### Waiting Dragons

**Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at** [http://archiveofourown.org/works/16344293](http://archiveofourown.org/works/16344293).

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<td>Series:</td>
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<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2018-10-19 Updated: 2020-01-28 Chapters: 49/? Words: 268072</td>
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### Waiting Dragons

by Dragonbat

**Summary**

While Rumple and Belle try to rebuild their relationship in the aftermath of Heartstrings a threat from Emma's past arrives in Storybrooke bent on revenge. Rumbelle with sides of CS, OutlawQueen, Dwarfstar, and Snowing.

**Notes**
A/N: This is the sequel to my earlier fic, Heartstrings. While I hope I'm making this one accessible enough to anyone who hasn't read it, I might fall short at times. So, in a nutshell, we're in an AU in which Rumple reached out and phoned Belle instead of Ursula after his heart attack in 4B. She, Emma, and August went to New York to help him. Right now? Rumple is no longer the Dark One. He and Belle are trying to rebuild their relationship. August is no longer in danger of reverting to wood. Zelena is currently locked up in a cell beneath the hospital and pregnant with Robin's child. Oh, and Lily has just arrived in New York bent on revenge for what the Charmings did to her mother and has made contact with Ursula.
Chapter One

Waiting Dragons

"How should we be able to forget those myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

—Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Chapter One

Rumpelstiltskin awoke at his usual hour, donned a robe over his pajamas, and made his way to the window. The sun hadn't fully risen yet, but the sky was definitely growing lighter. It was less than a week now until the winter solstice. Another month or so and he wouldn't need to dress by lamplight if the Venetian window shade slats were opened slightly.

His bedroom was warm and Rumple was almost reluctant to get dressed, have breakfast and go outside. He knew he had to, though. If he didn't, Emma would be concerned when she popped by the shop on her way to the sheriff station and found the door still barred. Then she'd either be here, knocking on his door or calling Booth to check in on him.

That reminded him. He was due at Marco's for dinner tonight. He paused in the doorway of his walk-in closet. Normally, there was no question of what he would wear: whichever Armani suit caught his eye, to be coordinated with the proper dress shirt and tie. But Marco wasn't much given to formality. Rumple wasn't even certain whether the handyman owned a suit. And he'd never seen August in even a sports jacket. Perhaps, Armani would be overdressing? If he had time to go home and change first, then there was no issue. But if not... Perhaps he ought to bring a change of clothing—a more casual change of clothing— with him.

As he brushed past the designer suits to the clothes at the back of his closet that he wasn't certain he'd even looked at, much less worn, during or after the 28 years of the Dark Curse, he realized that he was smiling. And scant wonder. Had anyone told him four months ago there would be people to look in on him when they didn't need a favor or a deal, or that anyone would even notice if he went missing, much less worry about him, or that anyone would care enough to invite him to dine with them, he would have been hard-pressed not to laugh in their faces. But now...

His clothing selections made—both for now and for later—he dressed swiftly and snapped up his phone from the dresser where it was charging. Before he put it into his jacket pocket, he pulled up the directory. He knew it was there, but it still gave him a rush of warmth to see the latest addition to that list. And even if he never called it, just having it meant more than those who had given it to him could ever know.

There was a message from Belle reminding him about their lunch date and whether he wanted to pick her up at the library, have her stop off at the shop, or just meet at the restaurant. He shook his head, but he was still smiling. Belle had never been ashamed to be seen with him, but she was still needlessly embarrassed to show her face at Granny's after what she'd done there several weeks ago.
This, even though Rumple had a strong suspicion that most of the other patrons would be falling over themselves to congratulate her. Belle apparently thought otherwise. And truthfully, Rumple wasn't inclined to press matters.

As deeply as Belle had wounded him in the past, as frightened as he'd been about letting her back into his life, he had to admit that these last few days had been almost as unbelievably wonderful as the day she'd stumbled into his shop for the first time, right before Emma had broken the curse. They were still feeling each other out, still exploring their new relationship, and it was terrifying and glorious and even if they still weren't sure that they could finally get it right, Rumple found himself daring to hope that they would. And today would be another step down a path that both were finally finding the courage to explore. Rumple couldn't wait.

There had been a couple of tense moments between them the evening before last, and he'd been tempted to lie as he would have on previous occasions. He hadn't wanted to upset her and telling her what he knew she'd wanted to hear would have smoothed things over for the time being, but eventually the truth would have come out and she would have been all the more upset. Being honest with her had almost been harder than letting her back in, but he'd somehow managed it. And while Belle hadn't exactly smiled and said that everything was perfectly all right, she hadn't walked away either. Things were complicated, but for once, Rumple didn't see 'complicated' as a deal-breaker.

He was actually whistling as he fastened his tie. And then he broke off abruptly, and his eyes grew wide as he realized what it all meant.

"I'm... happy," he whispered almost fearfully, half-wondering whether speaking the words aloud would somehow wreck it all. And in truth, his eyes darted nervously about, nearly certain that he was about to get a call or a text telling him that some of his plans had fallen through, or that there was some new disaster looming, or that somebody had just discovered some misdeed he'd committed long ago and forgotten about and was just about to burst in and take him to task for it.

His phone didn't buzz. The street outside was quiet. And there was nobody pounding on his door. After a moment, feeling slightly foolish, Rumple reached for his cane and made his way downstairs to the vestibule. But as he took his woolen winter coat off the hanger, the words kept reverberating in his mind.

I'm happy. I'm happy.

And he was.

Belle knew she was being silly. Or, if she wasn't being silly, she needed to get past hurt feelings and admit to herself that after these last months, Rumple's feelings were scarcely unjustified.

All this time, she'd wanted him to be truthful with her, but now that he was doing so, she realized that perhaps, she hadn't been ready for this level of honesty. In the past, she'd tried to be everything for him. When she'd realized that she wasn't, that his dagger—his power—still gave him something she couldn't, she'd taken it badly. And while she'd had some reason for her subsequent actions, she'd had ample cause to regret them since.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that it was all happening again. She still wanted to be everything for him. She still wasn't. And what was worse, not only did she understand why, but she wasn't even certain she could disagree.

"You could have come to me," she'd told him two nights ago. "I know we agreed to take things
slowly, but surely if you needed to discuss… Rumple? Do… do you still want to be with me?
Or…?"

His shocked expression both warmed and dismayed her, but so had his answer. "You know I do, Belle. That never changed. Even when I believed that we were both better off apart." He'd paused then and perhaps it was the fact that he'd had to cast about on the spot for the right words rather than try to fob her off with some glib response he'd prepared earlier that convinced her that he was telling her the truth when he spoke next. "Belle, I never knew what True Love was before I met you. And now, I wonder how I managed to live centuries without it. Without you. But while you make me feel loved, Emma makes me feel safe. And I'll confess that there are times when I do need that more."

The words had stung, even though she knew he hadn't meant to hurt her and that he'd been trying his hardest not to. That twin realization had been the only thing that had kept her from embarrassing herself by demanding to know why he no longer felt safe with her. She had the sinking feeling that Rumple would tell her. And after several weeks of intense self-examination during their time apart, she'd had ample time to recognize just how badly she'd wounded him and how seriously she'd eroded his trust in her. While Rumple had hardly been blameless for the deterioration of their relationship, it had taken too long for Belle to own her part of the problem. They were trying to put it all behind them. Not to forget it or pretend it hadn't happened, but to move past it and try to avoid making the same mistakes that had brought them to their lowest point. No more lies, no more deceptions, no more manipulative behavior. And, to his credit, Rumple was trying to uphold that agreement.

But the truth still hurt.

To her credit, Emma was fully aware of the awkwardness of the situation and she'd called Belle that same evening to assure her that what was going on between her and Rumple was strictly friendship.

"I know it's still kind of sticky," she'd added. "That's why we met at Granny's today; I thought that it would make it clear we weren't running around behind your back or hiding anything. Unless you'd rather we did meet in private?"

She'd rather they wouldn't meet at all. She'd rather Rumple would confide in her. She was still his wife, after all. He should choose her. But Belle had to admit that, even if her marriage hadn't been on shaky ground right now, Rumple probably still would have sought Emma out. And that if Rumple had turned to Archie or August, Belle's dismay would have been nearly as intense. Since she and Rumple had found each other again in this new realm, she'd felt she had to be everything for him and when she'd cast off that role, fearing that she'd lost her own way while trying to help him find his, she'd never thought that he'd find other people to support him.

Belle winced, owning that part of her hadn't wanted him to. If he wouldn't choose her, he wouldn't have anyone and he'd come to regret shoving her away. All those times I thought I wanted him to be a better person, I think what I really wanted was for me to make him a better person. Why can't I be happy he's come so far on his own? Why am I still trying to make this all about me? She closed her eyes. And what if he's right and I can't help him with everything he's facing? Except by encouraging him to seek out the people who can. Which is, I suppose, exactly what he's doing.

Belle massaged her forehead as though that could alleviate the figurative headache she was getting trying to rein in her thoughts and emotions. At least, she was recognizing a few homegrown truths this time out. She loved her husband, but notwithstanding that love, there were parts of his life that she just couldn't relate to the way Emma could. The sheriff hadn't spoken much about her early
years to Belle, but from what she had told her, it seemed as though Emma and Rumple had more than a few experiences in common. If Rumple was now turning to Emma for support because Emma could better understand what he was going through, then it didn't mean that he loved Belle any less.

But it also didn't mean that Belle hadn't wanted to put her fist through her apartment wall last night after those two conversations.

She understood intellectually exactly what was going on and that it was neither a slight nor a betrayal. Emotionally, though, it felt like both. She suspected that she was probably going to spend a number of evenings wanting to punch something for the next little while. Well. Perhaps it was time to indulge that desire in an appropriate fashion.

Belle looked once more at the pamphlet in her hand. Then, she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and strode purposefully up the six concrete steps to Springheel Jack's Kickboxing Academy. She hesitated for less than a minute before she pulled open the double doors. Until now, this was as far as she'd gotten before turning back, but now she stepped inside for the first time and stalked up to the information desk.

"I'd like to register for beginner-level classes," she announced to the clerk, letting her words tumble out quickly before she could lose her nerve again.

"Thanks," Emma said with a distracted smile when Snow set an open-faced grilled cheese sandwich down before her. "I could've made it myself."

Her mother laughed. "Your brother woke me at five. By the time I had him fed, I could hear you moving about and just because you generally let me sleep through the night doesn't mean I can't fix you something in the morning every once in a while." She tilted her head for a moment, still smiling. "Actually, I probably should, to show my appreciation. I never realized how much I took an uninterrupted night's rest for granted before."

Emma made a non-committal sound and absently tucked in, but it was clear her mind was elsewhere.

"Everything okay?"

Emma shook her head. "You remember before you and Dad knew you were married and you were seeing each other behind Katherine's back? I kind of feel like I'm doing the same thing, even though I know it's different."

Snow sat down across from her at the table. "You mean with Rumpelstiltskin."

"Yeah. Belle knows we talk things over. We're not hiding anything."

"You're sure that she knows?" Snow asked. Then, she went on quickly, "I only mean, that when David and I were... thinking we were having an affair, if you recall, he told me he'd told Katherine about us, but he really hadn't—"

"I spoke to Belle yesterday," Emma cut her off. "Gold called me to say she was trying to understand, but she wasn't thrilled. Understandably," she added. "So I followed up with her."

"And?"

"It went... sort of okay, sort of not. And I get it. I really do. Only..."
"Only there are times when Rumpelstiltskin is more comfortable talking things over with you than with her and you don't want to push him away, now that he's trying to reach out."

"Yeah. We connected in New York," Emma nodded. "And afterwards. I mean, it's not love. Not... romantic love, anyway..."

"Emma?"

She blinked at her mother's sudden nervousness and seemed to shake out of her previous vagueness. "No!" she exclaimed. "No, seriously... no. It's more..." She hesitated, realizing that the truth wasn't necessarily going to calm her mother down. "I guess... fatherly," she said, almost afraid to maintain eye contact. But though her mother's eyes did widen slightly, all Snow did was give a slight nod.

"I think I've noticed," she murmured. "And you did say before that you'd started thinking of him as a possible father-in-law," she added.

Emma smiled back, relieved. "Even if he and I aren't really related, he's still family. And ever since we found out that he was Henry's grandfather, we all..." Her voice trailed off, but Snow guessed what she'd been about to say.

"We've all used that against him," she said. "Getting him to help us without asking for anything in return and then looking the other way when he needed us."

"Yeah. I've been working on changing that and I feel like I'm getting through to him."

Snow tilted her head quizzically. "But..."

"Belle's still upset, even if she's trying not to show it."

"Right." Snow shook her head. "So it's..."

"Complicated. I know."

"But Rumpelstiltskin has spoken to her about it."

"Yes and so've I. And she says she's okay with it, and I think she wants to be okay with it, but..."

"But she's not."

Emma shook her head.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Emma realized that her coffee was getting cold and she took a gulp. "I don't know. Just... keep doing what I'm doing for now and hope that things work out. But if people start talking about me the way they did about you after Katherine—"

Snow placed her hand over Emma's. "You're my daughter and I trust you to do the right thing. Whatever it turns out to be."

Emma smiled. "Thanks."

"Papa!" August exclaimed as he trailed his father down the solid wooden steps and breathed in the dank moist air and the fragrances of garlic and dried spices in the cellar. "Whatever you serve
tonight will be fine!"

Marco ignored him as he faced the floor-to-ceiling shelves of glass jars in various shapes and sizes, each one meticulously labeled with a legend penned in the handyman's careful penmanship. It wasn't until he'd loaded the low-sided wooden tray August carried with a variety of pickled and otherwise-preserved fruits and vegetables that he shook his head sorrowfully.

"My son," he said, "if I'd been satisfied with 'fine' when I carved you, then you might been brought to life with your arms too long or your legs too short. Or maybe without knee and elbow joints. If I were satisfied with 'fine' when someone brought me a clock to repair, then it wouldn't be long before some smart young lad or lady set up a competing business and stole away my customers with better craftsmanship. 'Fine' is barely passable and I thought I taught you better."

August sighed. "Yes, Papa," he said, smiling a bit. Some things just didn't change and he wouldn't have had it any other way. "But just so you know, when we were in New York, he was really more of a soup and sandwich type than a seven-course gourmet dinner type."

Marco shrugged. "I didn't say I was going to fix a gourmet dinner. Where would I even begin? But I'm not about to slapdash something together and call it stew, either." He picked up a burlap sack. "Get the potatoes and turnips. I'll see to the apples."

"Sorry this is all I can afford," Lily said as she and Ursula carried their trays to a vacant table in the fast food restaurant's seating area. "The last job I had was waitressing in a place not much better than this."

"Don't worry about it," Ursula replied, "this is kind of a treat for me. Most nights, I just come home to KD or ramen."

"Been there, done that," Lily murmured understandingly. "So…"

"So," Ursula said, "how did you find me? And find out about…?"

"My mother?" Lily finished. She took a bite out of her burger, chewed, and swallowed. "You know, I've been planning it all out in my mind how this meeting was going to go down, imagining what I'd say and what you'd say and I don't mind telling you that I am totally off-script here."

"I take it I'm not what you expected."

"You could say that," Lily replied. "I thought you'd call me your dear sweet child or something. And I guess I pictured… tentacles."

"Oh, I've got those," Ursula said. "At least, I did the last time I was in a magical realm. But as for calling you my dear sweet child? Something tells me you're none of the above."

Lily snorted. "You called that right. Okay. According to the official reports, I was found as a newborn near Ann Lake—that's Minnesota—in the Sand Dunes State Forest with this," she reached into the neckline of her shirt to pull out a silver chain with a crescent moon pendant, "and nothing else. No diaper, no blanket, it's a miracle I didn't freeze to death before some campers happened upon me. They called the authorities and I went into the system. I was adopted eight months later."

