**Left to Rot**

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**Left to Rot**

by Animeniacs

**Summary**

The Descendants are growing up. After choosing good, Msl, Jay, Carlos, and Evie can finally see the bright futures ahead of them. They're ready to forget all that they left behind.

Except, more kids are coming. The new arrivals are ready to dig up pasts that are hard to handle. They are ready to take over and they have the skills, guts, and charm to do it. They want to see Auradon tearing itself apart from the inside. All starting with the Rotten Four.

Can the VKs hold true to their new identities and relationships with each other or were they even true to begin with?

After all, the Isle is a very big place with a lot of very big secrets.

(*If this works seems familiar scroll down to Notes*)

**Notes**

See the end of the work for [notes](#).
For Goodness's Sake

She had to be good, for evil’s sake.

It was the last mantra that Mal had whispered to herself as the royal carriage carried her out of the Isle to her uncertain future. The promise had come from obligation. The full heat of her mother’s viciousness loomed over her at the time, and the safety of those she would soon accept as her friends were also at stake. A job had to be done. By all measures, Mal had passed with flying colors. She had laid low, attracted the king, learned magic, and acquired the wand. But then her plans went to shit.

Being good, for goodness’s sake, had never been a part of the agenda.

Occasionally, she felt like it still wasn’t. Whenever Evie cried over Doug after a fight, or Jay was benched because the rival team didn’t feel safe playing against a villain, or Carlos’s STEM teachers banned him from using advanced equipment, she would remember that this wasn’t their true nature. Her mind would doze off to the Isle, despite the bad memories, it made her feel at home. After all, the Rotten Four was their everything. Evie had hoards of men begging just to speak with her, not pandering to a dope far below her status. Jay used to take on gangs of thugs twice his size in order to protect his father’s store, but tried his best to look as small as possible at competitions so he could play. Not to mention, Carlos’ intelligence made his inventions invaluable, now he was stuck picking the safest project for a science fair. In evil, they were forces. In good, they were forced.

However, Mal had more good days then not. She hated the rules but liked the feeling of being safe. Unlike the Isle, school taught her more than the ways of villandry. The purple haired teen hadn’t quite found friends of her own yet, but she felt herself become kinder everyday. Plus, there was one person who would always be her reason to stay.

Ben. Rather, King Benjamin.

The knight in shining armor fantasy had originally belonged to Evie. Yet, neither could refuse Mal had received it. Ben was too good for almost anybody let alone herself. He was furiously passionate cute to boot. Mal could almost see herself falling in love with him.

If he didn’t have to be so fucking stupid all the time.

“You know, King Ben and Prince Ben are two very different people!” Mal shrieked as she paced harder across the royal wooden floor. Evie was already too worn down to warn her friend about scuffing. Although, she couldn't help but scrunch her nose up at it. An action Mal actively ignored.

“Well he hasn't forced any of us off to another kingdom in order to conquer it only to come back in the form of a giant lizard. So I'd say we could've done worse going by royalty’s sake.” She sighed slung around Ben’s deceptively comfortable arm chair. She shrunk into the leather upholstery childishly amused by the squishy sound it made. Mal kept at her own game, moving back and forth oddly satisfied by the resounding sound of her heels throughout the empty hall.

“C’mon Mal, King Ben is still a good guy.” Carlos called leant against the beautifully draped window.

“Yeah...except now, Ben keeps secrets.” Mal grunted. She knew this was for the good of
auradon, however good auradon really was, but with all these new fancy mannerisms and public scrutiny she’d admit she wasn’t really handling it well.

“Don’t worry, you’ve done this before, just don’t look too lovey dovey so some asshole can’t claim that you and Ben fucking is grounds for abdication.” Jay slurred sat on top of the desk next to Evie.

The whole group felt terribly trapped in the King’s office, which seemed to be the objective. She couldn’t really blame anyone, today was a very big day and frankly, they were flight risks. The ceremony outside sent constant bursts of sound over the mic and the streams of light made Mal feel like she was slowly developing epilepsy. The other VKs didn't seem to fare any better; Carlos hadn't sat down once during the hour they've been here, Jay couldn't stop swiping things from the drawers only to put them back, and even Evie had to take a break from her perfect posture just for some sense of calming comfortability.

“That's not what I was talking about but thank you for reminding me to be stressed about that too.” Mal gave Jay a chilling smile. He received the message.

“Are we ignoring the fact that Jay just said the word abdication?” Carlos looked around at the girls.

“Well shit he did, and here I thought he’d never get passed four syllables.” Mal spat out.

“I asked how to spell orange once!” Jay shouted back, knowing she was bound to use it against him.

“But you did it last week?” Carlos mocked. He pushed off the wall to move closer to the group. The leather shoes swished on the floors as he headed over. Mal couldn't help but scoff at the sound, it was as if every part of their outfits were designed to be obnoxiously loud. She wondered if it was on purpose, after all it was one of the few events the palace insisted Evie couldn't design for. Evie did manage to sneak on a couple good pieces. A dragon earing for Mal, a spotted handkerchief for Carlos, lamps on the cufflinks for Jay, and a tiara which stretched along the collar of Evie’s dress. She's sure the guards weren't comforted that all the ex-villains had their own personal reminders of their parents but they weren't really the people they had to worry about today.

“Look, if you two idiots could stop fucking bumping your heads together-”

“Then what Mal? Please tell us how you freaking out in here is going to help solve any of our problems out there?” Jay shot back. Mal opened her mouth ready to retort but then she had an odd idea, maybe Jay was right. She closed her lips, deciding that chewing on them would probably be just as effective as speaking with them at the moment.

She had never been so mad at Ben in her life. She would’ve sworn she had never been that mad at anyone in her life but the Isle was a very very bitter place. Which is why this was so nerve wracking in the first place. They all knew that Ben wouldn’t just drop his Isle initiative even if they all hoped he would. Everyone worth having was already here! Yet, when the time came around to notify the proper people that another switch was in order they expected to be included in that circle. Instead, on the morning announcements just like every other clueless princess they heard that the selected islanders would be released later that week.

Just like that Ben had chosen who was coming from the Isle.

And he hadn't told a single person.
It was the exact sort of infuriating integrity that made her admire and detest him. She knew this was Ben doing things right by the islanders but he didn't understand what he was getting into. He got lucky when he choose the rotten four. They had already formed what they referred to back then as an ‘organic arrangement’. Plus, they all were guided heavily by their parents, they were villains by way of legacy. On the Isle, with so many deadbeats running around kids had to take up evil as a personal responsibility. They created their own villandry.

Now, without knowing any history or any context besides a few names collected from around the city Ben was going to bring four of those psychopaths here. She couldn't stand it.

“He really is an idiot isn't he?” Evie whistled as if following Mal’s thoughts exactly.

And now all of them would have to read the others names for the rest of the country.

“He could've just let us pitch some! We didn't even have to see his list just let us make suggestions. He’s going to cause the Isle to erupt.” Mal started back up again. Jay opened his mouth ready to fire back but Carlos interrupted knowing Jay would be too harsh.

Carlos shut his eyes obviously frustrated and tried to force his message out in the most calming way possible. “Like I said Mal, he's a good King, we all have our bias. We couldn't get in the way of someone's redemption just because we knew how they acted on the island. No matter how cruel they acted…” Carlos trailed off diverting his eyes to the ground.

The already quiet room went silent. Mal stopped pacing for once and suddenly felt guilty about all her fussing. They all knew the intimate details of Carlos’s life on the Isle. His ability to still be understanding reminded Mal of not only why she protected him but why she respected him. He was always the levelheaded one. She rubbed at her arm awkwardly once Carlos was done. She decided to finally commit to waiting out the tension until they were called.

“Kids!” Fairy Godmother called as she burst the doors open.

The four shot up like a light, breathlessly waiting for her magic words.

“C’mon, you know why I’m in here, move it!” Fairy Godmother waved her arm hustling them together as she led them down the hallway to the balcony.

Instantly, Mal felt like her heart was on fire. She laser focused in on everything. Fairy Godmother’s heels with dumb little wings on the side. The height of the stretched out windows which lined the pathway. The red carpet underneath so expertly steamed she couldn't trip on it if she tried. She glanced at her friends who looked as hypershot as she was. It was as if they were in an implicit race to see who could get their the fastest. Finally, as if sensing the strength of the stampede behind her Fairy Godmother sharply turned around right in front of the wooden doors of the balcony.

“...in that same spirit, we hope that all our citizens especially the outstanding students of Auradon Prep express the same kind understanding you displayed the first time around…” Ben’s voice splintered through the doors.

