fit into Auradon and how much her social skills are lacking, but I decided to go another direction with Mal because I didn't want her to be focused on conforming to Auradon, I wanted her to be concerned with bringing over other Isle kids. Also in the exposition, Jay was going to steal without realizing it, but instead I had him focus on his friends more. This idea was not totally abandoned, just move to later on in the story because Jay almost steals from Jasmine the second time they meet (7:33 pm – North Wing of the Castle).

Again with the rising action, Mal and Jay are the two to change their stories. Mal, who was originally going to mimic Evie, was going to be caught by Aurora, who thought that Mal was making fun of Evie or that Mal was trying too hard to not draw attention to herself, which would make Aurora suspicious. Right around the time that I changed Mal's plan of trying to blend in like Evie, I decided that Phillip should seek her ought first. Similarly, Jay was going to meet with Jasmine and Aladdin at the same time at first, but I went against that because I wanted some one on one interaction with him and Jasmine.

Nothing in the conflict changes, so I'll skip that.

The climax, the whole big fight scene, everyone's favorite! This was the part, before I began writing, where I knew what I wanted to happen but not the order. Everything in my outline still happens, but it all gets switched around. I tried to give all of the VKs an equal amount of time in the climax, but it seems to mostly focus on Carlos, who had the worst life of the four on the Isle.

The falling action and resolution, I kind of made up as the story was written. I just knew that there would be a scene the the adults realized the error of their ways, but I didn't have the ending planned when I began writing.

So this doesn't change anything in the story, but I had a few people comment that I inspired them, so I wanted to show anyone who is interested how I started everything and did my planning. I hope this helps inspire more people!

On to the deleted scenes!

The first scene that was deleted is one I did not save before hand and I really regret it. There was a conversation between Snow White and Cinderella (7:21 pm – Ballroom of the Castle) that I deleted because it made Snow White's scene too long compared to the rest of the adults.

I do have three scenes saved!

The first is during the climax, right after Carlos gets back up:

8:18 pm – Kitchen of the Castle

“All right, let’s get up,” Mal tries to push herself up, but a hand in front of her face has her stopping. As much as her pride protests, she grabs Jay’s hand, lets him pull her to her feet.

If it’s going to be the four of them against a country, they better be united.
He helps Evie next and Carlos hops up onto his own feet before Jay can get to him. The teens share a long heavy look between each other before facing the quiet adults.

Jay has always avoided the things he didn’t like, so it’s easy to evade the people he doesn’t want to see. He’s certain Jasmine is watching him, Aladdin and the genie too, but that’s not anything he can deal with anymore. He had been compared to his father and the idea that he could be as mean and violent as that man is chilling. If they wanted to see Jafar in him, fine. But Jay won’t look at them and watch the recognition in their eyes. He keeps his gaze on Evie and Carlos, checking them over while being hyperaware of everyone else.

As a princess, wannabe or not, Evie holds her head high. She may have hated herself, but she doesn’t hate Carlos, quite the opposite actually and she will stand next to him always. Her eyes meet with Snow White’s and again, the woman is a fair, dainty princess, not a looming, disappointed Evil Queen. Snow’s face is tight and her eyes are sad and she looks like she can’t find the proper words to say, but Evie wouldn’t want to hear them anyway.

Carlos scoops Dude back up quickly, surprised the Radcliffes didn’t nab him as soon as the dog was dropped. He keeps his face in brown fur, ignores his burning cheeks. He knows Roger and Anita are staring at him, they’ve been doing so the whole night, but Carlos is simply too exhausted to run, too exhausted to argue, to defend. He is content to stand in silence beside his friends.

Behind every adult stands Ben. He must have come in after Carlos had fallen. “Mal,” he says in a tired tone that’s not fair because he didn’t just get berated and humiliated.

But there’s not an evil bone in his body, Mal knows just as well as the other three know. The king is a golden boy, not so much as a single ill intention in him. He’s trying, she knows, and if anything goes wrong, it’s because of his naivety.

(This scene, the thoughts of Jay and Carlos and Evie, was deleted because I felt like it didn't offer any new information, it was too repetitive. I took it out to speed up the scene and keep it interesting.)

The second scene is during breakfast. This isn't so much a deleted scene as it is an alternative scene to Snow realizing none of the VKs are listening to the adults.

8:34 am – Cafeteria of Auradon Prep

A short glance at the Jay and Carlos to Evie’s right and Mal on her left show that they’re all doing the same thing. Not one of them is paying attention to the adult speaking to them. Instantly, Snow White finds it disrespectful and standoffish.

Then she takes a moment to reflect on their actions from the night before and, horribly, it all makes sense.

“Excuse me?” She clears her throat. Evie glances at her, but then goes back to her friends. “Excuse me!”

Voices settle and eyes turn to her.

“Thank you.” Snow White smiles and folds her hands on the table. “I don’t know if anyone else has noticed, but none of the children are listening to you. They are too focused on what is being said to each other rather than to themselves,” she looks at the teenagers and truly sees them as teenagers this time. These are not adults sitting before her, no full grown antagonists with body counts and slaves, but they are not children either, weary and hardened in ways that suggest they grew up before their
She shakes her head just a little bit. “Perhaps we should discuss matters one on one with them.”

“No.” Mal narrows her eyes.

(This scene felt too rushed, which is why I did the heavy editing and brought the other adults into it more, rather than Snow White commanding all of the attention on her own.)

Last but not least, this deleted scene is about Jay and the abuse he had from Jafar, also set during the breakfast scene.

8:34 am – Cafeteria of Auradon Prep

“No, man,” Jay grits his teeth and the hand not still holding Carlos’ finds its way against his forearm. “Jafar didn’t care for anybody.”

There’s no gasp or sigh, just Jasmine’s horrified voice. “He didn’t do that to you…did he?”

The scar on his arm has been healed for a while, sticking out against his skin in knotted, white tissue. Jafar had been furious when Jay returned with empty pockets, never noticing his son’s bruised face or asking if he was alright after being jumped. He had hit Jay, pushed him back so roughly that the jagged edge of their counter sliced his skin and muscle.

Jay just trails his fingers against it and Carlos squeezes his hand. He had cried then, but he won’t now.

He doesn’t answer Jasmine.

(This scene I felt pulled away from the present too much. I didn’t want Jay to get lost in his thoughts. Plus, more of Jay’s abuse from Jafar will be discussed in the sequel, so I didn’t need to fully address or explain anything in Grin and Bear It.)

That’s all! I hope you enjoyed reading about what the story was originally and how it changed and some of the deleted scenes. This is just here to be as a little thank you to everyone who commented and left kudos, it makes my day!

End Notes

Whew! Over 43000 words and 90 pages! I hope you liked this, I put a lot of time and work into this, please tell me what you think!
- Who is most in character? Who is out of character?
- Did any scenes bore you? Which scene was your favorite? Were any too long or too short?
- Which conflict was best? Which ones were hard to believe?
- Anything that made you laugh? What about ones that made you sad?
- Were the timestamps helpful? Or were they unnecessary?

Please don't feel like you need to answer all or any of these questions! They're just kind of like 'prompts' for a comment, don't answer a single one if you don't want to. I appreciate all feedback and criticism to make me the best writer I can be.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!