Ursula nodded. "There are a couple of us here; people from the lands from which we came. There aren't many, but I take it that if you know who you are, then your new parents must have…"
Lily snorted again. "Nope. Ma and Pa Page were as decent and ordinary and boring a couple as anyone else you could hope to find. Probably still are, I guess. I haven't seen them since they gave up on me and threw me out nearly twenty years ago." Her voice was hard and flat, displaying little emotion as she went on, "To give them credit, they tried for a while. I did too, I guess, but it seemed like no matter how much I wanted to be good and do the right thing, stuff kept... backfiring on me. It was like I was, I don't know, cursed. Or something." The last bit was accompanied by an eye-roll as she went on bitterly, "I mean, that's what I told myself, even though I knew it was a load of crap. Until one night, on a bus out of Mankato, I met an old guy who told me it wasn't."

"An 'old guy'?'" Ursula repeated, raising one eyebrow skeptically. "Did he have a name?"

"He didn't give me one," Lily shrugged. Then she bent down, retrieved her knapsack from the floor and hefted it onto the table. As Ursula watched, she unbuckled the two leather straps holding down the top flap and, with both hands, hoisted out a thick hardback book with a brown leather cover. "He gave me this."
Chapter Two

"May I?" Ursula asked, reaching hesitantly for the book.

Lily nodded and passed it over. "Be my guest."

Ursula's eyebrow shot up once more as she read the title aloud. "Long Ago and Far Away Across the Western Sea? He gave you a book of folk tales?"

Lily sat up a bit straighter and shot back with some irritation, "You might like the first one. It's all about a prince and princess who stole a dragon egg to use in a ritual to protect their unborn daughter, then banished the egg to another land, separating mother and child forever." Her voice dropped to an ominous whisper. "Or at least, until this day." She smiled. "That's how it ends. I've read that chapter over so many times I've practically memorized it."

"There's a page missing, it looks like," Ursula noted, as she flipped the leaves slowly forward, not quite able to conceal her shock at the accuracy of some of the illustrations.

"Yeah, it's an old book," Lily replied. "It's not in the greatest shape. I can still figure out the story, even without it. There are a few other good ones if you read on, but the first's my favorite."

"Who was the old man?"

Lily sighed. "I don't know exactly. I never saw him again. But he knew things about me that nobody else could have. Like about my necklace and how it ties in with this," she pulled up her sleeve to disclose a star-shaped birthmark on her wrist.

"Honey," Ursula said, "in my spare time I moonlight as a horoscope writer for a few papers. I know all about how to tell half a story and let you fill in the rest and convince you I'm some kind of seer. It's about playing on the credulity of others. It's a slick con, but it is a con."

"He didn't see the birthmark," Lily said with a faint smile. "He just knew about it. And he knew about me, too."

"Sure he did."

Lily pulled an overdone French fry out of the cardboard pocket and stabbed it into the pool of ketchup she'd poured into the top half of her Styrofoam burger box. "He told me that when I was ready, I should go to New York and visit the Hornby Aquarium and that you'd be the first person I'd meet there." She paused for a beat. "That was almost seventeen years ago."

Ursula had been in the act of dunking an onion ring into tartar sauce. She dropped it and it landed on the edge of the tray, before it flopped to the table. She didn't notice. "What else did he tell you?"
she asked, all mockery gone from her voice now.

Lily smiled. "Enough..."

She didn't know what the hell was the matter with her. Every time she had something—or someone—good in her life, she either screwed it up or something else backfired to make it all blow up in her face.

Emma was just the latest disaster on a list that had been started almost before she could recall. Lily had been filling her shopping cart with groceries she didn't need, for which she'd intended to pay with a credit card that wasn't hers, when she'd spied a girl her own age ineptly trying to shove a box of toaster pastries into her jacket pocket. Either a total amateur, someone begging to get caught, or both. Sure enough, a loss prevention officer was already approaching with a determined look on her face. Lily was never sure what came over her, why she exerted herself to help a total stranger. It hadn't been compassion—she'd never had much of that and everyone knew it. And, strangely enough, it hadn't been a chance to 'stick it to the store' either. Somehow, she'd sensed a kindred spirit in this other girl in a way she'd never felt about anyone else.

Oh, she'd tried to make friends before, but she'd always ended up feeling like a phony. She knew the words she was supposed to say, the things she was expected to be interested in, and she tried to blend in, but sooner or later, she showed bits of her real self and people started edging away. Something told her that this new girl wouldn't be like the others.

And so, Lily had stepped in and bailed Emma out. And they'd become instant friends. When Emma had admitted to being on the run from her last foster home and assumed that Lily was as well, it had felt like the most natural thing in the world to go along with it. Her own parents didn't understand her and she was used to feeling like an outsider. Maybe she was legally adopted, but she felt like she might as well be a foster kid, too—at least going by Emma's description of what her own life was like.

Of course things went south once adoptive-dad showed up and the truth came out and, this time, Lily knew she had only herself to blame. Emma had turned away in pain and anger and Lily would have given anything for a second chance.

Two years later, she'd gotten one, and promptly blown that one too.

So now, she was on a bus out of Mankato, headed for Pittsburgh and trying her hardest to keep up her tough-girl act because if she didn't, she knew that she was going to start sobbing like a baby in front of forty or so total strangers.

She had her crescent moon pendant out and was holding it up before her on its chain when a voice said softly, "That's a lovely necklace."

Lily didn't turn to face the speaker. She wasn't in the mood for conversation. But she also didn't want a lecture about a lack of good manners, so she thanked him and hoped he'd move on. He didn't.

"Did you ever notice how it complements the birthmark on your wrist?"

Although the voice was gentle, there was something about it that sent a chill down her spine. She turned to see an elderly man occupying the seat beside her. She hadn't heard it creak when he sat down. "How did you know that?" she asked nervously.

"I know about a lot of things, Lilith." Then, seeing her agitation, he said quickly, "Don't be
alarmd child. I can see that you have many questions. Fortunately, I have many answers."

"Answers?" she'd repeated stupidly. She should've sat by the emergency exit. She could be out and away from this creep in an instant if she had been. Yeah, she'd probably get scraped up jumping from a moving vehicle, but she'd survived worse. Much worse.

The old man continued calmly, "About who you really are and why your life has always felt so... wrong."

Great. Another minute and he was going to hand her a JW pamphlet or a Chick tract. But playing along might be the safest thing. Take what he had, thank him, and hope he moved back to wherever he'd been sitting before he'd started freaking her out. "And who am I?" she demanded.

"A victim of the unfortunate vagaries of Fate, for which, I'm afraid, I am partially responsible. In fact... I shouldn't even be telling you this."

She tried not to let her nervousness show. "You're crazy."

"You are not as responsible for your own misery as you would believe. The deck has been stacked against you, Lilith, and it's not your fault. Everything you do will be harder. And I owe it to you to let you know why. I owe you the truth."

It still sounded crazy. But he knew her name. Her real one. She'd never liked 'Lilith'; she always used 'Lily'. One more way to rebel against Ma and Pa Page who'd shunned the diminutive. Most people didn't think 'Lily' was short for anything. And she had to admit that she was curious about what he wanted to tell her. Not that she believed a word of it, of course. But she was still curious. She considered for a moment. Then she made up her mind. "Okay, Yoda," she rapped out. "Enough riddles. What's the truth?"

The old man regarded her seriously. "Let's start with the necklace..."

For nearly an hour, she listened while the old man told her of other realms, fairies, dragons, curses, and compulsions. And by the end of it, she still wasn't sure what to believe, but she also couldn't quite dismiss what he was saying out of hand.

"So, you're saying that... Snow White and Prince Charming kidnapped me, put their daughter's darkness in me and forced you to send me here? And now, they're here too?"

"The coercion wasn't on their part," the old man corrected. "But the rest is true."

"And you expect me to believe that."

The old man smiled. "I think that's probably asking a bit much at the moment. You've lived all your life believing that magic was fakery and histories were fiction. I believe it ought to take more than one conversation with a mysterious old man on a bus, don't you?" He didn't wait for her answer. "So, here."

"What's this?" she asked, as he handed her a heavy leather-bound book.

"You've been on this conveyance for slightly over an hour and a half now. It will be more than twenty-three hours before you reach Pittsburgh. Just think of this as something to pass the time. And, in approximately twelve years? Think of it as a roadmap."

"A roadmap."
"When that time comes," the old man added, "you'll want to visit the Hornby Aquarium in Manhattan..."

Waiting in a longish line for takeout supper at Granny's, a hungry Sister Astrid checked her watch nervously, but it still read a quarter to six and she wasn't due at the hospital until six-thirty. Come to think of it, it had read a quarter to six on her dashboard clock when she'd parked her car, too. That wasn't right. Maybe her watch was off by a minute or two, but... Oh no.

Nervously, Astrid looked up at the clock over the counter and stifled a shriek. It was twenty past six. Her watch must have stopped. And she'd only just placed her order and there were at least half a dozen people in the queue ahead of her and...

She mumbled an apology, knowing that the staff was too busy to hear her anyway and ran, weaving around tables and chairs, shouting apologies as she jostled Bashful's elbow, causing the dwarf to spill his soup. Pitching forward as her foot came down on Aurora's and managing to grab the edge of the table before she face-planted into baby Phillip's cradle.

"I'm sorry!" she gasped over her shoulder as she righted herself and stumbled for the door.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as she barreled full-tilt into someone else.

The other person gripped her arm gently but firmly, keeping her on her feet. "Careful, sister," he rumbled. "Take it easy."

Astrid gulped and nodded. "Thank you..." Then her eyes widened and an uncertain smile sprang to her lips. "Dreamy?"

The dwarf shook his head, but he was smiling. "It's Grumpy now, sister. Has been for a long time." He was still holding her arm and Astrid didn't want him to let go. Especially not when he continued, "And I've been wanting to talk to you since the first curse broke, only I wasn't sure if you'd be willing to give me another chance after all this time."

She was hungry. She was running late. And he'd dashed her hopes and dreams and broken her heart for no reason she'd even understood. And yet, somehow, she found herself replying, "I g-guess we'd better get out of the doorway then an-and sit down..."

Zelena stood on her mattress, looked out her cell window and sighed. The sun was going down and she'd had no visitors today. Again.

She shook her head with annoyance. The Blue Fairy was a prim, self-righteous irritant that she'd told herself she'd be glad to see the back of. Confinement was one thing, but really, she hadn't expected the heroes to subject her to torture on top of it.

On the other hand, much as Zelena hated to admit it, the little prig's presence hadn't been totally unwelcome. At least she'd given Zelena an outlet for her frustrations. The witch looked at the reading material piled on her cot and sighed. The nurse had dropped off several magazines with breakfast, but the witch had no desire to thumb through them. *Fit Pregnancy, Pregnancy & Newborn, Mothering Magazine*... Why couldn't her sister just rip out her heart and crush it? At least that way, it would be quick.

Not for the first time, she tugged at the leather cuff on her wrist, probing for some weak point. Not for the first time, she didn't find one. She'd tried lubricating it, first with the pat of butter that came with her daily breakfast, then with the salad dressing that came with her daily lunch. No luck.
The mattress shifted ever so slightly beneath her feet and she looked down to find that Billina was pecking at her blanket again. She groaned. "Come on, Billina," she addressed the yellow hen. "I need some comfort here. I don't know that they'll give me another cover if you unravel this one."

Her eyes widened. She looked at the blanket again. Then she studied the cuff. "I wonder..." she said thoughtfully. Her gaze flickered to the corner of the cell, where the security camera was mounted. Then, deliberately, she dropped to her knees on the mattress. She regarded the hen once more before she slid off the bed and, keeping her back to the camera and hoping that she was blocking it from seeing too closely what she was about, bent to scoop up some of the feed that was still in a semblance of a pile. Chickens were messy beasts and Billina had a habit of scattering the fine yellow grain about the cell floor.

She spilled the meal into her half-empty water cup. Too thin. She scooped up a second handful and then a third. She stirred the mixture with a plastic knife, working it into a paste. Then she set the cup on the shelf by her bed for a moment, while she stretched out on the mattress and pulled up the bedclothes.

Zelena waited for several moments before she reached for her cup and, under the blanket, scooped out some of the cornmeal mixture and spread it over the seam of cuff. She wasn't entirely certain that this would work. Even if the stitching were removed, there was no guarantee that it would break the magic that sealed the cuff against its wearer's removal. But it was the best idea she had right now.


He shouldn't have worn the suit, Rumple reflected with a pang of dismay. Not that Marco or August showed any indication whatsoever that they minded it. But, for once, he truly felt overdressed. Both of the other men wore chinos with button-down shirts. Marco had added a cardigan vest to his ensemble. August had opted for a cable-knit pullover, which he wore like a cape with the sleeves knotted loosely about his neck.

Rumple debated removing his suit jacket, but suspected that the phrase 'trying too hard' would likely apply.

"That commission you gave me is coming along," August commented as they proceeded to the dining room. "It just takes some time carving all those pegs."

"Not too tedious, I trust?" Rumple asked, relieved not to have to cast about to make conversation.

August smiled. "Sometimes, it helps to have something mindless to do. Usually, that's when inspiration hits."

"Inspiration."

August's smile widened. "You know I'm a writer. Not a very well-known one, of course, but I've managed to sell a couple of stories to anthologies here and there. I tend to get my ideas when my hands are busy and my mind is free."

"Ah." Rumple could understand that. Spinning had often served the same purpose in his own case. He said as much to August.

"I can see that," the younger man nodded. "Besides, if boredom sets in, I can work on the ships. I'm trying to save those for last."
Marco cleared his throat and the two immediately took their seats. The dining room was in a style that could best be described as 'natural' or 'rustic'. The walls were buff-colored and accented by support beams of a dark natural wood. There were similar beams buttressing the ceiling. A table and chairs of the same wood occupied most of the room.

And on the table… Rumple's eyes grew wide. Several round cheeses with waxy rinds greeted him, as did a large loaf of crusty bread, butter, and an assortment of small carved bowls, each holding a different pickled vegetable. A larger bowl that contained a number of breadcrumb-coated balls occupied the center. From the aroma that wafted toward him, they appeared to be of smoked fish combined with a healthy amount of dill.

It was the sort of fare that he'd enjoyed in his own village in the years before the Ogres War had brought harder times upon them all. "Wherever did you find pickled celery?" he breathed. Some vegetables—cucumbers, beets, and onions came readily to mind—were found easily enough in any of Storybrooke's half-dozen or so grocery stores. Celery, ramps, and turnips were quite a different matter.

Marco smiled. "My garden, he was good to me this summer," he admitted, lowering his eyes modestly.

"They're homemade," Rumple stated, trying to conceal his surprise.

"Papa's always grown our vegetables," August broke in. "At least, what we didn't find growing wild." He grinned at his father. "I think you had me foraging for purslane almost as soon as we got back home after that storm."

"It was late in the season," the handyman pointed out. "I wanted to enjoy it at least once before it was gone for the year." To Rumple, he added, "Some things, even a curse can't make you forget. And a good pickled turnip is one of them." So saying, he speared one of the aforementioned morsels with the serving fork next to the dish and slid it onto his plate. "Try for yourself," he invited, passing the dish to Rumple. "August, leave some trout dumplings for the rest of us," he said sharply.

"Sorry, Papa," August murmured. There were already a half-dozen balls on his plate, but plenty more remained in the serving bowl when he passed it to his father.

Rumple closed his eyes, savoring the turnip. "We didn't use juniper berries in the brine in my village," he murmured, recognizing the piney, peppery flavor. He opened his eyes. "Perhaps, we should have."