“Remember, smiles on, keep the audience under control, and make sure Mal doesn't stand next to Ben.” Fairy Godmother whispered giving them all her over excited awkward thumbs up. One of them would've giggled at it if they weren't just as fidgety and nervous as she was.

“And now, since you've all been waiting so patiently,” Mal could practically hear his winning smile as the crowd laughed at themselves for their restlessness. “The chosen islanders will be read
out by our first successes; Mal, Evie, Carlos, and Jay!” Ben clapped aloud as Fairy Godmother threw open the doors.

The first thought Mal had was that they were too high up. The second was that it was also too bright. Then the voices and the cameras came; flashing, shouting, booing, everyone cooing or cursing over the dresses and suits. The full force of Auradon’s attention was overwhelming and this was the worst it had been. She thought she was in a totally different time and space. She reached out for something, for anything, for a second, she felt like she might fall off the ledge. Then, she found Evie’s wrist and squeezed hard. It grounded her. The next time she blinked she saw that all of them were gripping each other. She swivelled her head to the right at Ben who had concern written around his poster child smile. Keep it up for the press, she reminded herself and felt herself slip into a similar beam as all her friends did the same.

Ben made a motion for one of them to come to stand at the front. Mal took a few steps forward but Carlos quickly stepped in between her and Ben. As soon as he did Mal sent him a flash of green and he retreated back.

She avoided knocking into the mics perched on the edge and looked down at the balcony. Lonnie, Doug, Jane, Chad, and Audrey were all still cheering along the outskirts of the crowd. Mal gave in and shined a great big grin. The Auradonians ate it up. Ben handed over an official looking blue envelope. Mal turned it around in her hand, before lifting open the seal and slowly sliding the letter out of its packaging.

She frowned and looked over to Ben who only shrugged in return. Of course they’d write her an intro. “First...” Mal began lazily reciting, “we’d like to humbly thank King Benjamin for giving us this amazing opportunity. Without him, our lives in squalor and evil would never have been cleansed by the goodness of the heros of Auradon.” The crowd clapped for themselves. Mal resisted the urge to gag. “Which is why we are grateful that we get to share this opportunity for the other poor and helpless children on the Isle,” Jay coughed loudly somewhere in the background. “After the reading of the following names the invitations will be sent out. Our second round is about to officially begin.” The crowd hushed. Mal’s stomach went queasy again, as soon as she was off this wretched tower she would need to take a long nap. With shaking hands she slowly pulled the envelope the rest of the way out.

“Those invited are…” Mal looked at the paper, then looked at it twice. “Heather, daughter of the Queen of Hearts and Madeline, daughter of the Mad Hatter.” Mal stepped back in line with the rest and Carlos immediately stepped up in her place giving the crowd no chance to react. Mal slid the card in her dress pocket for safekeeping.

“Two?” Evie mouthed holding up a pair of fingers, Mal peeked over at the three envelopes still in the brunette’s hand. He wouldn’t just invite an extra kid to auradon, would he?

Ben gently handed over the envelope. Carlos pulled it out swiftly. He glanced down and shuddered. The audience waited and Carlos glanced back nervously licking his lips before taking a big gulp of air, “joining them are Hayes, son of Hades and Felix, son of Dr. Facilier.” Carlos moved right away and Evie was quick to replace him.

Jay patted Carlos on the shoulder as soon as he reached him. He glared at Ben who was too busy looking off into the distance to notice. They’d all have a lot to say about some of these choices.

Meanwhile, Mal and Evie looked at each other suspiciously. Four names had already been read off. He wouldn’t...
Evie snatched the card out of his hand and ripped it open ready to get rid of all the stress she
had built up from waiting. “As well as Uni and Uri, daughter and son of Ursula.” All of the VKs
eyes flashed as they whipped around to look for confirmation that the others had heard what they
were hearing, “and...a-and…” Evie stuttered. Mal tried to maneuver so she could see her face but
she was facing the people head on. Evie cleared her throat, “Hunter, son of the Huntsman.” Jay
sauntered up to receive the final envelope as Evie roughly shoved hers back in Ben’s hands. She
stood next to Mal and Carlos positively steaming with crossed arms and hard eyes.

Mal couldn’t stop racking her brain for any other option. He didn’t put that many names out.
He just didn’t put that many names out.

“Finally, perhaps the most special guest due to his significance to the palace, the King
wholeheartedly extends the final invitation to Gus, son of Gaston.” Jay stepped back. The list was
done. Without any more announcements to interrupt their thoughts the crowd exploded. The royal
guards stepped forward to shield everyone. Ben threw a quick thank you over the mics and hustled
back inside where Fairy God mother locked the wooden doors.

For a few seconds everyone was gifted with one perfect peaceful serene breath.

Then, the dam broke loose.

“I can’t believe you! I can’t believe you! You just made us announce that! We can’t even take
it back! What were you doing?” Mal shoved him roughly feeding off the flaring energies around
her.

”Woah,” Ben held out his hands to placate the enraged teenagers. He slowly lowered them
once he was sure he wouldn’t get hit again. “Okay, I know you all have questions.”

“You fucking bet we do.” Jay backed Mal up.

“Oh my, language!” Fairy reprimanded slapping his arm, before she slowly crossed her arms
as well, “Although I can agree with the sentiment.” She eyed Ben too.

“Let’s go back into my office before the microphones on the balcony pick up all your
screaming.” Ben gave a warning look to the group.

Strangely, the command worked easily on the band of thieves, sneak, and liars. King Ben was
the authoritative figure, one with excessive power. Although, he had the decency not to flaunt it, he
did have the capability to express it. Mal had noticed his change in demeanor only three weeks
after his coronation. He had snapped at one of his advisors for insisting the Isle of the Lost have
their food regulations cut by half. Mal would admit it, if she was positive he could, she was sure he
would’ve beasted out. His newfound intensity was kind of hot but in this instance it only infuriated
her more. Nonetheless, Fairy Godmother dismissed herself so she could handle the mob outside
while the four trailed Ben all the way back to his office. As the doors shut Ben was once again
bombarded by their yelling.

“One at time, please!” The room quieted down a bit. “Evie what’s your problem?” Ben
directed his attention to her. Mal threw up her hands and stalked over to the corner to thrash in the
curtains.

Evie rolled her eyes at her friends mini tantrum, before getting back to business and leaning
over.

“Bennie, I know that being a fair ruler is very important to you.” She pursed his lips, Ben
nodded curtly not quite enjoying her patronizing tone. “So, I'll try to put this as nicely as possible. You are a very good person, we,” she gestured around, “are trying to be better. Some. People. Don't. Want. To. Be. Better. The people you put on that list, don't even like good people!” Evie pleaded trying to reason him. Ben examined her for a moment, he held his chin in his hand as he nodded and hummed to himself. He swiveled to look Evie in the eye.

“So they are just like you were a year ago?” He lifted his head up and leaned against his desk. Evie opened her mouth but only made a frustrated sound until she stomped over to Mal’s curtain. “You take him!” She shouted and Mal didn't waste the opportunity. She tagged in, stepping right into Evie’s place.

“You're all only confirming that I couldn't depend on your opinions. You're too emotionally involved, you can't see yet how great they will be once they get here and learn.” Ben smiled trying to connect to at least someone in the room. “You all sound just like my parents before you came.”

“That's what you don't get Ben! They are not us!” Mal all but barked in his face. Mal reached into her pocket to pull out the letter and tossed it in his face. Ben blinked resisting the urge to give into her petty games.

“Hayes is a textbook sadist.” Evie shook her head, taking a long look at Carlos before gazing out at the roaring crowd again.

“Maddy is an absolute lunatic. Unironically.” Jay added in.

“Hunter was voted most likely to rip someone's hand out of its socket.” Carlos jumped in as well.

“Don't forget Felix is the master of manipulation!” Evie tossed not even bothering to look up.

“Or Heathers mob boss mentality.” Jay muttered.

“Uni and Uri.” That was all Mal had to say to have the whole room participate in a collective shiver.

Ben only shook his head in disapproval as he tried to walk away but Mal stayed on his heels, “What? You don't like that kind of talk? We didn't even mention your own new best pal Gus! How could you invite your parents villain? Either the palace will plot his death or Gus will plot yours! It's going to end in a bloodbath! Even if your naive optimism works out he'd never have a normal life here. Not that he'd deserve one anyway! He'll probably lay out his entire resume of all the horrible things he's done since they're so damn proud of it.” Ben had to wipe off some of the spit that had landed on his cheek from her speech. Mal boxed him into a part of his desk giving him all she had, snarling at him. “You know, these people you picked aren't even the worst part. It's the sheer amount! You invited eight fucking villains to Auradon when four of us almost took over! You couldn't handle four but you want to upsize! You can't manage us properly! You have no idea how! Do you literally have any fucking idea what you're doing?”