"Where was that?" Marco asked, interested.

Rumple's fork was halfway to his mouth again, but he lowered it. "At the time," he said, "it was in the Frontlands. I suppose, by the time you were born, the area would likely have been called Ogre-Rout."

Marco frowned for a moment, thinking. "I was never there myself. But thinking on what the merchants from that region brought to sell in our marketplaces… you would have used fennel and coriander?"

Rumple nodded. "Dill-seed, too. And saffron when we had it. When the war came, though, that was the first thing seized for taxes to pay the army."

"We lived in a place called Hornbeam Grove," Marco sighed. "Once the battlefront drew nigh,
well. After six weeks, you could have called us Hornbeam Memory."

Rumple winced. He knew the properties of the tree in question, of course. Its sap was the key ingredient in no fewer than twenty stamina-boosting potions, while its leaves were revered for their ability to staunch bleeding and heal wounds speedily. In wartime, the hornbeam was more than worth its weight in gold. "That's hard," he mumbled.

"That's life," Marco returned and Rumple was startled into a smile to hear that rejoinder—a familiar refrain in any village where open criticism of one's feudal lord was a risky endeavor—again.

"Indeed it is," he said. "Indeed it is."

Marco picked up the dumplings bowl and held it out to him. "Smoked trout?"

Rumple felt his tension rapidly dissipating and he extended his hands for it with a smile. "Please."

"So, the Blue Fairy told you that…" Astrid's voice trailed off.

Grumpy shrugged. "I knew how much you wanted to be a fairy godmother one day. I didn't want you to give up your dream for me."

"For us!" Astrid protested. "Drea—Grumpy, it wasn't giving up my dream; it was changing it!"

"You would have lost your wings," Grumpy pointed out. "Become mortal. I couldn't let you do that. You didn't understand what it would cost you."

"Did you ask me if I did?" Astrid demanded. "Grumpy, did it never occur to you that because I'm immortal, I'm… not quite as young as I look."

"I thought—" Grumpy looked stunned. "I mean…"

Astrid sighed. "I'm a couple of hundred, I guess. It's hard to be sure. But that's not important. Grumpy, I don't want to spend another five hundred years gathering fairy dust and hoping that maybe I'll get a chance to be a godmother, if I do really well." She made a face. "Honestly? I'm not going to do really well. And if I do, I won't be able to keep it up."

"Don't talk like that."

Astrid shook her head, but she was smiling. "I'm not running myself down, if that's what you're thinking. I'm facing facts. Look, when you're a fairy, being selected to be a godmother is, well, it's what we all dream of doing. But sometimes, dreams don't come true."

"Yours still could," Grumpy insisted.

"Maybe," Astrid said. "If I spend all my time trying to squeeze myself into a mold that'll fit me like a dress two sizes too small. And at the end of it, I won't be me, and I won't be happy, but I also won't be able to admit it because I'll be living everyone else's dream." Astrid shook her head. "When I met you, I suddenly realized that it wasn't my dream. It was just the dream everyone said I should have and, novice that I was, I believed them. Until you gave me another one."

Grumpy blinked. "I did?" he asked, sounding confused.

Astrid nodded, smiling. "You were the first person I met who made me feel like it was okay to be me."
"But the Blue Fairy told me that if we ran away together, that it would end badly. Nova, I couldn't be responsible for you losing your wings."

Astrid burst into laughter, but there was a sob mixed into it. "I haven't had wings for over thirty years, Grumpy and I don't miss them!" She shook her head. "But I have missed you."

"She told me that the feelings I had for you were only a dream."

"Leroy, there's nothing 'only' about dreams!"

"And that you could be a great fairy, if I let you."

Astrid froze. "If you let me?" she repeated, sounding angry for the first time. "If you let me. That's what she said to you? Argh! I don't believe what I'm hearing."

"Sister…"

Her face softened. "I'm not mad at you, Dreamy," she said, not seeming to notice that she'd used his former name. "Really, I'm not. But whether I become great or not isn't something you decide. Or her. Maybe not even me. I don't know. I do know this: if either of you had asked me whether I was willing to give up my wings back in the Enchanted Forest instead of making the decision for me, I would have said 'yes'! Dreamy… I love you."

Grumpy seized her hands in his and held them tightly. "And I love you, too," he said softly. "But… is it real?"

"It feels real to me," Astrid assured him. "Or do you still think we're both dreaming?"

Grumpy considered. Then he released one of her hands and rolled up his sleeve. He took a deep breath. Then he pinched himself hard… harder…

"Dreamy?"

He waited another few seconds before letting go. "It's no dream," he said. "And if it is… don't wake me."

Astrid's eyes glistened. Then she reached for his free hand once more and squeezed it.

Merryweather heard Tink out in stony silence. Then she shook her head decisively. "No."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear another word," she cut her off. "I stepped into Reul's place temporarily and now that she's back, I'm out."

"But you were so good at it!" Tink protested. "Everyone's saying so!"

Merryweather raised an eyebrow. "I didn't realize you'd taken a poll," she remarked tartly. "I held the post for barely a week. And it was a quiet week. I'm an able enough administrator, I suppose —"

"Able enough?" Tink gasped. "Why you were practically perfect in every way!"

"Then think of this as not overstaying my welcome and giving you lot the opportunity to find fault with me. I'm not out to… to wrest power from Reul and that's that," she finished decisively, just as
her office door swung open and both fairies looked toward it.

Astrid stomped—if one could be said to stomp in crepe rubber-soled shoes—in and slammed the door behind her. "Did you just say, 'Wrest power from Reul’'?” she demanded, her face flushed and her eyes glittering with unaccustomed rage.

Really, this was getting out of hand. "I—" Before Merryweather could get another syllable out, Astrid plunged on.

"Because if you are, count me in."

Chapter Three

The Blue Fairy was not passing a pleasant evening at Storybrooke Hospital. Sister Astrid hadn't turned up for her shift. Blue was used to the young fairy bursting in at the last minute or—admittedly, less frequently than in the past—several minutes after the last minute, but never more than a half hour after she was scheduled.

She considered phoning the convent to verify whether the novice was quite all right. Fairies didn't get sick, but that didn't mean that some other mischief might be afoot. She couldn't think who might be instigating it, though. Green had been a little too overjoyed to inform her that Rumpelstiltskin was no longer the Dark One. Regina's Evil Queen days were apparently a thing of the past. And Zelena—as she well knew—was in no condition to instigate much of anything beyond a jibe, a jeer, or a pointed insult.

No, doubtless Astrid—Nova—was off daydreaming somewhere and had lost track of time. Blue shook her head. Some fairies, it must be owned, were given to flightiness and giddiness, but they were supposed to settle down and outgrow such things. And Nova wasn't. Well. It was just as well that Storybrooke's children had less need for godmothers in this realm than they might have back home.

But she was going to have words with the novice at the first opportunity.

Meanwhile, she thought as she rolled her eyes ceiling-ward, there was work to do. Merryweather had done an able enough job running things in her absence, but it was time to take the reins. And if Nova couldn't be bothered to perform her duties, well, it fell to Blue to step into the breach. Really, where would Nova be without her?

Merryweather heard Nova out silently, ignoring Tink's periodic angry intakes of breath. Finally, when the young fairy was done, she sighed. "I can see why you're upset," she murmured. "While fairies can certainly feel love for others, the instances of one of us being in love are so rare that I don't believe it's happened more than a dozen times in the last five centuries. And dwarves? I can't recall a single occasion when that's transpired. But," she added, holding up a warning hand as Nova opened her mouth to protest, "just because I can't name a time when it's happened before doesn't mean that it's not happening now."

"Are you saying…?" Tink let her voice trail off, but there was no mistaking her excitement.

Merryweather sighed again. "What I'm saying," she said, "is that the way things have always been isn't necessarily the way they are now or the way they always will be. But I would be far more convinced if you could show me some precedent, some accounting or even some legend that corroborates what you're telling me. I mean," she added not unkindly, "what you feel for… Grumpy, is it?"

"I guess it is now," Nova said. "But he was Dreamy when we first met."

"I'm going to assume that's a name and not a comment on his physique," Merryweather retorted, but there was a twinkle in her eye that told the other two fairies that she knew exactly what Nova had intended to mean. "Very well. What you feel for Grumpy might be genuine. I'll even go so far as to say that if decades apart, two Dark curses, and a cloistered life haven't changed your feelings,
then it probably is. And I've never heard anyone suggest that dwarves can't know friendship or affection. But I've never heard of one that was capable of True Love. He could be the first," she continued, "but he might also believe that what he feels for you is love, when it's something more on the order of infatuation."

Nova frowned. "Have you ever heard of a dwarf being infatuated with anyone before?" she asked.

"Honestly?" Merryweather shook her head. "I can't say I have. But then, I've never really looked into it. It's never been of interest to me, I suppose."

"Maybe," Nova said slowly, "maybe you're right. Maybe it is just… just friendship or infatuation. I don't know and, from what you're saying, neither does he. But I think maybe we should have the chance to find out."

"Even if the truth isn't what you want it to be? Even if it hurts?"

Nova locked glistening eyes on the older fairy and, despite her efforts to maintain self-control, a bitter laugh crept into her voice. "My life isn't what I want it to be—not now! And knowing that we've been apart for more than thirty years because Blue told Dreamy something to make him believe that turning away from me was giving me my best chance? Do you really think that doesn't hurt at least as much, if not more? Merryweather, please, you have to do something!"

"Well," Merryweather said slowly, "I can see why you're fed up with Blue at the moment and I daresay you've the right to be cross with her. I can't see how it necessarily follows that I ought to pit myself against her in some sort of fight to rule this roost. I'm not doing that. However," she said, "if you can come to me and show me some sort of precedent? Something, anything, that seems to support the idea that there's ever been a dwarf that has felt for another what you claim Grumpy feels for you…" She smiled. "I'll take it up with Blue and try my best to convince her to let you take some time away from the convent to seek out other options. Otherwise… you have the same freedom to leave that you've always had. If you're willing to pay that price."

"But—" Tink started to break in.

Merryweather's gaze hardened. "I'm not prepared to fight Reul for leadership. She gave me this opportunity to fill in for her. I'll not turn a disloyal face to her now and make her regret that choice. Besides, while she and I have had our disagreements, I must say that we two often do see eye to eye on matters. Now if you've specific grievances, you can review them with me and, if you'd like—assuming I think an issue has merit—I'll be happy to bring it up to Reul or counsel you on the arguments I believe you might best put forward to convince her of your cause. But beyond that? If you think the current leadership needs to change, you'd be better off finding another candidate. Clear?"

Tink nodded, but the expression on her face was far from pleased. "Crystal."

"Tink," Nova said hesitantly, "do… do you think that there might be anything in the library that might help me?"

"That would be a good place to start," Merryweather nodded. "But you shouldn't discount other libraries or collections either. And Nova?" Her voice, while still kind, took on a more serious note. "You really ought to show me what you find before you take it to Reul. Nobody likes being proved wrong or made to feel the fool. I'd hate for you to confront her and have that happen to you."

"I understand," Nova nodded. "Tink?"
Tinkerbell nodded back. "Come on. And pay no mind to the books on the tables. I haven't gotten around to putting back everything Emma and Belle were looking through."

She turned to Merryweather. "Thanks for your help."

"I know it's not what you were hoping for."

"No," Tink confirmed. "It's not. But I guess it's better than nothing."

After the two left, Merryweather shook her head grimly. "Be careful, ladies. Nobody likes being proved wrong or made to feel the fool. Reul's no exception."

The fast food was long eaten, but the conversation kept going. Finally, Ursula yawned. "Well," she said, "I should thank you for dinner, but if I don't get my beauty sleep, I'll start feeding bloodworms to the surgeonfish and spirulina to the sturgeons."

"Huh?" Lily asked blankly.

Ursula sighed. She kept forgetting that fish diets weren't common knowledge among the surface dwellers in her own realm, much less this one. "Surgeonfish are herbivores," she explained. "They eat mostly algae, plankton, and seaweed. Sturgeons, on the other hand, are carnivores."

Lily frowned. "Think we could use them when we find Snow White?" she asked.

"Well, they aren't aggressive," Ursula said, "but they weigh as much as a truck. If one of them collides with you, you'll know it."

"But couldn't you…?"

Ursula sighed again, this time more irritably. "No magic, remember? I can't even communicate with fish anymore, much less command them. And anyway, if your whole plan involves bludgeoning them with marine life—wait. You do have a plan, don't you? I mean, besides 'Find Snow White, get revenge'?"

"I was hoping you'd help me with that," Lily admitted.

Ursula laughed in disbelief. "Kid, if I had the kind of power you need, do you really think I'd be shoveling bait at a third-rate aquarium? Wake up and smell the surströmming. These days, I just keep my head above water. And if I were looking for revenge, my first target would be my landlord."

"But—"

"You're not from around here, right? Got somewhere to stay?"

Lily shook her head.

"Fine. I can let you crash for a couple of nights or so. But after that, unless you can give me a solid reason to team up with you—and that reason had better include a decent plan and some indication you even know where to find that charming royal couple—I think it'll be time for you to swim along, understand?"

Lily looked as though she wanted to argue further, but she lowered her eyes and slumped in her seat. "Fine," she muttered, defeated. "Just… fine."
The rest of Rumple's evening passed far more pleasantly than he'd originally envisioned. When Marco had first extended the invitation to him, Rumple had been certain that it was a test—and for good reason. Rumple had never had a true friend, but he'd found one in August. Unfortunately, the younger man had a long history of trusting the wrong people and Marco could scarcely have been blamed for thinking that a man of Rumple's reputation might be feigning friendship for his own ends.

Rumple hadn't held Marco's apprehension against him, but he well knew that distrust was a difficult thing to overcome and he had no illusions that the town at large considered him to be trustworthy. Well. He supposed that they trusted him to keep his word and uphold his end of a deal, but they also knew that if there was a loophole to wriggle through, they could trust him to take it. So. The prospect of facing a trial disguised as a dinner invitation and one where the verdict was likely already a foregone conclusion had been bleak indeed in Rumple's eyes.

It had come as a shock when the handyman had called on him at the shop and reassured him that he really did mean it as a friendly overture. Which, for a moment, had had Rumple thinking that it was instead meant to butter him up and coax him into reversing the enchantment placed on Marco's parents all those years ago. That was something that Rumple would have been more than willing to do, had he the resources available to pay the price of such magic. Unfortunately, he hadn't at the time and he didn't now. And yet, Marco had taken that in stride as well, asking only whether he might take the puppets home with him. And Rumple had started to relax, only to tense up again when he realized that he had no idea how he would converse with his host beyond pleasant greetings and inquiries into health.

There were things he might have discussed freely with August had nobody else been present. Both in New York and upon returning to Storybrooke, the two had discovered that they'd experienced similar mishaps in earlier years and it was comforting to both of them to be able to share them with one who could truly understand what the other had been through. But while Rumple and Marco were generally on good terms—a phrase that, in Storybrooke parlance, meant that they didn't despise one another—their relationship had always been professional. If Rumple needed a clock repaired, he knew who to call. Similarly, if Marco needed waterproof sealant, he knew that Rumple kept a good stock of lanolin. But as far as dinner conversation went, Rumple feared he'd be at a loss.

Astoundingly, he hadn't been. They'd gone from comparing pickling and preservation methods to sharing memories of village life, both before and after the wars. While they'd grown up leagues—and centuries—apart, it seemed that the similarities far outweighed the differences. In fact, Rumple realized later on the drive home, if anyone had been frozen out of the conversation, it had been August.

The younger man hadn't minded, though. After dinner, when they'd repaired to the living room—Rumple and Marco still deep in conversation (probably about loom construction by that point)—August had simply spread some newspapers about his feet, gotten out his whittling knife and a piece of wood, and set to work. By the time Rumple took his leave, there were a number of small pegs of uniform shape and size in the wicker box at August's side.

There had been no deals, no verbal battles, no spells cast nor potions brewed. Rumple didn't think that the subject of magic had come up at all, not even in passing. Nothing momentous had been discussed or taken place. And yet, as he made his way home, he found himself wondering whether another invitation might be forthcoming in the not so distant future.

Or perhaps... His eyes widened for a moment and a hesitant smile bloomed on his face as a new idea struck him. Perhaps the next invitation might come from his quarter instead...
Astrid was a fairy on a mission. While she hadn't been able to turn up much on dwarves in the library, she couldn't say that she was surprised. The library beneath the convent contained much information about Fairy history and culture and nearly as much on magic. While there were some volumes that pertained to other races, including dwarves, the information included dealt primarily with their habits and habitats, their foods and festivals, and their dealings with fairy-kind. She'd uncovered no mention of an ability to love or lack thereof.

"You know," Tink said, "I've had a thought. This whole... idea... that dwarves can't love. It has to have a source somewhere."

Astrid looked at Tink. Then, she gazed slowly but deliberately at the floor-to-ceiling shelves that surrounded them, each one filled to capacity.

"I know, I know," Tink said hastily. "But if it's common knowledge, then it's something we're taught—or something I would have been taught if Blue hadn't taken my wings before I finished my education or the curse hadn't hit before you finished yours. Which means that it must be in recorded in old notebooks and schedulae!"

"S-schedulae?" Astrid repeated, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

Tink nodded. "Parchment used to be expensive, particularly before we began trading with other races. Much too expensive to give to a novice to scribble notes on. We had to make do with bits and scraps left over from larger pieces."

Astrid frowned. "I see. But... why would I need to go that far back? I mean, if it's something we're all taught, then wouldn't it be the same if I were to look through the notes from a generation ago?"

"Yes," Tink agreed, "except for one thing. There was a time when it wouldn't have been common knowledge—probably somewhere around the point when we first began to treat with the dwarves and worked out the mining agreements. And at that point," Tink leaned in closer as her words tumbled out more quickly, "we'd also have a source for that bit of lore. Whether it's a book or just something like, 'According to the dwarven ambassador Diplomaticky'—and no," she went on as Astrid suppressed a giggle, "I don't know if that was actually his name, but it wouldn't surprise me. Find the original source and see if it actually says what everyone thinks. Maybe it's been taken out of context. Maybe it's a mistranslation. Maybe there's another part that got forgotten along the way. But start there and see what turns up."

Wide-eyed, Astrid nodded. "Where... where do I find those?"

"Records room," Tink said, all business. "It may not look as neat as all this..." She paused and took in the piles of books scattered on the tables, mute evidence of Emma's, Belle's, and now, Astrid's explorations and let out a heavy sigh, "...usually is, but that's just because odd-sized scraps of paper don't fit into neat little piles. It's actually fairly well organized. We first began dealing with the dwarves—"

"—some nine hundred and forty years ago," Astrid finished. When Tink gave her a surprised look, she flushed slightly. "My house's ancestral lands bordered theirs and they often came to trade with us. I remember there was a silversmith we'd see pretty often and if anyone ever so much as questioned the quality of his craft, he'd start bellowing about how in the seven hundred and forty years since the first dwarf-fairy treaty, nobody had ever found fault with dwarf silver." She shrugged. "That was about two hundred years ago."

Tink laughed. "Good. So you've got a rough idea of where to begin the search. So, come along and
let's get started." She gestured toward a door of dark wood bolstered by wide metal straps. "The records room is just through here…"

Blue returned to the convent with a sense of mounting dread. Nova had never shown up for her shift at all and now Blue was worried. The building was still standing and she sensed no evil presence within, but she still took a moment to summon a defensive spell in case someone or something lay waiting within.

As always, the door opened at her touch. All seemed well within. And yet, the fairies that she encountered in the hallway seemed paradoxically both more tense and more relaxed as they passed her. Odd. And still no sign of Nova. She mounted the stairs to the novice's room, hoping that perhaps the young fairy had simply fallen asleep. Or perhaps she'd suffered some mishap in brewing a potion and had grown an extra arm or sprouted a wart on her chin and was hiding from sheer embarrassment. Blue would have understood that. It was still no excuse for failing to perform her duties, but the matter could be handled with some leniency.

Nova's room was empty. Blue sighed heavily and headed back downstairs to talk to Merryweather.

"I believe she was in the library with Tink, the last I heard," Merryweather remarked. She looked up at the pendulum clock on the wall. "Goodness, that must have been something like five hours ago. Do you mean that she's been down there all this time?"

Blue sniffed. "I'm sure I can't say," she returned evenly, "seeing as this is the first I'm hearing of it. Well. I suppose I'll head down there."

"Now, you won't be too hard on her, Reul, will you?" Merryweather called after her. But if Blue replied, her answer was cut off by the office door closing behind her.

Blue found her in the records room reading avidly through the contents of a rowan-wood file box. "Nova," she said, displeased. "You missed your shift this evening."

Nova looked up. "Did I?" she murmured, distracted. "I'm so sorry."

The words were right, but the novice's tone didn't match her apology. In fact, it sounded as though her dereliction was of little consequence. "Nova?"

"If you don't mind," the fairy said, "I think I actually prefer 'Astrid'."

Blue blinked. "What's gotten into you? Nova, what are you doing down here?"

Nova's face colored. "I really prefer 'Astrid'," she replied, and while the request was uttered in a perfectly respectful voice, Blue had seldom seen the young novice this assertive. To cover her surprise, she repeated, "What are you doing down here?"

Nova regarded her teacher silently for a moment. Then she took another scrap of parchment from the box. "I met Leroy today. For someone incapable of love, he puts on a pretty good act. I'm trying to find out who it was first said that it was impossible for a dwarf to fall in love and see if maybe there's more to it than we think."

"My word isn't enough," Blue stated, allowing some hurt to creep into her voice.

Nova hesitated. "I think you told me the truth as you know it. But my feelings for Leroy haven't
changed and neither have his for me. After all this time, I have to know. And I'll go through every piece of paper here if I have to and ask Leroy to check his peoples' records, too."

Blue took a deep breath. "You won't find the source here. I'm not certain you'll find it anywhere else for that matter."

"What?" Nova half-rose from her chair. "Blue, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that when I told Dreamy what I told him, I was doing so on behalf of his foreman. It's rare that a dwarf dreams of something other than his mine, and rarer still that such dreams persist. But when Bossy realized that Dreamy actually planned to run away with you, he came to me…"

At first, she was inclined to scoff at the tale that the dwarf told her, but she'd noticed the change in Nova for herself, even if she hadn't recognized the cause. It wouldn't be the first time that a fairy had chosen to become mortal and, given Nova's inattention to detail and overall distractibility, Blue was rather inclined to allow it. Bossy felt differently.

"Begging your pardon, Sister, but I believe you've rather more fairies than I do dwarves. I'm thinking that your need for what we mine is at least as great this year as it was last. If I'm a man short, the haul will be short as well. I mean," he coughed and continued apologetically, "my people may love to work, but they have limits."

Blue frowned. "I can forbid Nova to see him again, but if, as you say, they plan to run off together, then I don't see what effect my edict might have. I'd hardly expect her to heed me then."

Bossy shook his head. "Not her. Him. Talk to him. Convince him he's making a mistake. Tell him dwarves can't love and your student will lose her wings and it won't end well."

"I…" Really, she knew so little of dwarves. Maybe they couldn't love. But if they couldn't love, then why was Bossy so convinced that this… Dreamy… would be willing to sacrifice his happiness for Nova's potential? Love was sacrifice and if he could be expected to give up his dream for her, then how was that not love? But the dust supply was already insufficient to meet their needs. If next year's crop was diminished, then how many more would cry out to the fairies in vain and how many fairies would be helpless to aid those who needed them most? Blue weighed her instincts and the happiness of two idealistic young people against hard reality and pragmatism. "Dwarves are incapable of love," she repeated, making the statement half a question.

"It's unheard of," Bossy nodded. But that wasn't precisely confirmation. Something must have shown on face, for Bossy added, "Look, Sister, I'll tell him that part. You tell him the rest. He's a good lad. He'll see reason…"

Nova's face was chalk white and her ears blood red by the time Blue finished speaking. "So, all this time…" she said faintly.

"I did what I thought was best. For both of you."

"No," Nova said. "You did what you thought was best for you."

"Not for me, Nova. For those who rely on us to protect and guide them in their darkest hours."

The novice stood up so abruptly that she knocked the rowan-wood box off the table scattering a small flurry of parchment scraps. "My name is Astrid!" she snapped, but her voice shook as she did. Then, swiping at her eyes, she pushed her way past Blue and took off at a run.
Ursula's couch wasn't the best bed Lily had ever slept on, but it wasn't the worst either. She awoke shortly after seven to the ding of the microwave and Ursula's footsteps. "Good, you're up," the other woman greeted her. "I hope you've got stuff to do today, because I've got to go to work."

Lily sat up at once. "Yeah, I've got a few places in mind," she said, reaching beside the couch for her knapsack and pulling a clean, if creased shirt out of it. "This is New York, after all. I'll figure something out. Like a plan."

Ursula snorted. "Yeah, you do that. Uh, you want something for breakfast? I've got some microwave oatmeal. Cold cereal… bread."

Lily shook her head. "Nah, I'm not much of a breakfast person. Thanks, though. I'm good. I'll catch up with you later."

"Sure, kid. Just don't think that this arrangement's going to last more than a couple of days. I don't know if you noticed but this apartment isn't that big."

*It'd be bigger if you ditched those fish tanks,* Lily thought to herself. *Talk about bringing your work home with you.* Aloud, she said, "I noticed. Don't worry. I won't overstay my welcome."

Ursula poured some milk into her bowl of oatmeal and sat down at the small end table. "I finish at five. You can meet me at work if you want to go for supper."

"Sure."

She dressed quickly, grabbed her coat, and went out.

She'd noticed a library branch not far from Ursula's building and, once she'd noted the hours, she walked around, familiarizing herself with the area while she waited for it to open. When it did, she went in and signed up to use one of the internet terminals. As she'd hoped, in addition to computers, the library had a scanner. Lily hesitated for the barest instant before she reached into the inner pocket of her coat and pulled out a folded page that had clearly been ripped out of a larger work. She scanned that and, once she'd opened the file on the computer, searched for a similar image online. A moment later, she smiled.

"Cruella Feinberg?" she muttered under her breath. "Really?" She read the article that accompanied the photo and her smile became a smirk. Contrary to what she'd told Ursula, she did have a plan. And it felt as though it was starting to come together rather nicely.
Chapter Four

It was still dark when Belle's alarm went off the next morning. At first, she thought she'd accidentally set it to six PM instead of six AM and somehow slept through the day. Then she remembered that, unlike her home in the Enchanted Forest, winter days were far shorter and sunrises later in Storybrooke. It was morning, all appearances to the contrary. It was morning and she'd deliberately set her alarm for this ungodly hour because her first kickboxing lesson was today and she'd wanted to give herself time for breakfast and coffee.

She washed and dressed quickly and checked the fridge. There was one egg left in the carton; not nearly enough for an omelet. She closed the fridge and started to open the cabinet next it before she remembered she'd finished the last packet of instant oatmeal yesterday. She opened the fridge again, hoping that something would appeal to her, then closed it with a sigh. She really wasn't in the mood for toast or cereal. She would have loved to sit down at Granny's for the breakfast special. But she still couldn't quite bring herself to cross the restaurant's threshold, no matter how many times she told herself that she was just being silly.

She didn't know what would be more embarrassing: seeing Blue there and feeling as though she really ought to apologize, because that was what Good people did—only she still didn't regret what she'd done, hearing hushed whispers about what had happened the last time she'd stepped foot in there when she passed by, or having people come up to congratulate her and tell her that Blue'd had it coming.

Blue had had it coming but, like almost everything else in Belle's life right now, it was more complicated than that. In other words, Blue had deserved that black eye, but as satisfying as slugging the fairy had been, Belle was mostly horrified (though still slightly pleased) that she'd been the one to administer it. Hitting was wrong. Violence was never the answer. Good didn't exact vengeance. Belle knew that. She lived that. So, regardless of the provocation, giving Blue that shiner had been the wrong thing to do. No matter how right it still felt. She didn't want anyone to take her to task for her actions, but she didn't want anyone to applaud them either. She just wanted to forget the whole thing. Well, mostly forget. At least, that was what she told herself. Constantly. Which meant that going back to the place where it had happened was a really bad idea.

Belle sighed. She really wanted a hot breakfast. Well, she had time. And there were other places to eat in this town besides Granny's, even if she couldn't name any other than the Rabbit Hole—which wouldn't be open until lunchtime anyway. She'd just start walking toward the gym and hope she found one.

There was a diner three doors from the gym that reminded her a bit of the eating area in the movie theater that she and Rumple had gone to in New York: red leather couches, slick laminate tables, and plenty of chrome accents. Belle checked her watch and saw that she had nearly an hour before class, so she sat down at the counter and ordered the special: eggs, sausage, and hash browns.

A loud slurp immediately drew her attention to another figure, who was seated several stools over and draining the dregs of some sort of milkshake. Pink, like the figure's hooded sweatshirt. Belle studied the woman absentely. Messy brown hair tumbling out of a bun, an expression on her face that was equal parts nervousness and determination, long tapered fingers, no visible jewelry. Belle
realized that there was something familiar about her, though she couldn't say where she'd seen her before.

She went back to studying the chalkboard menu above the counter. They had burgers. Good. It was a bit further from the library than Granny's, but perhaps they'd deliver. And it would be closer to home once she and Rumple were back to living together.

Belle bit her lip. She was still his wife. They were working things out. And they'd agreed to take things slowly, one day at a time. But for short winter days, they seemed so long. She was trying not push. Pushing him to do things he wasn't ready or able to do had contributed to the rift between them. Yes, Rumple had lied and kept things from her and done things behind her back, but she realized now that it was partly because he'd never really had anyone who he could let in and trust not to leave him. And after what she'd done to him when she had found out, she couldn't blame Rumple for his caution now. He loved her. That didn't mean he felt he could fully trust her.

She understood. That didn't mean that being kept at arm's length now didn't hurt. But she feared that if she pushed too hard, she might just push him away again and this time, he might not be willing to come back. She wasn't used to living with this kind of fear, though she suspected it was something to which Rumple might be able to relate all too well. One more thing they had in common, she thought ironically. Somehow, she didn't feel like celebrating it.

"C-could I have another one?" a hesitant, slightly-nasal voice asked.

Belle blinked. She knew that voice. "Astrid?" Her face broke into a surprised smile. "I didn't recognize you without your uniform!"

Astrid it was, and she looked as though she'd been here for hours. Didn't the convent have some sort of curfew?

The fairy gave her a wan smile in return. "Hi, Belle."

"Do you come here often?"

Astrid's head-shake was more like a shiver. "It's my first time. After I left the convent, well, the only other places open I could find were pubs and I didn't feel safe going into one of those, so I came here." She winced. "A-and I'm afraid to leave," she added, lowering her voice so that the person behind the counter wouldn't hear. "B-because I don't know if I have the money to pay for these milkshakes, but I was afraid they wouldn't just let me sit here unless I ordered something."

Belle scooted down the row of stools until she was sitting next to her. "I have some," she murmured. "How many milkshakes have you had?"

The server set a plate down before Belle and a strawberry milkshake before Astrid.