At that Ben had finally had enough and slammed down on the table at full force. They all startled, mouths dropping as he broke out of Mal’s fixed stare, “I rule over the entire Kingdom of Auradon! Bankers, Businessmen, Students, Elite! I run the whole country and I'm tired of people doubting that I can handle it!” Ben huffed out as he threaded his hand through his hair. Mal backed off, stepping away. The rotten four melded together to stand in front of their friend as he calmed himself down.
After a minute, he took a hard look at their waiting faces, “I’m not sure what you want from this. It’s already been done. Even if I agreed, I couldn't change the nominees, it was designed that way.”

Mal wrestled with her face for a moment before turning herself right around and walking out of the Kings chambers. Evie followed behind trying to keep up with the other girl’s rough pace as she fled the room. Jay gazed at Carlos for a second but when it looked like he wasn't going to move Jay trailed after the girls. Ben lingered for a second as they disappeared down the hall, leaving only him and the shortest VK in his room.

“Uhm…” Carlos started awkwardly scratching at his head. “I know she won't make an apology so…I'm just going to make one for her.” Ben nodded taking a seat and gesturing for Carlos to do the same. He opted to stand. “It's been a stressful week with these announcements. I understand what a tough position you were put in and Mal does too but she can't really hold back her blow ups. I'm pretty sure it's the only way she knows how to deal with stress.” Ben laughed gently at that, Carlos sent him a small smile and was about to make his way out before Ben stood to stop him.

“Hey!” Ben laid his hand on Carlos’s shoulder as he turned around. “Mal told me about…some stuff that's happened to you.” He tried hard to keep a neutral face. “And I just want you to know, I did think about you when I made my choices.”

Carlos nodded again, this time without the smile. Ben squeezed him twice on the shoulder before he let him go. “Honestly…” Carlos continued, “we were going to be upset no matter who you picked. The only people who've ever been good to me are right here,” Carlos glanced at the exit. “Same with Evie, same with Jay, same with Mal. I think that's why she flipped and why she's so scared.”

Ben perked up at this, curious, “Scared of the other kids?”

Carlos shrugged, “Maybe. That's not what I meant though.” Carlos paused for a moment, “She’s afraid you’re going to get your heartbroken when you realize you can't save them all.”

Carlos studied Ben for a moment, trying to read his expression. Ben didn't make much of a move. Carlos wasn't sure he had even seen Ben so straight faced. It was slightly haunting but he couldn't look away. Carlos considered leaving it at that but after a long two minutes Ben replied with a whisper.

“I have to assume that I can.” He said, “it's the only way I can do this right.”

Carlos and Ben took another second to look at each other before Carlos nodded and they parted ways.

The white haired boy scurried off to join his pack, likely still ranting in the room.

The older teen sat down at his desk. He fiddled around with a pen for a minute before picking up the phone to call his assistant. He wanted to see if his latest batch had received the news.
Chapter Summary

Meet the New Descendants:

For quick reference;
Hayes son of Hades
Madeline daughter of the Mad Hatter
Felix son of Dr. Facilier
Heather daughter of the Queen of Hearts
Hunter son of the Huntsman
Gus son of Gaston
Uri and Uni twins of Ursula

Chapter Notes

I'm ready.

He wouldn't say the residents of the Isle were excited. Excited was way too happy of an emotion. However, he had to admit, his people were certainly stirring. A special day. He could almost believe it. There was an undeniable hope that had manifested in their rotten city. He smiled to himself. It was the exact sort of hope he could prey on.

Hayes leaned himself on the shaded side of a broken lamppost a block's distance from the crowd. Everyone was stuck scanning the horizon. Little kids pounded small fists against their shared bubble, declaring to anyone that cared enough to listen they'd be the one to break the barrier. He huffed. It was so pointless, although he understood the instinct. He had once done the same. Attempting to put himself on a pedestal to trick his father into approval. He guessed not much had changed. After all, he still had to do his father’s bidding. This time was different though. He had a stake in it.

Maleficent owned a fucking beautiful castle.

Hayes overlooked the crowd to peek at the structure. It shouldn't have surprised anyone that Mal’s toy tyrants had run to Auradon. They already had everything. All they needed was more. Black tar settled underneath his fingernails as he scratched a thin white line into the post. He scraped out the smut with his teeth. He was over it. Hayes had never humored his highness’s bullshit. King Beast locked them in and King Benjamin had fun fiddling with the keys. Faith in Auradon wouldn’t come back with anything. Over a decade in this wretched place should’ve taught them all that. He was the only one willing to face facts. His generation would be the first to live and die on the Isle. Then their children would, and their children would, and their children would until their children forgot there was anything else.

He knew people thought of it as a grim reality. He saw an opportunity. The island was a perfect concentrate of viciousness and desperation. No better place for a villain.
He flipped up his hoodie concealing the hereditary mark of his blue hair. He pushed off the lamppost. He had to get going. Hades would go off if everything didn’t go according to plan. He stalked off. In the opposite direction of the crowd, the castle retreated in the background.

The city was cascaded in a coat of grey mist. The buildings almost comically leered overhead. The older generations had torn up the streets into hard gravel destroying the old road markings. All cars belonged to the royal armada. People hobbled down the path with wraps slung around their faces, mumbling to themselves or hissing whenever someone got too close. Only true villains felt comfortable on the streets of the Isle. Even the Rotten Four were considerably passive when not fully assembled. All grudge was fair game on the street. Hayes tugged his hoodie closer.

His father was hated. Notorious villains simply demanded the reaction. It only grew worse when the war for the castle began.

The loss of their most feared and the malevolent leader had caused the Island to erupt. Jafar, Cruella, and the Evil Queen managed to escape in the power vacuum. Workers vacated the premises as soon as Maleficent had disappeared. All knew what was to come. Ursula had thrown the first shot. Her rule over the coastline had only been contained by the fairy, without her, the woman saw the island as hers for the taking. Every villain had fought to keep her out. At a year later only a select few remained. Ursula. Lady Tremaine. The Huntsman. Hades. They understood. The building was more than just space, the owner of the palace owned the power.

That made his trip out even more dangerous. He had to make sure he wasn’t beheaded before he was crowned.

He turned into the Market. The food carts and stores were overloaded by traffic to the barrier. He kept his eyes on the ground. Among the crowd, he felt something catch in his stomach. Unsettled, he tensed. Hades had given him strong instinct. He inched his head up. A floor length cloak pushed forward with purpose in the opposite direction. The pace of the walk was rushed and frantic. Jagged. He kept up with the flow of the sea, waiting for the masked stranger to veer off. They didn’t. The figure continued manic as the fabric swayed.

Hayes felt the urge to act. He eyed an open area where it would be easier to pass. He moved. The on comer doubled in speed. He did too. The runner pushed their hands out. Reaching. Hayes wasn’t fast enough. His arms flew into the air bracing for a hit.

They slammed together.

Without a beat, the cloaked figure started hard into his chest, one fist after the other, rolling their body into the punches. It wasn’t enough to knock him over. He swallowed down air, trying to catch his breath under the onslaught.

Then, the cloth shifted. With all the movement the hood pulled back enough to show the smallest twist of orange locks.

He knew this lunatic.

He latched onto the assailant’s wrists. He gripped the small bones and heaved them up and away from his torso. An easy apprehension. The girl went on thrashing harder in his hands.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Hayes harshly whispered. Customers continued to walk past casually but all their heads were angled in.

“Hayes Hades!” She shrieked. She clawed at her restraints. His clasp on her overcoat left her
feet open. She planted her foot on his chest which she expertly rammed on his lungs, “Karma is about to catch up with you!” She spat on the ground next to him.

The other people on the street stopped. Full attention. Local onlookers had watched first. They recognized the name, along with the voice throwing it out.

“Hatter what the fuck,” Hayes coughed all in one breath. He scanned. They had to do this somewhere else. Moving her along with him, he dragged her by the wrists down the street before shoving her into an alley. A quick check behind him showed the mob had dispersed. She hadn’t ceased her slamming and the hard hit of metal against his leg had begun leaving bruises on his shins. It came from her jacket. He moved in. He pulled her, pretending to heave her up, as his hand slipped in and out of the pocket. When he drew back he had a knife in his hand. He swiftly slid the object into his jeans. Without a word. He pushed her back out of the limelight into the darkness of the corner. Hayes let go. As expected, she stopped fighting. She stood straight up. Placid.

“Goddammit!” He dragged his hands through his hair, his hoodie slipping down onto his shoulders as he did. “Are you trying to get me killed out there?” He thought. “Don't answer that.”

“All worms eat.” She shrugged.

Hayes took his hand out of his hair and let off a groan somewhere deep in his throat. She sounded as vague and faded as ever. He glimpsed briefly in disgust assessing the girl in front of him.

Somewhere along the line, she had removed the cloak. She was dressed in her usual attire with random swatches and patterns sewn in along the edges of ratty old shirt collars and pant buckles. His father had fantasized about her before. She was only fourteen, but the age of consent didn’t really apply on the Isle. Neither did consent most of the time.

He guessed he could see it. She had a cute face with a body like the doll types old guys loved to rough up.

Hades would never try anything with her though. His father was crazy, but the Mad Hatter was more than that. His condition didn’t make him fearless or carefree, it was groundless. Madeline was no different.

“Look cunt,” He ground through his teeth, “I don't care what you want right now. I have shit to do,” He rounded. He stomped out of the alley but Maddy knew he wouldn’t make it far.

“How long do you think it'd take Hunter to find you?” Hayes paused. She continued, “I'll follow you and let him know every single place you go today but honestly he’d be able to track you down by himself if he knew you were out.” Her eyes zeroed in. He turned around stalking slowly back towards her. Cement in every step. “You’re in the war for the castle, aren’t you? Rumor has it you’re planning something big, it'd be a shame if the competition took you out of the race early.” He stopped in front of her leaning over. The tip of her nose almost bumped against the bottom of his. Hayes had stopped progressing. He stood for a second body fueling. She was threatening him. She was winning. And he had stopped. Maddy smirked up, “Rivers don't bite snakes, Hayes.” She finished. Hayes waited. He had to back off. He couldn’t hit her without dealing with the repercussions later. He might not be scared of him, but Hunter was a big man.

Hayes sighed. He stepped away, pressing his back against the brick wall, enjoying the way the sharp edges of chip scraped as they dug in. He spoke up to the sky. “Fine. Bitch. What do you want?”
Madeline perked up. With that, she unleashed the full force of her bubbly smile. She practically bounced. He tilted his head down avoiding looking at her as she carried on.

“It’s nothing much really if you had cooperated the first time...” She rolled her eyes playfully, but Hayes only scrunched up in more confusion. “I guess I didn’t have this situation to capitalize on. I want the information that’s rightfully mine.” Hayes took a breath. So, he did know what this was about. “You know who bombed us.” He caught between the sickly honey of her voice the small pops of instability. She could break.

He waited for a second debating with himself. The entire Isle knew about the attack on the Hatters. The fire had smoked up the entire Market. It had made everyone high-strung either to suffer a similar fate or be falsely accused and face the wrath of the two psychopaths.

Luckily for the two, neither had been in the shop that day. However, the strike was pronounced. The Hatters had to relocate and a month later no one had found the bomber.

At least if she was caught in the explosion he wouldn’t have to deal with her right now.

“Why would I know?”

She crossed her arms. He could tell this would be a battle. Normally, he’d applaud the challenge. This wasn’t normal. “Hunter saw you leave our street that night. You’re not the type.” At least he wasn’t a suspect. Then again, he would’ve already been squashed by Hunter if she thought he had something to do with it.

Hayes knew questioning Hunter wouldn't work. She had too much faith in him. He scratched the corner of his eye. He couldn’t risk delaying his plans. He clicked his tongue. His lean frame glided off the wall to come to a gentle stop in front of her. Madeline was all ears. “What's your plan? What’s the point of knowing who did it if you don't even know what you’re going to do with them.” He had to say, the question was both for stalling sake as well as curiosity. She was Madeline Hatter after all. He wanted to know what the girl could come up with.

The redhead surveyed him, considering her answer. It looked like she hadn't thought much about it either. Her style seemed to be blind reaction, but she tried to answer anyway. “An eye for an eye. They destroyed my father, so I'll destroy-”

“Destroy what?” Hayes interjected.

“Are you suddenly concerned about someone other than yourself?”

Hayes stared off into space. He sighed.

The battle wasn't the war.

“You've got me in a corner, don't you?” Hayes quirked an eyebrow at her.

Madeline smiled. “Literally.” He twisted to see she was right. He was looking at the dead end of the alley. Only him and Hatter present to hear. He guessed this would just have to serve as a lesson. The poor kid.

“Your dad’s store…” He felt Madeline hold her breath, “The Tremaine. Anthony. I saw him that night, busted into the middle of the whole scene.”

Her eyebrows knitted together as she shook her head in confusion. “He’s your competitor why would you protect-”
“Would you shut up so I can tell you?” She shifted back but nodded emphatically. Hayes rolled his eyes. “Apparently, he had to earn respect from his mother to take the lead on the castle. He needed something big. The Hatter's a notable villain but still old and senile enough to be a good target.” Madeline shut her eyes but Hayes didn’t bother to care. It was the truth. “When he saw me, he panicked. We both knew he couldn't afford a new enemy in his pursuit of the castle. I wasn’t going to be intimidated into silence. I’d tell everybody if it took him out of the competition. It was the end for him no matter which way you looked at it.” Hayes smiled to himself, “He was ready to accept his fate and watch me run off. He was so vulnerable, I had to take advantage. I offered him a deal. He’d earn my silence by giving me anything I needed to win. His full support had to be behind me, his money, his weapons, his pride, and then maybe his mother might warrant a place by Hades’ side.”

Madeline slowed down as she took the smallest step toward Hayes. She locked in on him, “That’s a pretty big debt to owe.”

He simply shrugged, “He was afraid you'd come after him.”

She breathed hard, “So he didn’t want to kill me?”

“No, definitely not. He knew you guys weren’t there. He has a conscience.”

She smirked. She threw her arms around Hayes which he quickly pushed off. He barked her down with a sneer. Hayes re-secured his hoodie and wrapped it tight around his face. “You’re oddly invested in this whole shop thing,” Hayes drawled out. His voice cuts out when Maddy gave him a pitiful look.

“It’s my dad, of course, I’m going to stick up for him.” She looked up at Hayes strangely as she retrieved her own cloak from the ground.

Hayes laughed. She didn't expect a reply.

Everything was tucked in. He started his way towards the street; he almost made it out before Madeline latched onto his sleeve holding him back. “Hey,” She watched him as his head bent towards her, “Why would you give up that support? No one would see it coming, it could guarantee a win.”

Hayes stepped out of her grasp. Begrudgingly, he didn’t walk off. His face went cold.

“It’s not winning if I need some else to be apart of it .”

Madeline lingered by the exit. Pensive. Whoever won that castle it wouldn’t be good for anyone else. She took a step out. “So. Does that mean no Rotten Four? It’s a little hard to be Mal without her friends.” He stepped up next to her.

Hayes looked out into the Marketplace again as the haggard goblins and goons of the Isle made their way back and forth. He smooths down his jeans. His nail snatched on something sharp. The knife. He had almost forgotten. He glanced at Madeline as he opened his mouth. “After everything you’ve seen, you really think Mal has friends?”

Madeline pursed her lips, but he had already bolted. Blended into the frenzy. She thought to herself.

“No.” She let out into the solitary space.

She took off into the opposite direction.
The little girl entered the alleyway only a few small steps at a time. Shaking. She swallowed hard as she eyed the brick buildings to her right and left that formed the narrow space. Her hands had cramped up. Her palms were slick. The full darkness enveloped her as she passed the threshold of the alley. She had started to sweat. The odor was palpable. It only derailed her nerves even more. She took her thumb and swiveled it around her ring as she ventured farther in. She licked her lips and spread her hands to steady herself. She held onto both walls at once. She started to slow down. The girl had already entered the darkest part of the alley. She could barely see her hands in front of her. The brunette glanced around rapidly waiting for some approaching figure but was unsure if she could distinguish such a thing. She closed her eyes once, tight. Open. No tangible difference. She whistled high and long letting it bounce off the walls. It came as a slight relief. Someone could hear her scream. Then, she heard shuffling. She steadied herself. Her back firmly against the wall. Her hand clutched tight, afraid to drop its contents. The noises grew closer. A small silhouette just barely made itself out in the thinning light. It looked at her. She stepped up from the wall. “Do you have it?” She called out, cursing the weakness of her voice. The figure nodded. Slowly, she felt rough fingers pull at her hand as she unfurled them, revealing dozens of crumbled bills underneath. The shadow snatched them. It took a second, there was the quick sound of rummaging before her empty palm was replaced with a small brown paper bag. She used her other hand to grab at the top. The contents shook next to her ear. She heard it move. Eager, she almost opened the package until she realized it was still too dark to see. She looked up, “Thank you,” she whispered into the same darkness, figuring the person still had to be close. She bit her lip. One more time. She wearily looked at her surroundings. She wasn’t sure if she could do this again. She scurried out of the alleyway. As quickly as she had come.