"This is my fourth," she admitted. "I'd never had one before, but it was just so good, and I barely ate dinner because I was so busy catching up with Dreamy and then..." She stopped and looked away. "Sorry."

"No, no, don't be," Belle hastened to reassure her. She looked back up at the menu board, mentally multiplied the cost of a milkshake by four and then added in the price of her breakfast. As she'd expected, what she had in her purse would more than cover it. Then she realized what Astrid had just told her. "You left the convent?"

Astrid nodded. "And I'm not going back!"
"Uh… okay," Belle said, wondering if she'd somehow given the fairy the impression that she was about to argue with her.

Astrid clapped a hand over her eyes. "I'm sorry, Belle. I just…" She hesitated briefly. Then she took another breath and, words tumbling out in a rush, continued, "About thirty years ago, Dreamy and I were going to go away together. And then, at the last minute, he backed out. I knew Blue had something to do with it, but it wasn't until last night that I found out what. And now…"

"Now?" Belle prompted, wondering whether she truly wanted to hear more about what Blue had done. She looked at her watch. Why, there was plenty of time before class began. And her curiosity was aroused. "Actually… let me have breakfast. I need to be at the gym for nine." She frowned. "And I need time to change before that. But if you want to come with me and wait for me until my class is over, we could walk back to the library together and you could tell me on the way." She hesitated. "And perhaps we could find a better place for you to stay." Her apartment wasn't large, but she might be able to rearrange a few things to clear enough space for a folding cot. And find someone she knew with a folding cot she could borrow.

Astrid's smile was considerably less wan as she lowered her face toward her milkshake.

"It went well?" Emma asked when Gold walked into the sheriff station the next morning. "With Marco?"

Gold sighed. "I suppose that one of the drawbacks of not having some imminent threat looming on the horizon would be the opportunity to indulge in small talk."

Emma regarded him for a moment. Then she made a show of reaching for one of the reports on her desk and started to read it.

"It went better than I'd expected," he relented trying to sound annoyed even though he knew she wasn't buying it.

Emma set down the report at once. "I told you!" she said, smiling.

"You did indeed."

But although he was smiling, Emma could tell that there was something else weighing on his mind. After a moment, when no further elaboration was forthcoming, she asked encouragingly, "So…?"

He sat down in the chair before her desk and took a deep breath. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

Gold didn't answer immediately. This time, the silence stretched long enough to make Emma wonder whether she should return to her report after all. Maybe her maintaining eye contact was making him feel like she had him under the microscope. But maybe looking away now would send a message that she wasn't interested in what he had to say, or that she had other, more important things to do. And one thing that had come through loud and clear when he'd finally started opening up to her—to all of them—in New York was how often he felt shunted to the sidelines, ignored, or scorned whenever his power or advice wasn't needed. She chewed the inside of her lower lip for a moment longer. "Gold?"

He blinked. Then he took another breath. "When you first came to this town, you were—as you admitted later—something of a drifter. I think we can agree that such is no longer the case."
"Uh… okay," Emma said, wondering where this was going.

More hesitation. Then, "How did you… change?"

"I…" She stopped. "Well, I mean, Henry needed me. And I knew Regina was up to something. A-and Graham asked me to stay on as deputy."

"Yes, yes," Gold waved his hand impatiently. "Those were your reasons for remaining in Storybrooke temporarily. And I'm aware that you did pick up and try to leave that one time. But when you came for me in New York, I don't believe it crossed your mind for a moment to remain behind and send for your son to join you while you picked up your previous life."

"No," Something made her add, "But that would have been a first, too. When I left a place… I left. I didn't go back to it."

"Which makes your return to Storybrooke during the second curse all the more extraordinary."

"Well, no," Emma clarified. "Sorry. When I said 'go back', I meant in the sense of settling down." She grinned. "C'mon, I was a bail bondsperson. I'd be lousy at it if I refused to track my quarry inside the city limits of a place I used to live. When Killian came to New York to bring me back home, I really thought it was just to… to break the curse and then we'd go back. I didn't even want Henry remembering."

"I'll ask again," Gold replied, with a good deal more deference in his tone than might have been there on an earlier occasion. "Why did you stay on permanently?"

Emma regarded him for a moment. Her grin changed to a hesitant smile. "I finally found a place I just… missed when I left it." Her answer didn't seem to satisfy him and she frowned. "Why? What did you want me to tell you?"

"I…" He stopped. "Well. Never mind. I was hoping you might have…" He shook his head and got up, reaching for his cane. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. Enjoy your day, Emma."

"What?" She half-rose from behind her desk. "Gold, wait. What did I say?"

Rumple shook his head. "Nothing wrong. Again, my apologies."

"Gold!"

"I've lingered long enough," he said, and though his back was now to her, she could still hear a smile in his voice. "There I things I must attend to in the shop before I open for business and I've kept you from your work long enough. Good day."

She knew a firm goodbye when she heard one and she wished him the same. But as the door closed behind him, she was left wondering what sort of question he'd really wanted to ask and what it was about her answer that had shut him down.

Shaking her head, she reached for the report once more.

Rumple wasn't used to opening up, not even now, not even with Emma. And he himself wasn't sure what he'd wanted to ask her. But at home last night, after he'd returned from dinner, he'd remembered something he'd said when he'd apologized to Belle all those weeks ago, on her second night in Manhattan.
I spent every day of our marriage deceiving you, when I should have been trying to make you happy.

He still wasn't doing that. He was being honest with her, which he knew was a good thing. But honesty was painful at times and, while lying to her was worse, he'd be a fool to believe that Belle was happy with the current situation. And she was his wife. He was glad that she was back in his life. He wanted her back in his life. But the pain she'd caused him was still too raw and recent for him to trust her completely.

That didn't mean he couldn't make her happy, though.

He'd been racking his brains to try to come up with some sort of grand gesture. A real one, this time. Not like when he'd given her an ersatz version of his dagger to let her believe that his faith in her ran as deep as he'd wished it did. Something meaningful. Something difficult. And then, he'd thought of something that seemed, at first blush, almost perfect. And at second blush, almost impossible to accomplish.

Almost.

But not entirely.

But he couldn't disregard the strong likelihood of it backfiring on him, albeit not for the same reasons that such endeavors generally did.

He knew, as well as many and better than most, the pain of being estranged from a loved one. He also knew that while he wasn't the only reason that Belle had distanced herself from her father, he—or, at least the mutual antipathy that he and Moe French held for one another—were definitely part of the problem. And, more painfully, while he'd always believed that he had good reason to detest Belle's father, he'd since come to realize that the root cause of his hatred had been a misapprehension: Rumple had believed that after he'd sent Belle from his castle, she'd returned home, only to be imprisoned and mistreated by her father's clerics until she'd thrown herself from her tower to her death. He'd been laboring under that belief when the first Curse had fallen. And once he'd awakened from it, he'd first attacked Moe's livelihood and then, after Regina had talked the duke-turned-florist into robbing him, kidnapped the man and might well have beaten him to death had Emma not intervened.

Small wonder that Moe loathed him now. After everything the man had suffered at his hands, Rumple could even understand why he'd tried to send Belle over the town line. At the time, of course, he'd been furious. Aghast that Moe's hatred for him would drive the man to send his own daughter into exile with no memory of who she was or where she'd come from. But now, he found himself considering the possibility that Moe's primary motivation hadn't been hatred, but fear. Had he been so afraid for his daughter's life and safety that he'd acted, not out of malice, but out of love? His face hardened. Even if his hunch about Moe's motives was correct, it still didn't make it right.

But when Rumple thought about the matter a bit longer and asked himself if he might not have done the same thing for Bae in similar circumstances, well, he didn't have to deliberate long to have his answer. Even if that wouldn't have been right either.

Rumple heaved a heavy sigh. As hard as he'd found it to apologize to Marco, the two situations were scarcely comparable. Marco didn't hate him, for one thing. For another, the harm that Rumple had caused him had been both inadvertent and indirect. And he truly regretted it.

When it came to Moe French, the most that could be said was that Rumple knew he ought to regret the harm he'd caused him. And that he did regret the position it placed Belle in.
And was family as important to Belle as it was to him? Perhaps, if Rumple set about trying to patch things up with her father and somehow succeeded, she'd resent his interference.

No one decides my fate but me.

Belle was normally cool and rational, but she had her buttons and blind spots, much as he did. And while she controlled hers rather better than he did his, she possessed a temper as well. And even if Belle's buttons and blind spots were few, interfering in familial relationships was still a risky venture.

He remembered how Emma and August had refused to get involved when he and Belle had been at their lowest point and imagined what his reaction might have been had they tried to step in and push the two of them to reconcile instead. It wasn't a pretty picture.

It would have been so much simpler if he could ask Belle. And he might have, if he could have been sure of how she'd react. But he could predict three probable responses, were he to bring up the subject and they were not all worth the risk.

Don't bother. Right now, I don't want anything to do with him. Should that change, I'll tell you, but for now, leave things alone. But thank you for considering it. And for asking me. He would have welcomed that one.

I can't deny that I'd like that, but maybe it's too much too soon. Are you sure you're ready for that if it doesn't go well? He had enough doubts about the wisdom of such an action without having anyone else corroborate them, but he still wouldn't have minded such a reply. But then there was the other option.

Rumple! That would be wonderful! Yes, please! And be sure to tell me how it goes. In fact, I'll go with you! Let's do this together. Right now! Just the thought of that reaction had his hands sweating already. He was still toying with the notion. He had no idea whether, when the time came, he'd be able to get the words out right, particularly not with Moe glowering at him while Belle beamed expectantly. And if it didn't go as hoped, then either Belle's rift with her father might deepen, or Belle might blame him for failing. And if he said that he needed more time or that he'd prefer to approach her father on his own, she'd be continually asking him whether he was ready, how much longer he thought he'd need, or...

He shook his head. He couldn't ask Belle. And he didn't think he could ask Emma. Or August for that matter. While each of them surely had some experience with being disliked, he didn't think that either knew what it was to be loathed, nor how to go about changing that circumstance.

If he'd just wanted to vent, it wouldn't have mattered who he spoke to. But, he realized, he was looking for advice.

And he had no idea where he could get some.

Then his eyes widened and a faint smile graced his face for a moment. Then again, perhaps he did...

"Welcome to the Conjuring Arts Research Center. May I help you?" The attendant at the desk wore her lilac hair in a shaggy pixie bob. A small purple gemstone twinkled in a gold star-shaped setting from a stud in her nose. She wore a smartly-tailored blue herringbone blazer over a white ribbed turtleneck. A blue cameo brooch in a gold filigree setting adorned one lapel.

Lily smiled. "I made a research appointment three weeks ago. I'm Starla Hogandraig."
"Hogandraig," the young woman's lips curved in a welcoming smile. "Yes, I have the material that you requested here." She reached down and set two volumes down on the desk. "I'll need to see your ID," she murmured.

"Yeah, I know." That was why she'd made the appointment under her current name. As far as most of the world was concerned, Lilith Page had died in a car accident several years earlier. She pulled out her wallet.

The woman glanced at the drivers' license and nodded. "Thank you. Okay, if you have a laptop, feel free to use it. Pencils are the only writing instrument allowed. You have a maximum of two hours."

"Got it," Lily said, as the woman stood up. She was wearing a pencil skirt of the same fabric as the blazer.

"If you'll follow me," the woman said, "I'll show you where you can look at these. I'm Carey, by the way. Carey Norton."

"Thanks," Lily started to say, but Carey was already walking and Lily had to trot to keep up.

"By the way," Carey continued, "about your surname. Did you know it means 'dragon daughter'?"

Well, that was why she'd picked it. But admitting to that was only going to prompt a conversation she had no interest in having. The old man on the bus had been very clear. She would never be able to locate—much less enter—the town where her birth mother currently resided if she wasn't able to obtain the spells (one spell really, but split between two apparently unconnected tomes for security's sake) secreted within the pages of the volumes she'd requested. So now, the plan was to get the spell, go back to Ursula with it, pick up Cruella, and head for the town where Emma, Snow White, Prince Charming, and Maleficent awaited. And then…

The fun could begin.
Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

A/N: Info on kickboxing taken in large part from "I tried it: kickboxing", an article found on the cookinglight website. Yala National Park, Sri Lanka has a park-wide ban on cell phone usage. While I'm not ignoring the events of Beyond Witch Mountain, I'm taking the tack that, as with Henry's book, we don't necessarily know that story as well as we think…

Chapter Five

"Well," Regina said finally, "I believe I understand why you sought me out. Some tea?" She paused. "Or something stronger? You look like you might need it."

Rumple was about to accept, but then he remembered that without his magic, teleporting wasn't going to be possible and he wasn't about to risk slipping on an icy patch were he to walk the three city blocks between the town hall and his shop. "It had better be tea," he demurred regretfully. "I drove." And without his magic, he had no idea of his alcohol tolerance levels; he'd always cast a healing spell to counter the effects of strong drink in the past.

Regina nodded. Then she got up and went to the hot water urn on the sideboard and poured out two cups. "Lemon balm?"

Rumple smiled faintly. There were a number of naturally calming teas easily available. Lemon balm was one of the few that wasn't also a sleep aid. "Please."

From the fragrance emanating from Regina's cup when she set it down on her desk, she'd selected jasmine for her own. She sipped briefly from the cup and set it down. "I have to admit I've never been big on regret myself," she said finally. "And apologies don't always come easily. But at times they're needed."

"And you think that this is one of those times."

"I can't answer that," Regina replied. "You're right. It might clear the air. It might make things worse. Sometimes you have to address past wrongs. Sometimes those wounds heal just fine on their own and the wisest course of action is just to move on. But figuring out what's called for in each situation…" Her voice trailed off.

"I will say," she continued, smiling, "that if Belle takes after her father, an apology might go rather well, if you let him rail at you initially."

Rumple blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"When Zelena had your dagger, I came by the shop to see whether Belle had any idea what she might be planning. And your wife—admittedly with considerable justification—took me to task for what I did to her before, during, and after the first curse. I apologized then. I… also reminded her that keeping a grudge and refusing to help me might not be in the town's best interest or yours, for that matter. And, while I can't say for certain that she decided to let bygones be bygones, she did at
least see my point enough to share her findings with me. Since then, well, I'm not sure if relations between us have improved, but at least they haven't regressed. I suppose we've both tacitly agreed to ignore the history between us and start fresh."

"Yes," Rumple nodded, "but you're forgetting that when it comes to something you've needed from me, be it advice, a charm to protect your son from the dream realm, or your mother's spell book, it's scarcely mattered whether we've been working together or at cross purposes or whether I'd summoned a wraith to dispatch you not five days prior. I've never needed to forgive you in order to do business with you. Belle's feelings may be the same."

Regina thought about that. "What about her father?"

"Unknown."

Regina considered. "There's something to be said for clearing the air, you know. I think it might be helpful to decide if your sole reason for burying the hatchet is to do something considerate for Belle, or if you're also looking to make amends because you're trying to…" She frowned, thinking. "Regina?"

She took a breath. "You know, I'm sure, that when I was trying to stop relying on magic for Henry's sake, I was seeing Archie. He had me treating my dependency as an addiction and we were trying to treat it as one might more… conventional addictions. Are you familiar with twelve-step programs?"

Rumple's eyebrows shot up. "I assume you're referring to the step that speaks of making a list of those we've harmed and being willing to make amends to all of them." His lips curled derisively. "You realize, of course, that I'm no longer immortal. I doubt I'll live long enough to accomplish that one."