Felix watched as the girl retreated down the alley. He adjusted his collar. He had practically felt the fear emanating from that kid. She was so worried she hadn't even realized he had taken her wallet. Plus, the ring. He pocketed the money. He had made a clean sixty dollars, not counting whatever bonuses her gifts brought. The ring slipped nicely on his finger. He fished for a second. His hands scrambling in the dark before they brushed against his bag. He slung the drawstring up. He had to see how much he’d scored.

He strode out of the alley looking up at the dreary sky. Might rain. Felix expected it. The King wouldn't clear up the weather even for his special little ceremony. Don’t better what is broken. He went to unfold the wallet before he had noticed a woman waiting for him in the light.

She stood high and mighty, both delicate hands splayed on equally slender hips. Dangerously long nails stretched over the expanse of smooth tan skin. She towered over him. In heels and without. Her silky black hair flowed smoothly down her back. She snapped her fingers. A call for his attention. They both knew she already had it.

Felix let his bag rest on one shoulder. He smiled down. “I’m guessing you’re not here for my services.”

She scoffed at him. Her hair tossed over her shoulder. “Good guess. I’m guessing you’re not here for mine.” She smirked. Felix rolled his eyes. Although, he knew many would have taken her up on her offer. She crossed the space towards him as she, a tad mockingly, looked down. “So you're selling in alleys, now. Isn't it a little late for anonymity?”

He let out an annoyed puff. The alley covered his face a lot better than loading up a shack. Far
He walked out onto the side street. She followed him, recognizing his cue to talk. “I’m not protecting myself. I’m protecting the product. Which you should be happy for Ms. Princess of Hearts.”

Heather smiled brightly this time revealing the pearly white teeth beneath her red lips. She was beautiful. She had worked hard to be.

Felix’s lingering stare went noticed. Heather moved to pat his hair, since patting his head wasn’t an option. He had a helmet of caramel brown curls. Afro defense for his skull. Felix swatted. His mane didn’t protect his dignity quite as well. She then leaned her elbow on his shoulder as they continued walking. He was sure she only did it to emphasize the height difference. He looked up at her. She lifted her hands as she spoke. “Good for you for using my official title. It almost makes your shady side business seem a little less disgusting.” She marveled. He laughed down at the ground. She could judge him as much as she wanted.

The scared girl had run off this same road. He couldn’t tell if she had made it far enough down. It wouldn’t be safe to exit the same way. Even she could connect the dots. Heather dropped her forearm off his shoulder and stretched into his space to follow his gaze. She pivoted back to Felix with a weary flick in her eyes. “What exactly did you give that girl?”

Felix shifted. Heather wouldn’t like what she saw, but she knew that already. Tentatively, he knelt. He laid his backpack down on the concrete and began to pull the strings apart. Heather crouched over. She held up the end of her skirt, carefully avoiding the ground. The strings flew apart. The bag went limp. In one corner, piled up, were the empty folded brown bags, and on the other, lay a dozen small baggies. He pulled out a caplet. He flicked the Ziploc once as he held it up for examination. Heather took the various bunch of tablets from his hand. She looked skeptical. Albeit somewhat pacified. “How much shit did you put in here?”

Felix stood indignantly still holding the pills, “They’re my mixed party bags. They sell pretty well. They’re mostly Oxy and Morphine, some Ecstasy, LSD if you’re lucky.” He shook the bag in her face. She moved it away gently but scoffed at him nonetheless. “They sell a lot quicker together. I’ve been pushing pretty well this week.” Heather ignored him as she strolled down the street. He snatched his bag back. He decided not to mention the opioids had already sold out that day.

She pointed a scolding finger back at him, “You shouldn’t feel pride in that, Felix. You’re above this.”

Felix looked off to the side. “Right.” Internally, he had rolled his eyes out of their sockets. Heather was a princess. Through and through. No one was above anyone in the tragic little fishbowl they were trapped in. Their parents had invaded entire lands. Their children bargained over a castle. He knew the main villains loved to assert their positions, his own father included, at least their enemies ruled kingdoms. However, The Queen of Hearts didn’t even belong to the group. Alice wasn’t a princess, by a long shot. He pressed his lips together. She could follow any formalities she liked; they all grew up under the same bitter sun. “Well, my business you despise so much is about to buy us another week worth of non-perishables.”

She clasped her hands together. Eyebrows tight. “We need another whole week of food?” She whispered. She had fixed onto him.

Felix bit his lip. He gazed down the street refusing to look over. “Cassie said with the turn of the tides we’ll be fighting the current. She was positive. With the addition, we could be out at sea for four weeks...” He swallowed.
Heather and Felix fell into a cold quiet. They walked alongside each other. Tense. The breeze had picked up. Small blows. That was all it took to threaten the volatile atmosphere.

Heather couldn’t hold it. He felt her pick up before she even spoke. Her eyes grew steely.

“I don’t believe her.”

Felix glared right back at her, “No, you don’t want to believe her.”

She flipped around in her spot to face him. “It doesn’t take a month to get from here to Auradon. That's asinine! When you oversaw routes for the Raid, you mapped us out there in 10 days max.” Heather’s jaw clenched tight.

Felix wasn't naive. He wasn't the first one to try, but that's exactly why he had to be the last. The Isle was so tiny. So irrelevant. A blip on the map between the kingdom’s greatest achievements. Meanwhile, the only people who got to experience both worlds, sat obediently, not even utilizing the hunk of rock they stood on. He’d never make that mistake. He wanted off. Then, two years ago, a mysterious force gave him the chance. A machine activated, changing the foundational limitations of the Island. Out of nowhere. A rip. The barrier met its match. In just the smallest fragments, magic had seeped its way into the Isle. Since then, Auradon repaired their hole, but they had been as rattled as the residents. The barrier wasn't foolproof. However, people wrongfully jumped to conclusions that day. The barrier hadn’t been broken. It had been weakened. That day marked the fragile spell. The ripples stayed. Nowhere else had taken the hit like the docks. The Goblin Wharfs brought in constant shipments, deflating the barrier. Auradon had armed them with a means of escape.

The four of them just had to seize it.

“Cassie is an expert at sea. I don’t have her experience. Besides, I made those calculations weeks ago, things could have changed.” Heather fisted her hair in her hands. Felix, trying to stay patient, reasoned with her. “Besides, there's no need to upset her days before we go.”

“Listen to yourself!” Heather tugged at a chunk full of her hair. She slid her fingers out. She couldn’t dare to jeopardize her appearance. “We are solid on this plan. Cassandra is not. She thinks we’re going to leave her behind, so she’s been misleading us with these ridiculous forecasts!” She stepped into Felix’s face.

He rolled up his sleeves as he crossed his arms to stand indignantly in front of her. “Ah yes. An extra week of precautionary food. I guess revenge is best served in surplus.” Felix contested with a sour look in his eyes.

Heather brushed it off as quickly as he said it, stepping into the light to gesture out towards the sky. “She wants us to think it’s unachievable!” She threw her hands up, “Think logically! The royal car only takes an hour to drive across.”

Felix froze.

Heather gulped down a breath of air. He coughed. Low in his throat. Heather looked over at him. The anger immediately cascading out of her in waves. Felix sank. His dark brown eyes bore into the ground but even so, she felt the gaze prickle around her. She straightened up. She blew out the breath across her lips to calm herself. Slowly, she pulled in another. Sweet. The words left her mouth slow and soft. “Felix. I know how your mind gets,” She nodded. She tried to study his face, but it was pointed at the ground. “I didn’t mean it the way you think.”
Felix had sucked his lips in. His hands slid casually in his pocket as his sharp eyes shot out. Full force. “I think the meaning got across fine. The limo is your preferred method of transportation, is it not?” Heather’s mouth held tight.

He was aware enough to know that with anyone else it was a simple statement. Not Heather Hearts. She always chooses her words carefully. It was ingrained in her. Since she was a child, she was never the soldier type. She didn’t believe in loyalty the same way everyone else did. Loyalty belonged to no one. Only goals. If she was set, she’d see it through, no matter which way she had to bend. Ambition. It drove her to the Raid. It could still drive her towards any other method of escape. He never believed connections could keep her around. She’d stick to her best bet. If she didn’t have confidence in the Raid, she’d pull out.

“I just said that we were solid. I’m not dumb enough to fall for Auradon’s tricks. I’m not relying on them to save me.” She grabbed his shoulders on either side, searching his face for understanding.

She found none.

He thought the admonishment, fully unconvincing. She could save face as much as she wanted. Felix had already drawn her plot in his mind. “Sure, you say that, but it would be convenient, wouldn’t it? Like you said, the trips easier and faster. They take care of your accommodations.”

“Are you trying to convince me to go?” Heather stepped in to argue back.

“Only if you're compelled to.” Felix uncrossed his arms. Instead, opting to cup them behind his back. “If you're inclined to submit yourself to that level of compliance. I mean you won’t have to think for yourself. You can just hold whatever role they give you. You’re such a stickler for rules maybe you get enjoyment out of living on someone else's terms. Just be nothing but backwash from the Isle. That’s what the Rotten Four are doing. Maybe you just want to be like Mal. Princesses are known for sitting pretty.” He finished. Dry.

Heather craned her neck. Her tongue swiveling inside of her mouth. A humorless laugh fought its way out of her. He bristled. She took careful precision to make sure she leaned down directly above him. “Facilier, if you're trying to equate me to a wet blanket, then you're in dire need of reflection. I was the only one confident and forward-thinking enough to settle on a deal for the announcements. I suggested we make a pack to deny the invitations to Auradon if they came. I finalized it. I don't need any reminders. I’m making it off this island on my own terms. You’re over calculating, wait, miss calculating thoughts aside. I could get off this Isle anyway I choose. So, don't make me curious about my other options.” She brushed down. In one quick swoop. Her nail left a mark on his cheek

Heather retreated into her own space. She didn’t break eye contact. Felix didn't either. The two continued the silent standoff while still visibly boiling. Overdone. Then, gradually, Felix’s face grew softer and Heather’s mirrored it.

He shut his eyes tight as he centered himself. Deep breath. When he opened them, he had outstretched his hand toward her. He conceded. “I know.” He gave a small nod.

She glanced down at the outreach taking a moment to deliberate. She grasped tightly. “I know better.” She twinkled. Felix chuckled. Their hands parted as they turned to stroll down the road. This time with Heather as the lead.

They had reached the end of the side street and entered the border of the Isle.
A crowd seemed to be gazing out to greener pastures as they stood around with an almost gleeful look amongst them. He shaded his eyes. He inspected closer, beyond the bubble, towards the Beast’s castle. Real. He could forget that sometimes. That the land across the sea was real. It wasn’t just a mirage in the distance. Someday he'd be there. He could prove it to himself. Not fake. Real. The two looked over into the crowd. It was peaceful. They were all thinking the same thing. Cohesively mapping out a future in a faraway land.

Felix snapped out of it. He clutched onto reality. He analyzed the crowd more directly and identified at least a dozen regulars from his father’s shop.

Heather piped up, “You know this would be a good place to try to sell-”

“Way ahead of you,” He interrupted already laying out his bag on the floor again. Felix set everything out. Careful in its place. He hoisted the bag up to wiggle it in front of her. “Salesman?” He mocked. She rolled her eyes but accepted the bag into her hands. She shook out her hair. The silk cascaded. She unhooked the top two buttons of her dress as she hoisted the hem up even higher on her waist. Her chest open. She glanced at Felix for approval. He nodded curtly.

She rubbed his head one last time before she sauntered away. “Check back in an hour!” She called over her shoulder.

He watched as Heather approached a lone man on the outside of the swarm. Fat. Sweaty. She practically hung off him as they spoke. It only took thirty seconds for her to lead him away by his arm with a dopey grin on his face. As they gallivanted away, she shot Felix a wink. She’s a killer.

They'd sell it all in no time.

He hung back for a moment longer. He scratched his head. He had put up a front for Heather, but his suspicions still lingered. He didn’t believe Cassie. Heather would only escalate the conflict so she had to be abated. However, it was reassuring to have his doubts corroborated. Felix had to handle the brunt of the problem. As usual. To ensure the success of the Raid, Cassie would have to be dealt with. He’d need reinforcement. Felix spun around and headed back down the side street they came from.

Hunter’s body rammed into the saloon doors with a quake as they shuttered and slammed onto the sides of the wall. They clapped. The sound barely registered amongst the drunken cacophony. Hunter remained in the doorway. The bar sat at the very back of the room. The front lined rows of round tables. Beer bottles and coins rattled from every part of the room. He’d thought the place had music but no one would be able to tell over the shouting. The men, closest to the entrance, seemed to be the only ones taking respectful sips of their brews. They were playing cards. Chips stacked. Ready to be whisked away. From the looks of it, none of them could afford a big loss. He could relate. Hunter shouldn’t have been out in the first place, but he had business here.

He stalked out of the doorway. Relieved, the double doors swung closed behind him. He couldn't stand the spot. There was enough villandry to go around without adding alcohol to the mix. They looked a mess. He figured half of the people in here were drinking in anticipation of the announcement. Strange. People would devote so much time to chance while Maleficent's castle sat unguarded. He shouldn't be surprised. Villains hate hard work. He searched the people, scanning
faces at every table.

Suddenly, there was an odd uptick in noise. He swiveled for the source. Abruptly, a boy went sailing down the bar counter on his back as his skull crashed into the opposite wall. Every head popped up. Eyes swerved for clues. The same thought sat unified across the bar; stunt or fight?

A block of a human stomped angrily after the slider.

The question answered itself.

He grumbled as he headed over with everybody else. A dense swarm encircled them. Hunter managed to squeeze himself comfortably to the front. The guy, who had ended up on top of the bar, struggled to sit back up. His short black ponytail knocked over everything that rested on the counter with him. The bulky man was drenched in sweat. He took the opportunity to haul ponytail off the table. The man grabbed hard.

The smattering crowd couldn't seem to get enough. The brute had him by the collar. Desperate, the smaller pulled the hand trying to ring it off. “Stop moving you little prick!” The builder hit him square in the nose. Red trickled out. However, he didn’t look ready to quit yet. The boy bit down. Hard. The attacker jerked away. The man held his hand, beyond furious. He lifted up his boot. His opponent trembled. Suddenly, the raven-haired boy was back against the counter with the boot slamming on his insides. His stomach was crushed between the foot and the bar. The people hollered. They raised their glasses in awe of the fine display of strength. The boy wheezed. The man put even more pressure onto his middle until he began gasping. The weaker slipped his hands beneath his pant leg. He felt exposed skin. Swiftly he dug his nails. Down. Pulling deep. The man groaned out in pain. Both were bleeding now. The pressure on his midsection alleviated, and for a second, the boot retreated an inch.

As the beast wiped at the streak of blood the kid had enough sense to rise to his feet again. He glanced. Nowhere to run. He acted quick. He raised his fist and socked the older man in the jaw. The thick neck went teetering back. He had staggered! The underdog went to jab him in the eye. The man wobbled unsteadily. The kid grabbed him by his biceps trying to keep as much distance as possible. They spun. The older man’s back hit the bar and all at once, the boy pushed him. The attacker went flying over the other side. The man had gone tumbling. He reached his hand out for balance, but hit the shelf. Glass smashed. It piled on top of the man concealed behind the counter.

The boy looked.

Hunter smirked.

A woman in the mass, clearly tipsy, let out a whoop of support. Inspired, everyone joined in. Clapping. Hooting. Hunter glanced around as he slowly put his hands together too. The boy reveled in it. He grinned wide as the shouts grew louder. The winner snatched a drink from one of the men in the front and raised it in a toast. The people laughed. Joyously, they raised up as well. Hunter searched for a glass to do the same, until he noticed a head, poking out from the counter. The same man. Beaten. He climbed over the counter. A shard of glass, as long as his forearm, was clutched in his hand. The boy didn’t notice. He hadn't turned around yet. The man wielded it above his head.

Before Hunter knew it, he had a fist in his hand.

Hunter pushed the boy aside to grab onto the man. The strip dropped to the floor. The man stuttered. He tugged his hand back trying to loosen the grip but found it impossible. Hunter had him. “Nice try. But next time, stay down.” He barked out.
Hunter tightened his grip. He didn't stop tightening his grip. He clenched down as if he expected the hand to enclose in on itself. The man shrieked out in pain. He was overwhelmed. His face felt hot. The man’s arms popped with veins. He tried to throw his body into dislodging the appendage but the power made his brain scatter. Then came a pop. A crunch. The man contorted as he fought to free himself. After the third pop, Hunter let go. It was disturbing. The bones were all set out of place. His fingers lay limply out of the socket. An awkward bump sat on the back of the hand. As soon as it was over, the man scattered away. For good. Hunter turned back to the boy and the crowd.

The bar had gone silent. Hunter shrugged. Blank and unforgiving. The woman from before yelled out to put her glass in the air once more. The others joined. Silently. A dozen cups thrust up in the dead air. The crowd disassembled. Shrouded looks lingered on Hunter as they moved back into the usual bar throngs.