"It's about being willing, not necessarily able." Regina shook her head. "If it weren't, I'd be in the same situation you are. And making that list? Isn't Step One. I think it's eight or maybe nine. But just because you can't reach out to everyone doesn't mean you shouldn't bother reaching out to anyone." She took another breath. "If this is about trying to do something… nice for Belle, then if I were you, I'd make sure that it's something she actually wants before you tackle it. But if it's also about trying to clear the air between you and Moe, well, seeing as my actions ignited and fed that particular conflagration… You're not the only one who owes him an apology. If it'll help make that task less onerous," she smiled, "I'll come with you."

Belle made it back to the library, Astrid on her heels, and into the apartment at the back before she sank into a chair.

"It kind of looked like… fun," the fairy said weakly. "If you like that kind of thing, I mean."

Belle closed her eyes and leaned back with a groan. "It was many things," she murmured. "Fun was not one of them."

The lesson had begun with skipping ropes, of all things. Belle hadn't jumped rope since she was about eight or nine, but she'd quickly fallen into the familiar rhythm and, as everyone in the class was doing it, she'd felt a good deal less foolish about it than she might have thought she would, had she known what to expect. On the whole, she'd thought that it was going rather well.

They'd moved on to simple punches and kicks against imaginary foes. Again, it had been fairly easy. She'd been feeling rather pleased with herself. Then the instructor picked up the pace.

Belle's pace began to slack off. She was falling behind. She wasn't sure where she was supposed to breathe in all of this. Was it punch left, then right? Or right, then left? Did it matter? Had the instructor said?"

"Punch! Left hook, right hook, side kick, punch!"

Some of the other women were also faltering, but Belle thought that they were still doing better than she was.

"Kick higher, ladies! Not so choppy! Let the moves flow seamlessly. Uppercut, uppercut, knee lift, front kick, punch, punch… Come on!"

Belle wasn't used to feeling so… inept but she stuck with it, first gamely, then grimly. Finally they moved on to squats and sit-ups. Belle was out of practice with those, but at least she knew what she was about. Her old fencing master had sworn by those exercises—swordplay involved lunging from a squat toward an adversary and sit-ups helped to build up core body strength.

"All right, ladies," the instructor said finally. "By next class, I expect you to have completed one hundred squats and one hundred sit-ups. Now, hit the showers. And when you get home, jump into an ice bath. It'll help with the soreness. You can use a heating pad in a few hours. See you Wednesday, bright and early."

Belle didn't want to move anymore right now, not even to take that ice bath, never mind the conditioning exercises. Wednesday would come all too soon, but today was only Monday and the idea of sitting here in this extremely comfortable armchair for another forty-six hours or so was rather appealing.

"Uh… Belle?" Astrid ventured hesitantly. "I was sort of up all night and it's catching up with me. Do you have someplace I can take a nap?"

Belle groaned and reached for her cell phone. "Just stretch out on my bed for now," she invited, as she tried to think who among her contacts she could ask for that folding cot.

Coating the cuff with cornmeal paste wasn't the best idea Zelena could have come up with, she realized in hindsight. Billina was happy enough pecking at the dried food, but lacked either the beak strength or the inclination to tug on the leather shackle itself.

It was so frustrating! Zelena had the feeling that she could likely rip the thing in two with her bare hands if it weren't on her forearm. But the thing was spelled so that the wearer couldn't remove it. She'd tried cutting it; the glamor charm she'd worn about her neck was sealed in glass. Nobody had bothered searching her when they'd confined her here and the glass had broken easily enough. The shards, however, hadn't so much as scratched the cuff. It appeared to be on to stay.

Angrily, she tugged at it once more, but although the leather stretched somewhat in response to her fingertips, it wasn't enough for her to slide it off. The fact that there was some give gave her an idea, though.

The hospital had thoughtfully provided a pile of straw for Billina to nest on. Zelena plucked three long strands of it now, barely hearing the chicken's squawk of annoyance.

If she had still controlled Rumple, she fumed, she wouldn't have this problem. One command and
he'd have this thing off of her in no time. And if her dear sister had somehow anticipated such a thing and added to the enchantments already surrounding the cuff to protect it from his interference, perhaps a piece of gold wire might be just what was required to pry it off. Well. Rumple was beyond her control and she had no wire. But perhaps straw alone might suffice. One piece was weak and easily broken. But braided, it might just be strong enough.

It was a longshot, but Zelena knew that she never would have been able to create a working time-travel spell had she listened to the allegedly-wiser voices telling her that what she was attempting was impossible. And if she could unravel time…

…A leather cuff shouldn't be much trouble at all.

There was a way to break free of it. And with time and patience, she would find it.

She twisted the ends of the three straws together and drew them into a knot. Then, with hope in her heart, she began the braid.

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Lily finished copying over the information she needed within the allotted two hours. She wasn't entirely certain that she had the symbols correct, but she hoped that it would make sense to someone who could read magic. And that she could find such a person. If Ursula's sobriquet was deserved, then Lily imagined she had little to worry about. Presumably witches could read magic, so if the woman she'd met yesterday was truly the 'sea witch', then she ought to be able to translate the script. If she couldn't, then hopefully, Cruella would.

Truth be told, Lily wasn't very worried. So far, the old man's instructions had been spot on. She had to believe that he wouldn't have told her where to obtain the spell she'd need to find her mother and those who had wronged her, if he hadn't also arranged to have her meet up with someone who could actually use it.

She checked the time. Ursula wouldn't be finished work for at least another four hours. She could use that time to find out Cruella's address. The image search she'd done earlier had led to an article in the *Great Neck News* about the Feinbergs' recent purchase of several lots of silverblue, blue iris, and sapphire mink furs and speculation about what they planned to do with them. That article had been six months old. Lily would have delved further, but she hadn't wanted to miss her appointment slot at the Conjuring Arts Center and, it being her first time in New York, she'd decided to give herself plenty of time to get lost and find her way to her destination on time. Now that she had the spell, she could set about tracking down Cruella. Another trip to the library was in order.

Lily hoped that Cruella was in town. Great Neck, Long Island was only about 25 miles away. If she was vacationing somewhere, it would complicate matters. "I got this far," she told herself. "Even if it took me more than fifteen years to get started. And despite that, everything's been working out for me for the first time in... well, in forever. So, here's to hoping."

Less than an hour later, her jaw dropped. She reread the article. This time, a muffled curse escaped her. "Jack Feinberg arrested for investment fraud..."

According to what she was reading, just over a month ago, Cruella Feinberg, nee De Vil, had been turned out of her luxurious mansion with little more than her car and the clothes on her back—which had included some rather costly fur—when her husband had been taken into custody by the FBI. All assets had been seized.

"No... no... no," she whispered, scrolling down the search page. There had to be something more recent than that. People didn't just vanish without a trace. Some way, somehow, she had to find
"You're sure you want to go through with this?" Regina asked. They were taking her car; his own was still parked in front of her door.

"Are you suggesting I shouldn't?" Rumple asked.

"No." Regina fastened her seatbelt with an audible click. "Just… recognizing that this won't be easy."

Rumple sighed. "Very little in my recent experience has been. While I can't say I'm looking forward to what's to come, I'm finding that if I think of it as something I owe, the prospect becomes a bit more palatable. I do honor my debts."

"Maybe that's why it's not working for me," Regina said so softly that Rumple almost missed it over the sound of the car starting.

"Pardon?"

Regina backed carefully out of the driveway and waited until they were on the road before she replied. "When I've apologized before, both to Belle and to Marco, there were two elements in play. First," she smiled reluctantly, "I needed something from them. Second, they called me out for what I'd done to them in the past. That's… not the case now."

"Ah. And Snow?"

Regina smiled a bit at that. "She apologized first. And we'd been working together since Neverland. And… thinking back, I don't believe that I ever apologized for plotting to kill her." She turned onto Main Street. "There was never a moment when I said 'I'm sorry' and she said 'I forgive you'…"

"We can never know our past completely," she'd said after Snow had discovered what her mother, Queen Eva, had done to Cora. And then, something had made her add hesitantly, "If we had, I probably wouldn't have spent so much time trying to kill you."

It wasn't an explicit apology, but it was an olive branch and Snow leaped for it.

"Well, we would've found something to fight about," she'd returned. "I mean I was such a brat."

A year ago, Regina's rejoinder would have been tinged with bitterness, her comment more a sneer. Now, she chuckled and agreed good-humoredly. "Your mother's child."

Snow laughed back. "I think we've wasted our last day being haunted by the past…"

"I suppose," Regina said, "we've just… moved on."

Rumple nodded. "Somehow, I don't believe that's going to happen now."

Regina took one eye off the road for a moment to look at him. Then she pulled over and parked.

"What are you doing?" Rumple demanded sharply.

Regina locked her eyes on his. "If you're going to do this, you're going in there with a fighting chance to do it right. We both are. We're going to stay here for as long as necessary and rehearse what we're going to say and how Moe's likely to respond. And then… we're going to try to come up
with some way in which you can walk out of there without beating him to death with your cane and I can walk out of there without turning him to a cockroach." When Rumple's eyebrows shot up, she shrugged. "Apologies still don't come easy for me. I don't honestly know how I'll react the first time one of mine isn't accepted. Backsliding might just be more of a danger for me than it is for you at the moment." She broke eye contact and sank back into her seat. "We shall see."

Rumple regarded her searchingly for a moment. Then, in a tone that was almost nonchalant, he asked, "How did you wish to proceed?"

Regina hesitated. Then she closed her eyes and concentrated. "I guess a glamor spell is a good way to start," she said as her features took on Moe French's appearance and her voice deepened and took on his cadences. "All right, Rumple. What do you want to say? Or rather…" She took a breath. "Let me try to get into character." At that, illusory Moe's face screwed into a vicious scowl. "Gold. What the hell do you want here? Get out!"

Rumple smiled broadly. Then the smile fell away and he raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Please," he began, "I-I'd just like a-a moment of your time…"

"Lose the stutter," Regina said, and there was something bizarre about hearing her speech patterns in Moe's voice. Evidently, it sounded strange to her as well, for she—as Moe—blacked and cocked her head to one side, nonplussed. But only for a moment, before she continued, "Non-threatening doesn't have to mean weak."

Rumple nodded at that. He took another breath. "I've… Well, I've come to apologize."

"Better," Regina-as-Moe nodded. Then the scowl returned. "Bit late for that, don't you think?"

"I…" For a moment, his mind drew a blank. Then he slowly shook his head. "I'm hoping that it won't be. Though I daresay I can't fault you for believing so…"

Ursula clearly didn't care to stick around for long once her shift was done. She was out of the aquarium at three minutes past five. She spotted Lily sitting in a bus shelter across the street and waited for the light to change before crossing over to meet her. "Hey," she said.

Lily looked up. "Mind if we go somewhere we might have to show ID tonight? I'll pay."

Ursula shook her head. "No plan?"

"I had one," Lily replied, getting to her feet. "It was actually going well. I should've remembered." She exhaled noisily. "Nothing ever works out for me in the end."

"Yeah?" Ursula gave her a light slap on the shoulder.

Lily flinched and half-whirled, hands already locking into fists. Then she lowered them and looked away, embarrassed.

"Sorry," she muttered. "Probably not a good idea to do that without warning me first." She wasn't about to get into why. Ursula was already feeling sorry enough for her without bringing up the abusive boyfriend. He was out of her life now, anyway. She wondered whether he'd discovered that his ATM card was missing yet. She'd managed to get $500 out of the account for two days straight, then decided to stop pushing her luck and toss the thing. He probably hadn't had much more than the thousand anyway.

Ursula held up her own hands, palms wide, eyes slightly less-so. "I was just going to invite you to
"Rumple?"

"I'm fine," he snapped testily, getting back into the car.

"Okay, okay," Regina said, holding up her hands again in the same placating gesture she'd used just moments earlier in the flower shop. She didn't start the engine, though. "That man is infuriating."

Rumple took a breath and Regina braced for a verbal blow. He'd managed to keep his temper under control during the confrontation, but she suspected that it was even now struggling to break free. Empathy and support weren't always Regina's strongest suits, particularly where Rumple was concerned. Usually she could snark him out of a funk, but instinct—coupled with some of the things she'd learned from Emma and August—warned her that something else might be called for this time.

And then, Rumple exhaled and, without looking at her, said dully, "Given the history I have with him, I suppose I can understand why. Not that you fared much better."

He was being diplomatic. Moe had seemed to reserve all of his wrath and venom for Rumple, only sparing some for her when she'd reminded him of her own part in the troubles that had been visited on him and Belle.

"Still," she murmured, "as much as Snow's fond of saying that heroes do what's right, not what's easy, reactions like his make things harder than they ought to be." She shook her head. "It wasn't wrong to try."

"It feels like it was," he retorted. "Sometimes it's wisest to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Sometimes," Regina nodded. "My earlier offer of cider is still open if you want it."

For a moment, he seemed to consider it. Then he shook his head reluctantly. "My reason for refusing it then hasn't changed. Besides, I keep a bottle or two of spirits at the shop, though I seldom indulge."

"All right."

She regarded him for a moment, wondering whether he had anything else to add. When he remained silent, she reached to turn the key in the ignition.

"Perhaps you'd be willing to join me." His offer came out at a rush, and when Regina turned back to face him, his eyes were wide and, judging by the nervous incredulous expression on his face, he couldn't quite believe he'd made it. Understandable. After what he'd just been through with Moe, risking another rejection on its heels couldn't exactly be easy for him. Moreover, thinking back, Regina couldn't recall another time when he'd ever offered such an invitation to her. The closest he'd come had been when he'd been arrested after assaulting Moe and she'd come by the sheriff station to confirm her suspicions that he was awake. This was something altogether different from the sarcastic, 'Please sit,' he'd extended on that occasion. Well. Thankfully, her schedule for the rest of the day was mostly clear. Apart from…

"All right," she said again, smiling this time. "Let's go back to my place so you can get your car, and before we head off, I'll make sure that either Emma or one of her parents can pick Henry up.
He stayed late today."

Rumple made a noncommittal sound. "Nothing untoward, I trust?"

Regina laughed. "Not detention, if that's what you're hinting, no. He just decided to take on an extracurricular, this year. He's trying out for the school play."

"Good evening, Conjuring Arts Center. How may I—oh! Mr. Castaway. I'm sorry to have bothered you on your vacation." Really sorry, she thought. Mr. Castaway was a good boss and in the five years that Carey had worked for him, this was the first time she could ever remember his having taken more time off than the occasional long weekend. He'd finally decided to take a month and visit his wife's family in Sri Lanka.

The voice on the other end of the phone chuckled warmly. "Not to worry, Carey. I thought I had everything covered. The one thing I didn't check was whether cell phones were allowed inside Yala National Park. I know Dayani and I wanted to go somewhere remote and get away from it all, but maybe we could've picked someplace less remote in hindsight. Well, we're back in the US, now. Visiting my sister and her kids in Stony Creek. I'm only just checking my messages now and I see you left one almost right after I left."

Carey smiled. "Give Tia my best," she returned. "And… I don't know. You told me to advise you if anyone requisitioned a couple of the Merlin works?"

There was a pause. "Which titles?" he asked, and Carey didn't miss the faint apprehension in his voice now. She double-checked the application and read them off dutifully.

"And what name?"

She gave him that, too. "She was just in yesterday. I hadn't heard from you, so I let her read them. I kept an eye on her and nothing seemed especially off. She did seem to know exactly what she was looking for, though."

"Uh-huh." Her boss's voice was suddenly vague, as though he really wasn't paying much attention to her anymore. "Okay," he said finally. "It doesn't sound like there was any harm done. I'll be back on Monday. And Carey? You'll let me know if she comes back?"

"Yes, of course."

"Great. I'll see you Monday, then. But you should be able to get in touch with me now if you need to. Bye for now."