Save one.

The boy glared up at him.

Hunter sighed. He rested his hand on the younger’s shoulder, “Gus, you need to lighten up. I just did you a favor.”

Gus shrugged off the hand. He paced past Hunter over to the bar. He beelined to a beer that most likely wasn't his. Gus swerved back around to stare down Hunter. He finished it all in one go.

“I had it handled,” Gus assured. He set the empty bottle back onto the counter.

Hunter groaned. “That guy was a Hun, he would’ve cut your head open.” Hunter moved closer to the bar as he climbed up onto an empty wooden stool. It was shaky. Predictable. The chair had likely been an unsuspecting casualty of a bar fight. He felt his weight push down on the chair. He planted his feet. Too much muscle. After he stabilized himself, he patted the spot next to him. A peace offering. Gus, more out of curiosity rather than gratitude obliged.

“Hm, that’s not the worse. Maybe I would've gotten free pity beer out of it.” Gus kept on, scanning the room for something to catch his interest.

Hunter flared.

He knew the big talker was ungrateful but he didn’t have to be a whiner too. Hunter was known for his skill. Revered. Enough that no one dared to test those skills. Until he showed some feat of strength. Then, word spread. People would gossip about the instance. True. False. It only came with harm to him. The more people he fought, the more people fought him. It was an endless cycle. He tried to avoid it the best he could. Yet, his hand was forced again, by Gus.

“You’re not a kid anymore, you’re 16. Gaston doesn’t have a major reputation. If they think they can kill you, they will kill you.” Hunter bore his eyes, trying to find some sense in the kid.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Gus muttered.

Gus scarfed down another bottle. Drinking is probably the only thing Gaston had passed down to his son. Hunter looked him up and down. He wouldn’t be surprised if alcohol was the majority of his diet considering how scrawny he was. The kid reached over to retrieve another. He paused. He counted fingers under the table, murmuring to himself. Hunter lowered his head with a familiar disdain. He brought his hand back when he noticed Hunter staring. He held the drink closer than before. “Aren’t you going to ask what we were fighting about?”
“Let me guess,” He shot off quickly. “Something stupid you wouldn't have cared about if you were sober.”

“Ha! Like you've seen me sober.”

Gus sipped on his new drink.

As soon as Gus set it back down Hunter popped up. He pulled it out of reach. Gus wavered. “So you cockblocked my fight and now you trying to cut me off too?”

Hunter leaned back into the counter, arms crossed. “I am. You can't be stumbling around. I need you alert for what we're about to do.”

Gus wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He looked longingly at the beer Hunter had acquired. Gus hummed in consideration. “I could probably do it drunk, but let’s hear it.”

Hunter edged his elbows onto the bar. “It’s about Anthony.”

Gus groaned.

“I don’t want anything to do with any stupid castle shit.” Gus had risen up with a start. He unhooked his leg from the stool, but Hunter’s meaty hands had already latched onto his wrist. Frustrated, Gus sank back into his spot. He waited, in clear resentment.

“This isn't just about the castle,” Hunter tried. He held up his free hand to slow him down. Hunter shook his head. Eyes closed. He planted his hands on the boy’s forearms as he thought. Gus stared down at the hold, cautiously. It weighed him down like an anchor to the seat. After a moment, he lifted his head back up. “Maddy’s after him.”

Gus shifted. Uneasy. The mood in their talk instantly switching. Most people didn’t get to know Madeline Hatter but for the people who did. She was important.

“Why?”

Hunter dragged his hands off of him. Gus readjusted. He felt more comfortable without the firm grip. Hunter sighed to himself. “Tremaine was the one who busted up her Dad’s place.” Gus’s eyebrow quirked. He was taken aback. “She stopped by my hideaway to tell me. She wants revenge.”

Gus nodded to himself, “Good on her, she should.”

“She wants to storm the mansion.”

“Okay nevermind.” Gus swiveled off the bar stool once again, but this time Hunter let him. He stood there. His forehead glowed red. Gus returned to the stool. Confused. He pointed to the drink that Hunter was still harboring. Hunter forged it over. He took a long drawn out sip. “That’s the entire Tremaine klan.” He looked around scattered, sinking his head even lower.

“Come on,” He whispered back forcefully. “Of course she’s not planning to just go kill everyone! All she wants is Anthony and he’s in hiding.”

“I’m not entirely sure why you aren’t either. The other castle kids have done some fucked up shit.” Gus took the time to remind him.

Hunter ignored the comment, Gus wasn’t surprised. “Look, she just wants to get even. Give him
some justice.”

Gus’s face remained uncertain, “They won’t let that happen.”

Hunter deadpanned. “That’s why we’d have to storm the place.”

Gus chewed on his nails as he continued to swivel his eyes nervously around the bar. His mind raced. He leaned back into Hunter. “Why are you doing this?” Gus asked. Point blank. Hunter had to admit, Gus was quick to sober. “Taking down Ant is a rough bet and honestly doesn’t quite seem like your style. We both know he doesn't have enough game to win. So, who is this really for?”

Hunter turned away. His shoulders shifted. He angled himself, no longer directly facing him.

“She's going to do it whether we are there or not. Might as well get credit for his takedown.” The boy took a moment.

Gus didn’t believe him.

Gus had never meant to become acquainted with Madeline, he assumed no one did. When she was her normal self, he liked her. She was refreshing. But the volatility was a hazard, especially on days like today. He cursed at himself. He didn't have to keep waiting, he knew his answer already.

“We can't let her burn down the entire town. Where is she?”

Hunter’s face warmed in a soft grin. “We got to be at the Tremains in 10 or she's starting without us.” Hunter clapped him on the back and shot up off of the bar stool. Gus rubbed at his back sorely and followed.

The boys moved away from the bar, passed through the tables, and returned to the streets of the Isle.

The city was a wavy blue without any lights to clear it up. Hunter looked over the small houses as Gus came out the doors behind him. It was quieter on this side of town. The homes around here belonged to henchmen and minions. All workers struck down by association. It had none of the intimidation of the center of the Island. Just sad and desperate. Hunter could relate, they didn’t deserve to be here. None of them did.

They took the turn off the bar heading right. Gus had gone comfortably silent. It was nice to see the kid chilled out for once. The two walked in tandem trotting down the cobbled path. Their lane led into another lane which led into another lane which eventually connected them onto the main roads. Hunter looked up at the sky as if it could give him some indication before turning around, “How much time do we have left?”

Gus looked back at him, “You realize there is a giant clock in the center of the city.” Hunter groaned internally but took the suggestion. He figured the center was on the other side of the buildings. He squeezed through the passageway. There, he found the clock but something else caught his attention.

He stared in wonder, “They weren't kidding about the crowd.”

“What?” Gus called out, he squeezed through the buildings too. “Oh. Fuck.”

Their eyes glazed in front of it all.
Being there made him feel very different. The crowd was intensely alluring. Their energy and hopes seemed to shoot out amongst them with an almost innate pull. He wanted to be invested. He wanted to speculate and debate about what was going to happen like some sort of Isle wide reality show. Looking at them, he wanted to go. He couldn't say it was out of style for the Isle. Residents would do anything to get to the top. There was no higher top than Auradon. As much as Hunter was curved by the thrill he had to stay straight. He knew the likelihood of him going, especially with The Evil Queen’s lineage still running around the castle. The truth of the matter was that he didn't have time to stop. He had business here on the Isle. So would the rest of them when the four suck-ups would be called. He was just rejoining reality early.

As they each separated from the haze, they walked around the ring of the crowd to the other side.

Hunter ducked into the Market instantly troubled by the busy space. He was strong, but he didn’t want castle trouble today.

Hunter began to slouch trying to conceal his toned figure as he shrunk in on himself. His face gaining cover under the shadow of his hand. He peered through his fingers as he swung his head around looking for anyone suspicious. He glanced back as well, making sure Gus was still behind him. He was right on his heels. He grew angry at himself. He should’ve taken a different route. How could he have forgotten how large of a space this was? Hunter lowered his head as far down as possible. He tensed up as something was pushed into his free hand. He focused harder, it was cotton. Hunter turned around to look at Gus in surprise. The other boy simply shrugged and gestured loosely at him. Carefully, Hunter pulled on the hoodie and tied the strings together. It was tight, but it kept him hidden.

They walked until they had hit the end of the stretch. The packs thinned out but the human traffic still hadn’t dispersed. The final stores on this side of the Market were even more shady and secluded. A strange marriage of both hobbled down and overdone. He had been maneuvering quickly through those who had ventured this far down, but with his big body, he was mostly bumping into people. Suddenly, one walker had enough roughly bumping Hunter off to the side of the road and straight into a chain linked fence. Hunter stood up ready to square off until he realized what he had fallen into.