Tony Castaway ended the call with a sick look on his face. He registered the faint step behind him, but didn't turn around until his sister asked, "Trouble?"

He sighed. "Maybe. I don't know. The name was wrong; it could just be another King Arthur groupie trying to find Camelot. But it could be…" The look in his eyes was both nervous and resolute. "I think it's time to get in touch with Uncle Béné."

"So, that's the story," Lily said, taking a sip of her beer. "They're in a magically-protected town and I've just gotten a lead on the way inside. Only, without Cruella…"

"Is she really that important to all of this?" Ursula asked dubiously. "Or are you just trying to
collect everyone who crossed over with you?"

Lily hesitated. "If you and I go alone, it's just two of us against the whole town. Unless my mom took over, but from what the old man told me and what's in my book, I don't think she did. If Cruella comes, that makes three. And, I mean, if you're the sea witch, I guess you're strongest in the water, but on land? I think having someone with us who can control animals could come in handy. If nothing else, I know that if Snow White can talk to birds, she can get them to spy on us. I'd like to be able to do the same."

Ursula's eyebrows climbed. "It seems you are thinking this through," she said. "Not just blindly following a map and an old book. You may not have a whole plan, yet, but…"

"Without Cruella, I don't know if I've got a plan at all," Lily said, taking another morose sip.

"Well," Ursula said, raising her sea breeze (which had nothing to do with the sea whatsoever, but appearances needed to be kept up and she was rather partial to both cranberry and grapefruit juices) and taking a sip of her own, "I might be able to help with that. Not that we've had anything to do with one another in over twenty years, mind you, but if she's still anything like the woman I knew," she smiled, "I think I have a pretty good idea of where to find her…"
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

A/N: References to Witch Mountain and A Spaceman in King Arthur's Court/Unidentified Flying Oddball (Disney, 1979). Fans of the latter will note that Hermes is an android duplicate of "oddball" Tom Trimble. However, the inhabitants of a magical realm would likely come to a more reasonable assumption upon meeting two men who appeared identical in every way. Also, much like the OUAT characters' backstories aren't entirely consonant with their classic fairytale versions, some tweaks have been made to the other Disney properties as well.

Chapter Six

Camelot, many years ago…

The Apprentice had rarely questioned his master before, but this time he had to. "It could be the answer we've been seeking!" he protested. "You can't condemn an entire land to die!"

Merlin turned away angrily. "Do you imagine that I want to?" he demanded. "Don't you think I've considered the possibilities?"

"Then…?"

Merlin didn't turn around. "Every time I try to make things better, I make them worse. I wanted to find happiness with my True Love and was ready to sacrifice my immortality to do it. Instead, I released pain and sorrow upon this entire realm. I tried to mitigate the danger, tethering Ni—" his voice hardened. "Tethering the Dark One to a dagger to prevent her power from running unchecked. She knew me too well."

The Apprentice felt a pang at the bitterness in his master's voice. Nimuë had guessed where the dagger might be hidden and she'd known the key to unlocking the protections that surrounded it. She'd been clever, careful not to overstep the strictures Merlin had imposed upon her when he'd had the blade in his possession. The first he knew that it was missing was when rumors reached him of a new Dark One, more ruthless and terrible than the previous.

"And now, this… Malagant threatens to flood the Pebble Islands if Uther won't swear fealty to him and Uther refuses." The wizard shook his head. "He believes that if he gives in now, he will be forced to give in again in the future. He's probably right. But there are twenty thousand lives at stake and I can't save them all."

"But this newcomer… You saw as I did. His vessel can travel the distance in no time. And if we can fashion more like it, then perhaps we can use it to evacuate the islands!" It was actually their best chance. When Uther had sent a flotilla of boats to the rescue, the Dark One had sent a raging squall to meet them. As far as could be determined, not one sailor in that fleet had survived.

Merlin shook his head. "At what price? And don't tell me it doesn't matter; that sort of talk has a
way of coming back to haunt a person. Besides, from what I've seen of this new Dark One, once he
claims someone as his prey, he'll hunt the realm over to find them and destroy anyone who gets in
his path." His expression was stricken. "I don't want to condemn them to death, but I can't see any
way to save them. Not when Malagant steals hearts, then clothes his thralls in armor, and sets them
against me. Not when I have to fight innocents to get to him and those innocents have orders to kill
non-combatants if I try to engage them. This conflict is going to keep escalating until it engulfs the
realm."

"So, you're just going to do nothing." The Apprentice hadn't fully believed it until this moment, but
he realized that his teacher and master was truly not going to involve himself. Twenty thousand
people would die as a result of his inaction. He took a breath. "I've already spoken with Trimble.
He's shown me the drawings… the plans—schematics, he called them—for his vessel. He and his
brother have already begun adapting our technology to theirs and building more."

For a moment, Merlin seemed to consider the possibilities. Then his face fell once more. "We
know too little about their technology. They come from another land, one with no magic—for all
that a craft that travels through time and space would seem to demonstrate otherwise. If he's
looking to add magic, the results would be… unpredictable."

"But it might work."

"Or make things worse."

The Apprentice hesitated. "Suppose I were to go with them? I-I know my power isn't close to
yours, but I think I understand something of what they're trying to accomplish. At least enough that
between myself and the Trimbles, we would likely be able to correct errors, should anything go
wrong."

Merlin frowned. "You'd be making quite the sacrifice, Bené. If you leave this realm..." He
frowned. "When first I took you in, I had a vision that one day, you would be called upon to fill a
grand purpose, one that would weigh heavily upon you down through the years. I said nothing to
you at the time; there didn't seem to be much point and I knew you would want details you weren't
ready for."

"Then."

"Then," Merlin nodded. "Until you had a means of crossing the boundaries, not merely between
realms, but between space and time as well, discussion was pointless. And the duty that will befall
you, unlike custodianship of the hat which I know I have forced upon you, this new duty must be
freely and unreservedly accepted."

Bené waited. "Master? What is this new duty?"

Merlin seemed to be lost in thought. "You are familiar with the concept of Authors…?"

The Apprentices eyes grew wide. "Surely. But what has that to do with…"

"Travel between lands with magic and lands without is difficult. An Author must manage it. And
so must the one who appoints an Author to their task." He paused for a beat. "My visions told me,
Bené, that you would be that individual."

"M-me?" Bené stammered.

"I'd thought that there would be more time before the burden would fall to you. And, at any rate,
until the means to travel presented itself, I didn't consider the matter overly pressing. But the ship
is here. And if it is in your heart to travel to this new realm—the realm that no longer possesses its own magic and yet possesses the dreamers and imaginers that can conceive the possibility of it and even, occasionally, to touch it—then…” He took a breath. "Come. There is much that you must learn in the days that remain to you here. If you truly intend to accompany these people," his smile, while forced, was still warmer than any Bené had seen on his master's face in weeks, "then it falls to me to do what I must to prepare you for the years ahead."

"Shall I never see you again?" the Apprentice asked, sounding for a moment like the boy he'd been when first he'd entered Merlin's service.

"Perhaps not in person," the wizard replied. "But there are other methods. Which you will commence to learn forthwith." He frowned. "There really isn't going to be enough time. Unless…"

"Unless?"

Merlin smiled. "It's time for you to learn Portal Magic, my boy. Observe and attend." Before the young man's eyes a disembodied door appeared. Bené blinked.

"How…? Forgive me, master. I did not see the process. Only the result."

Merlin's smile didn't ebb. "It is through making use of the result that you will have the leisure to master the process. Go ahead, Bené. Open the door and walk through."

Wondering, the Apprentice did so, his master close behind. And then they stood in a sun-drenched meadow, high stone bluffs before them and greenery all about.

"Welcome to the Edge of Realms, Bené. The one place in the universe where I can teach you everything you must know before you travel on from me and still be back in time to join the refugees…”

---

Now

Henry wondered what the heck he was doing here. He'd been lamenting to Emma that he missed his friends in New York and, now that there was a curse on the town line, he couldn't even visit them. Yes, the scroll would have allowed him to leave and return and there had been a lot of crossing back and forth recently, but there was a difference between leaving town to save lives and leaving town because you wanted a vacation. Nobody really died of boredom.

Emma had understood, but then she'd reminded him that he'd made friends in New York by joining clubs and after-school activities. There was no reason he couldn't do the same here.

The thing was, Henry had been griping because he'd wanted sympathy. He hadn't expected his mom to suggest he actually do something about it. He'd forced himself to smile and resolved to talk to his other mother. And, once he did, he realized that Emma must have already called her.

"Getting more involved in school activities is a good thing," Regina had maintained. "I know it was harder for you when, apart from myself and Jefferson, you were the only person in Storybrooke aware that time was frozen. But things are different now. And you've read that book so many times by now that I'm sure if it was somehow lost, you'd be able to rewrite it from memory. I'm not suggesting you abandon it, but it's healthy for you to cultivate new interests." And then, she'd opened her purse and pulled out a folded flyer that Henry hadn't thought she knew about. Jeez, was Grandma in on this, too?

"In fact," Regina went on, "your grandmother and I met for coffee earlier this week and she
mentioned that Storybrooke Middle School is going to be putting on Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* this term and auditions are next week." She smiled wryly. "It appears that despite the situation with the town line, it was still possible to obtain the necessary permissions from the copyright holder. At any rate, I think you should go."

Yep. Grandma was involved. Which meant that his odds of escaping this horrifying turn of events had just plummeted from slim to none. Still, Henry tried to make her see reason. He wasn't an actor.

"They need backstage crew as well."

He had no experience.

"Somehow, I doubt that any of your classmates are applying late of appearing on Broadway."

He had homework.

"Yes. You're in school. And I would imagine that everyone else involved in the production is going to be in a similar situation. I think that the teachers generally lighten the workload as the performance draws near. In any case, that might give you the perfect reason to form a study group, which would—"

"—help me make some new friends," Henry finished, defeated. "Fine. I'll go to the auditions. Happy?"

"Satisfied," Regina had corrected. "I'll be happy when you've found something to do besides traipsing through the house morosely moaning over how bored you are. Besides," she added, "thinking back now, you did manage to pull off a number of inspiring acting performances in order to see Emma behind my back when she first came to Storybrooke. I think such talent ought to be honed, don't you?"

He knew a rhetorical question when he heard it. "Fine!" he repeated, whirling about and stomping upstairs.

That had been last week. And now, here he was, sitting in the school auditorium, waiting apprehensively for his turn to read a monolog.

"Hey." He looked up to see Nicholas Zimmer leaning toward him.

"Hey."

"So… what part are you hoping for?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't know. I guess whichever one they think I'm good for. You?"

"Horace Vandergelder," Nicholas said. "Or maybe Cornelius Hackl. But I won't get either. I mean, I couldn't act like Ava and I had parents when our staying together depended on it. How'm I supposed to pretend to be someone I'm not?"

Henry blinked. "You mean… because you couldn't fool my mom's superpower, you don't think you can act?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I guess."

Henry hesitated. Then he reached into his backpack and pulled out a hardcover copy of the play
that he'd checked out of the public library that morning. "I was reading it on my lunchbreak and… well, maybe if I get Barnaby Tucker, it'll be okay. And since Barnaby and Cornelius have a lot of scenes together, you want to practice a little before they call us?"

Nicholas broke into a smile. "Sure!"

There was no way to be sure how long Bené and Merlin spent at the Edge of Realms. Time didn't pass there as it did outside of it. By the time the two returned to Camelot, Bené's hair and beard were long, wild, and mostly gray. And yet, when they stepped back through the portal into Merlin's study—Merlin looking virtually identical to the way he had upon setting out—barely a moment had passed. If that.

"We needed to ensure that you'd learn everything I could teach you," Merlin said.

"But I'll be able to contact you, if I have reason to," Bené protested. "You taught me those spells ages ago."

Merlin was silent for some time. Finally, he said, "My visions tell me otherwise. Not always in ways that are easily understood of course. Certainly not clearly enough to see every twist and turn on the map that Fate will draw. But I do know that there will come a time when those spells you place such faith in will fail you. You are my apprentice, Bené. That has not changed and never will. But at some point, you will need to set up shop for yourself with the tools I've provided you. When that day comes, I must know that you'll be ready."

"How long?"

Merlin shook his head. "Not for a while, but sooner than you think." He smiled. "But no more on this. Come. The people of the Pebble Islands need your help. You know how to create the many from out of the one?"

Bené nodded. It had been one of the first spells he'd learned independently. "Yes, Master." It would not take years or even months to replicate Trimble's ship. Once he understood its mechanics—and he'd been more than halfway there before their journey—he would be able to create multiple copies in moments. There were still logistics to be worked out: which families to be assigned where, how much food and equipment to bring with them, what—if any—personal effects might be brought aboard, but once the ships were built, the greatest hurdle would be passed. And unlike the broom he'd enchanted that first time, the magic used in the building of these ships would not escape his control. He'd practiced too long for that. Thankfully. Because if anything were to go awry this time, the consequences would prove to be rather more serious than a flooded spell workshop…

The tryouts were going badly as Henry knew they would. If The Matchmaker had featured a narrator, he might have had a better chance. It wasn't that he couldn't read with expression, after all. But to sink himself into a part and pretend to be someone else was a different story. He could read for a character. He couldn't become one. Practicing with Nicholas had only cemented that.

It didn't make him feel much better to see his classmates stumbling through their monologues as his turn to read drew nigh. He took a moment to send a sympathetic look in Nicholas's direction. The casting team wasn't having them read from the play; each auditioner was handed a slim paperback opened to a specific page. Henry could glimpse the title in the hand of the girl reading onstage now: 50/50 Monologues for Student Actors. Nicholas looked like he wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed that his preparations with the actual script weren't going to be needed.
"Henry Mills?"

Henry gulped.

"Break a leg," Nicholas whispered.

"My mom would just send me onstage on crutches," Henry deadpanned back. He was rewarded by a snicker as he mounted the steps toward the stage and the doom that awaited him.

Twelve ships. That was how many they needed to evacuate the Pebble Islands. "Unfortunately," Trimble had explained even before Bené and Merlin had gone off to study, "they're designed to travel between planets. I don't think my systems can be fine-tuned enough to pinpoint a spot on this world where we can all land. And at the speeds we travel, we might not be able to slow down in time. We'd no sooner be up in the air, when we'd have to…"

Bené nodded, not really surprised. "If we had more time," he said, "I might be able to pool my studies with yours in order to do more than simply repair your craft and create more like it. Had we several months, it could be possible to modify this technology so that the Islanders could make a new home within Camelot."

Trimble looked at him sharply and Bené nodded once more. "I've spoken with the governor already. He agrees with our assessment. In order for these people to have their best chance, they will need to leave this realm entirely. Perhaps your land can accommodate them. Perhaps we will need to travel onward when we reach this new realm. But if they remain here, then the threat to their lives, and to Camelot, is too great."

Trimble looked stunned. "You… you have to understand that while people on my planet think that there might be other worlds out there in theory, if I show up with a few thousand refugees from another world, it's going to be… I mean…"

"Your authorities will think us hostile invaders?"

"If they don't, the media will," Trimble nodded. He hesitated, thinking. "You know, the guys who designed my ship did so with the idea that I—or, at least, my andr—I mean, my twin brother, would be undertaking a voyage to the farthest star we'd charted. They told me that there was a shield on the ship that ought to make us invisible to any scans or other detection systems."

"Ought to…?" Bené raised an eyebrow.

"Well, obviously, they can't know. I mean, they're not even sure if there's any life orbiting that star, much less how good their tech is if there is any. They would have had to have made the ship invisible to Earth's top detection systems. Which would mean…"

"Which would mean," Bené said smoothly, "that they did not do so. They would have to have considered the possibility of your capture and interrogation, and that your ship had fallen into enemy hands. They wouldn't equip you with a means of stealing past your own world's defenses." He smiled. "But I can."