It was the Hatter’s old shop.

The shop short and stout had been uniquely cared for. The bright blue front walls used to be smattered with strokes of other eccentric colors. Almost as if someone had repeatedly smashed a dozen paint cans across the four walls. Knowing the owner that was probably exactly what had happened.

He missed the walls.

With the windows, they'd been blown away. The shop had been secluded enough to be inconspicuous about the destruction. He resented it, but Anthony had chosen well. Hunter couldn’t imagine how’d he’d knocked everything down without crushing himself in but he wished he had been less careful. The site was nothing but rubble and wood. To the blind eye, it’d be unclear whether it was a building at all or a disposal site. Hunter didn’t have the luxury. The layout was as clear as if it was still standing. The large splintered broken boards were reminiscent of the old front doors. The pieces of glass mixed with scattered shards, a window. Bright patches of fabrics smothered in dust still threatening to wave their flag with the same spirit they once sported on the shelves. The aforementioned of which held on lopsided to each other on the inner panels. The divider which separated the clients from the work had evaporated.
The wreckage spilled out into the street like a small wave. A false look would’ve confused one of the dismembered mannequins as human parts. Madeline would’ve preferred the latter.

The giant holes left the entire room open. A ragged mess, all blackened out from dirt. It might as well have been smoke.

Hunter had held his breath. He strained to tear his eyes away from it. While he was still gripping the fence from where he’d been pushed, he caught Gus in his peripheral. His mouth had hung open. Stuck there. Hunter managed to swallow clearing the pathway. He squatted down to minimize his obstruction of the view. Gus instinctively drew closer. People were attracted to tragedy, he supposed. Hunter swung back to him, “You hadn't seen it yet.” He nodded solemnly down at the ground brushing his hands over the soot that rested there.

Gus remained rooted to the spot. Encaptured in the same way as Hunter. He regained himself enough to close his mouth, licking his lips to warm them up again. His breath grew louder as he searched for the awareness to speak. Without moving anything but his lips Gus muddled out his words. “I don’t think I realized it until right now...but I didn’t really believe her.”

Hunter hummed. He had suspected as much.

He rose back to full height and unhooked his fingers from the fence. He looked over his shoulder at his companion before wresting out a strand of the hoodie off the fence. He gave a wistful look over the place, “We're almost there.” Gus soaked up the last bit of disaster before shaking his head and walking along. Hunter turned his back on the place.

They finally took the turn off the marketplace to enter the normal city streets. Down one road and up the other. They had finally reached the Mansion. The boys stood. They covered themselves in the darkness of the alley, marking out their location. Across the gravel stone driveway, were four henchmen guarding the porch.

Abruptly, Hunter felt a heavy weight drop onto his back. He flipped around ready to toss the figure onto the wall when he stopped.

Madeline Hatter smiled down at him perched on his back. “Hello, my knight in shining armor.”

Unconsciously, a smile etched itself onto Hunter’s face.

“Hey.” Hunter lowered her down from where she had jumped onto him. The girl was still beaming up at him, and while he enjoyed it, he couldn’t help but feel embarrassed as the party animal next to him looked between them strangely.

Maddy realizing she wasn’t getting much attention from the jock decided to shake Gus and wrap her arms around him excitedly. He didn’t do much to stop it. Hunter watched as slowly Gus gave up the attitude and mirrored the movements of the girl holding onto him. “Where have you been?” Maddy quirked an eyebrow examining him. “A ship always sails always sinks.” Gus scratched his neck, trying to figure that out.

Hunter moved away from the cluster opting to loiter by the edge of the pathway. He leaned up against the brick. Since the King’s order against guns, they had largely been swept off the Isle. Potentially, it gave them an even playing field. However, the Tremaine’s were still rich. Hunter bit his lip. The two in front they could manage. But they’d still have to face the unknowns inside. When the family catches on they’ll unleash their full power. Their small group could be trampled. Even if they didn’t leave with stab wounds it would still be a hard beating. Anthony would be all too happy to celebrate their failure. Plus, Lady Tremaine was not quick to forgive. As much as
Hunter knew this, he knew Maddy did too. He stopped eyeing the beyond as he turned back into the conversation.

Maddy had excitedly been talking when Hunter zoned back in. “What’s with the bloody nose. Did you win a fight?” Hunter raised his eyebrow at the kid.

Hunter shook his head. “No. The guy came at him with a broken bottle ready to carve him out like a pumpkin.”

Gus’s face dropped. “That’s only after I tossed him behind the bar, which is why those bottles were broken in the first place.” Maddy dazzled. He soaked up the attention in all of its glory.

“You mean after he slid you across an entire counter.” Hunter pitched in again. Gus shot him a glare back, not ready to back down from an obvious test.

“At least, I don’t step in last minute taking over another’s man victory.” Gus provoked, edging him on.

Madeline felt caught between the tension. She tried to think of a way to get them back on track. “So I actually have a game plan for once!” She announced, but it was too late, the boys were too into it.

“At least, I don’t start fights just to get my ass kicked when the winner was obvious was the start.” Hunter hits back.

Maddy jumped in again, “Well, it’s good training either way for what we’re about to do today-”

“Exactly!” Gus steps closer to the taller man. “It’s training to bring out y natural inheritance.”

Hunter laughed in his face. “If you had a natural inheritance he wouldn’t have been three times your size.”

Gus steamed. Maddy backed away feeling the fire emanating off of both boys.

“Well, I see you have your natural inheritance since you’re obviously obsessed with an underage girl.” Gus jaw set clenched.

That was all it took.

Hunter swung hard, but Gus ducked out of the way. Another swing. Another miss. He stopped swinging. He wrestled his hands around the other boy’s neck throwing him in a headlock. Gus kicked. He landed a blow on the other’s thigh. Down. Hunter was on one knee. Gus barrelled into him slamming him down on the ground. He managed to land blows on his stomach. Hunter coughed. He was a quick recovery though. He flipped Gus. His head smashed hard onto the pavement. Gus grabbed his fists before he could swing it. Hunter pushed against the hold.

From the corner of his eye, he sees Tremaine’s guard running down the driveway. Hunter glanced up at Maddy. She was staring off towards the house. She was surveying it. She spun back towards the boys still wrestling with each other.

“I was going to ask you to provide a distraction but this works too.”

Maddy adjusted her coat methodically. Her spindly fingers maneuvering the buttons slowly as she unhooked them. The boys watched. She reached into the inside pocket. She pulled out a lighter. “Hunter. Gus.” She motioned for them to move apart. Hunter stands up first. Gus roughly shoving
his way off the ground. The guards stop coming seeming confused. They called out to the teens, but it was too far to hear. Maddy only smiled gently as she continued to move forward. The men were clearly irritated as they stalked toward her.

Hunter moved to trail behind her but Maddy wagged her finger behind her back. As she walked, a small bucket dripped behind her. He waited. She continued to approach. This time she could hear the men. They shouted at her to move their catfight off the property. There was no excuse now. She opened her mouth as if to respond but instead left it hanging. The motion stopped the men as they waited. She closed her lips again. One of the men sighed. He reached out as if he were going to turn her away, then they noticed the small tin in her hand. Once they saw it she quickly tossed it behind them as it clunked on the pavement a foot or two from the porch. She bolted in the other direction. As she did the open lighter fell onto the street. The flame caught as it sparked across the entire entrance. The street was ablaze. The Tremaine House was officially under siege. Maddy smiled. She walked right past the guards as they stood horrified at the scene around them. The men shook their heads furiously. They dashed after her. Hunter rushed into action with Gus quickly behind. Hunter grabbed one guard as Gus tackled the other. Hunter knocked the two men’s heads together until they went unconscious. Maddy hadn’t even looked back. She drew a heart against the door frame as her fingers trailed across the knob. On the threshold, she paused calling out,

“Don’t wait up!”

She opened the door and walked in.

The boys followed her in the same direction.

End Notes

Ha. So as you may have seen if you're down here that this is the second iteration of this story. Although, I didn't hate the first drafts it came to the point where I got lost and I didn't know where I wanted to go next. In a story that can be very dangerous. Instead of continuing to chug along and trying to fight my way to a plot I decided to scrap it all and give myself a break. I came back after I got very watching Descendants 2. It was obviously good but it wasn't what I wanted it to be. So this is how I fix that hole in my heart. I can assure any readers that I now know exactly where I'm going with this fic and you're in for a treat. There is some unexpected villandry, a few romantic bumps, and an ending I can't wait to write. Plus the old fic works as a great framework to fit this new main five centric plot into. So please enjoy!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!