"You?" Trimble blinked. "You mean, with a spell like how you're making these other ships?" He gestured to the field before them where pieces of metal and wood were even now shaping themselves into something that was beginning to look like the craft in which he'd arrived.

"Not exactly," Bené admitted. "You are from a land without magic. A spell would fail as soon as we crossed into it. But a device would be another matter." And using the island's raw materials
would ensure that the ships wouldn't immediately dissolve once they passed through the portal to Trimble's realm.

"A device?" Trimble shook his head. "Sounds like we're debating semantics."

"It's no debate. It's a loophole. A protection spell won't work. A protection charm, one that emits a glamor field that could make this fleet appear as no more than a flock of birds… that will. But while you will return to the point from which you departed, I rather suspect that your… docking port will not be able to safely accommodate a dozen invisible ships—or flocks of birds."

Trimble nodded slowly. "You're right, there." He frowned, rubbing his forehead. "You know," he said after a moment, "I think I do know a place. Wilderness country; I used to go fishing there a lot up until the last few years. A place in Idaho called the Misty Valley, just on the edge of one of our national forests. There's a small town, ghost town now, really since the silver mine closed about fifteen years back."

"Ghost town?" Bené looked at him askance. "You surely can't mean it's haunted?"

"Wha—?" Trimble laughed. "Oh, no. No, a ghost town is what we call a place that used to have people living in it, but then—usually for economic reasons—everyone packed up and cleared out. Like when a mine goes dry, or the factory the town was built for goes bankrupt." He took a breath. "I don't have to explain factories or bankruptcy, do I?"

Bené smiled. "No, not at all. So, you're telling me that there's a largely-uninhabited area where we can land unseen, and when we do, we'll find shelter waiting and food nearby? You did mention fishing, and I would presume that the forest has edible fruits and greens?"

Trimble blinked. Then a smile came to his face, one almost as bright as the twin star-emblem on the wall tapestry, emblem of the governor of the islands. "Yes. Yes, it does."

Bené's smile broadened as well. "I believe that sounds perfect…"

Belle had opened the library late and spent most of her time behind the circulation desk. Not many people came in, which meant that she was able to spend her time sitting behind the circulation desk in a cushioned swivel chair. She tried not to look at the full trucks of books waiting to be shelved as morning slid into afternoon and drifted toward evening.

She'd left Astrid in the apartment curled up with her copy of *Wuthering Heights*. She was hoping that the fairy enjoyed it. It wasn't that people in Storybrooke didn't read; going by the aforementioned book trucks, many did. However, the books checked out tended to fall into two camps. First there was something Belle thought of as 'non-fiction for practical purposes'. She knew that when Marco came in, he'd be headed directly for the carpentry section or checking to see whether the latest issue of *Extreme How-To* was in the periodicals reading area. Snow and David were always browsing the child development section, just as they had the pregnancy and fetal development sections before Neal's birth. Plenty of students, from the first-graders starting at Storybrooke Elementary who came in with their parents, through to the young adults attending Storybrooke College would be searching for help with some project or paper and looking for a book that their school library either didn't stock or had already released to another patron. Probably three quarters of the books to go back on the shelves fell into that category.

As far as fiction went, though… Well, to be fair, there were a handful of young people who seemed to love curling up with a good book as much as she did. Most of the others who came in seemed to go for the mass-market romances and suspense thrillers that Belle thought were rather generic.
Take one protagonist from column A, one love interest from column B, one setting from column C… Belle had read a dozen or so of them and was hard-put now to remember which details went with which title.

She remembered the lively discussions she'd had with her mother and her tutors over her readings and wished that she had someone in Storybrooke with whom she could do that now. She'd tried with the schoolchildren, but some were shy, some seemed to react as though she was quizzing them on the material, and all preferred diving into a new book to discussing an old one. If Astrid enjoyed *Wuthering Heights*, then she and Belle could really delve into the story together. They'd talk about the characters and explore the themes and then look at the body of criticism and see whether they'd unknowingly come up with the same insights that someone before had found or whether they'd come up with something new, and… Belle froze. And then a look of consternation crossed her face. She was doing it again. She was taking one hope, one observation, one puzzle piece and trying to assemble entire… jigsaw out of it without bothering to find out whether the picture she saw that piece fitting matched the image on the box. Astrid was a person, not a puzzle. Belle sensed a kindred spirit in her, but how well did she truly know the fairy, after all?

*I don't make up my mind about a character after reading one paragraph. Surely I can take longer than a day to make my mind up about Astrid. Maybe she'll want to discuss the book with me. Maybe she's the kind who just takes down what she reads and parrots it back without forming opinions of her own. Maybe she's just never read a book that wasn't assigned to her before and it's a novelty to her and tomorrow, she'll be doing crosswords or… or even going back to the convent and studying to be a fairy godmother. I have to let her decide instead of… of trying to make her over into what I think she ought to be.*

Even if Belle did think she had a few ideas with regard to what was best for Astrid. Because Astrid had left the convent to get away from people who claimed to know what was best for her and only ended up making her miserable in the process. And while Belle might not be Blue, she too had no small capacity for complacency, self-righteousness, an assurance that her way was the right way and everyone would thank her for interfering in the end.

Belle shook her head, furious with herself. She was trying to change. She was! But it was so hard not to revert…

The door opened and her father strode in. Before Belle could rise to greet him, he was looming over her at the desk. "I suppose you put him up to that?" he demanded.

Belle blinked. "Father?"

"Sending him round to the shop to try to make amends so we could all be one happy family? You should stick to your books and stop trying to meddle in things you don't understand."

Belle felt her own temper begin to simmer, but parental respect kept her tone even, though she clutched at the edge of her desk for support while she replied, "Father? What on earth are you talking about?"

Bené had come a long way from the bored, frustrated boy who'd enchanted a broom to get him out of a menial task all those years ago. And the duplication cantrip he'd accidentally worked into that spell was something he could now cast with ease and purpose. A good thing, too. Trimble wanted to be certain that if anything went wrong and the ships didn't all land at the same site, the passengers would still be able to find their way to Stony Creek and Misty Valley.

Each refugee had been issued a small carry-case bearing the twin-star emblem of the Pebble
Islands. Partly, it was to remind them of where they were from. But the emblems also served to conceal an area map of Misty Valley, drawn by Tom Trimble's twin brother Hermes. It wouldn't help much if the ship landed in some other part of the Trimble's realm; according to Tom, the region wasn't one that many would have heard of. However, sooner or later, they were bound to come across someone who might point them in the right direction. There were many advantages to steering for an obscure destination. Those benefits far outweighed the risk of some refugees being flung off-course and unable to easily find their way to the others.

"At least you all look like the people from our world," Tom had remarked.

Bené nodded. He wished he knew what effect this world, this Land without Magic would have on a select segment of the population. For while many had the aptitude to acquire magic through years of study as he had, there were others who were born with the power. And while it was more than likely that crossing the boundary would neutralize all magical talent whether learned or innate, it wasn't something that he could be certain of until they were actually in this new land.

After Moe left, Belle locked the library door behind him. She'd lost track of the time and already been open past closing when he'd stormed in. As she set about shutting down the computer terminals for the evening and closing the lights, she was trying to process what he'd told her and wondering what she ought to make of it.

Had Rumple tried to apologize to her father because he was genuinely sorry for what he'd done? Was it part of some plan or scheme? Was it all a ploy to… to show her that he was trying to be a better person? And if it was an attempt to impress her, was that such a terrible thing?

*If he'd wanted to impress me, wouldn't he have told me what he meant to do?*

Belle wasn't so sure. Rumple read most people the way she read books. He must have guessed that she'd find out what had happened from her father in short order. But why wouldn't Rumple have talked to her about this? Weren't they trying to be more open with each other? Was he still afraid to trust her?

Belle flicked off the light switch in the Group Study Room C with a bit more vehemence than was warranted. Rumple wasn't the Dark One anymore. She didn't have to be constantly on her guard against missing some twisted scheme or other. If Rumple hadn't told her what he was about, then he must have had his reasons.

She just wished she could think of one that didn't make her feel sick inside. Because if he wasn't trying to hide some plot or plan from her, then he was probably still afraid to lower his walls around her. She understood why he'd open up to Emma, even if she wasn't pleased about it. But Regina? What was *that* about?

"Belle?"

She turned, startled. "Astrid?"

"Sorry," the fairy said. "I-I thought the library closed an hour ago and I was wondering what was taking so long. You said we were going to go borrow that cot from Granny's at seven and it's almost time now and…" She broke off. "Belle? Are you okay?"

Belle smiled. "Of course. I… just lost track of time. Here. We'll leave through the apartment; I just need to get my coat."

Astrid tilted her head to one side. "You're sure you're okay? You look, uh, kind of upset."
Belle sighed. "I guess I am, a little. Nothing you need to worry about, though. I'm fine." She added in a slightly lower tone, "Or will be, anyway."

Astrid tilted her head to the other side. "All right," she said finally. "But if you want to talk about it, I'm here."

She didn't, but she felt her lips curve into a small smile regardless. She couldn't remember the last time that anyone had extended that sort of offer in her direction. She knew that, if she were to ask for a listening ear, there would be plenty of people around who would be happy to oblige. All the same, it was nice to have someone volunteer one without her approaching them first. "Thanks," she said sincerely. "As long as we're at Granny's, we may as well get takeout for supper and tomorrow, maybe we'll do a grocery run."

"Sure."

Fate had a way of giving people exactly as much time as they required, no more, no less. The ships had been finished and stocked less than twenty-four hours before Bené's scry-spell detected Malagant and his forces streaking toward them on ships with ghostly-gray sails that crackled lightning from masts and rigging.

"Get in and prepare for departure!" Trimble ordered. "Bené, take the lead ship!"

The Apprentice hastened to obey, nearly stumbling over a kitten that appeared out of nowhere.

"Winky!" a child cried and Bené, stooped down to scoop the small black-furred creature up. "Here," he said, handing it to the parents of a girl of no more than four years old. She dropped him a hasty curtsey. "Thank you, Uncle…" she said, addressing him as she might any adult, related or not.

"Bené," he smiled.

"I'm Tia."

"And we all have places to be," the woman holding Tia's left hand in her right and the hand of a slightly-younger boy in her left said quickly. "Come along now. Don't bother Uncle Bené."

Bené inclined his head thankfully, but something made him add, "Good manners are seldom a bother, good woman. And neither's your daughter"

While boarding proceeded swiftly, it was far from instantaneous. The pilots knew their craft—Merlin had been able to help with that much; some spell he was tinkering with to implant memories and knowledge far outside a subject's ken had proven quite useful. Still, it wasn't clear whether those memories would make them truly expert at this new craft, or whether they would have the theory, but not the reflexes.

No sooner had they lifted off when Bené's communication device—radio, Trimble had called it—crackled to life. "That door in the sky you said you can make?" Trimble snapped. "Now would be a really good time to make it!"

Bené's eyes widened as he peered out the portal window. Malagant's fleet had arrived. And while the gray ships couldn't fly, the same could not be said for the enormous fireball that was even now streaking toward them. Bené waved his hand in the direction that they were moving and the portal appeared. But now a new problem occurred to him: once his ship passed through, the portal would seal behind him. He walked over to the pilot and explained tersely. "It would appear," he said, "that
we can no longer be the lead ship."

"I understand," the pilot said. "I wish you could have told me before lift-off; we could have made some changes to the roster, gotten the children assigned to other vessels. But wishing solves nothing. Do you know where the escape pods are?"

Of course he did; he'd memorized the schematics. "Get the children into them now," the pilot continued. "If we're attacked, get them away from here if you can. You may have to launch them manually if it comes to that." He smiled. "My thanks for that knowledge spell. I'm realizing that I know... quite a bit more about how to maneuver this craft that I'd realized before I sat down in this chair. But I should caution you that things are going to get rather... rough."

Bené needed no urging. While the pilot hastily informed both the other ships and the crew about the change in plans, he raced down the corridors to the children's quarters and made his explanations to the crew members assigned to look after them. A few minutes later, he was escorting some fifty boys and girls, ranging in age from fourteen or so to babies in arms.

"Think of this as a drill for the moment," he reassured them as he bundled them into the pods. "With any luck, you'll be out of these soon."

No sooner had he finished speaking when an unseen force seemed to fling the ship off course. A moment later, the lighting failed, plunging the evacuation chamber into total darkness.

A small child began to wail and the sound was quickly picked up and echoed by others.

And, thinking of the fireball he'd seen only a short while before, Bené wondered whether it was only his imagination...

...Or whether the temperature inside the ship was rising.
Chapter Seven

It was nice to have someone around in the evening, Belle reflected. She and Astrid had eaten supper while watching TV—something Astrid confessed she’d never done before. “If I wasn’t at the hospital or doing my duties at the convent, I was studying,” the young fairy admitted. “First for the novitiate,” she rolled her eyes slightly, “and later… well, Blue kept telling me I’d never make godmother if I didn’t apply myself.” She smiled sadly. “I guess she was right on that one. She just never mentioned that I probably didn’t have it in me, no matter how hard I tried.”

“Now, you don’t know that,” Belle protested.

Astrid was still smiling. “Yes, I do. And I probably would have recognized it sooner if I’d ever had the chance to try anything else. But she scuttled that,” she added with a hint of bitterness.

“Are you and…” Belle hesitated, wondering whether Grumpy was still Grumpy or if he’d decided to go by ‘Dreamy’ again, “Leroy,” she continued, playing it safe, “seeing each other now?”

Astrid didn’t answer immediately. “I think so,” she said slowly. “I mean… I hope so. I think. I…” She let out a breath. “When he told me, all those years ago, that he wasn’t coming with me to see the fireflies, he broke my heart. And even though I know the whole story now,” she sucked in a breath and let it out. “I mean, I couldn’t stand up to Blue back then; that’s why we were going to sneak off together. And from what Leroy said to me last night, he had to face Blue and Bossy. I can’t blame him for giving in. I shouldn’t.”

“But you do,” Belle said softly, understanding.

“A little,” she admitted. Then, hastily, “But I still love him!”

“I know,” Belle said. “Believe me.”

“I want to,” Astrid said. “But how can you kn… Oh!” She focused her attention fully on Belle with dawning comprehension. “You too?”

“Yeah,” Belle’s confession was barely audible. “M-me too.”

“Nobody ever said that love could be this… complicated,” Astrid said, squeezing Belle’s hand fiercely. Belle squeezed back.

_space, Many years ago...

Bené forced down a wave of dread. He had to stay calm, for the children’s sake if nothing else. He cleared his mind, closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths. Mercifully, the lights came on again, albeit markedly dimmer than before. “Is everyone all right?” he asked. He was gratified to realize that he sounded concerned, but that no hint of fear breached his emotional defenses. He was the only adult in the vicinity. If the children picked up on the terror that gripped him now, then they would only amplify it. And among these children were those whose mental abilities would allow them to project their feelings onto others. Perhaps even to the crew.
Slowly, the answers trickled back. “What happened?”

The Apprentice hoped that the smile in his voice would reassure them. “I’m going to find out,” he said. He moved to the box on the wall—intercom, Trimble had called it—and groped for the button that would activate it. “What is our status?” he asked in a clipped tone.

The pilot—Bené had never even bothered to ask his name—answered at once.

“Are you all uninjured down there?”

“For the moment. What happened?”

There was a long pause punctuated by a crackle of… Trimble had called it ‘static’. “Well,” the pilot said, “the good news is that we’re now through that door and it closed behind us before Malagant could follow. Unfortunately, he blasted us with… something. I don’t think it was fire exactly. As I understand it, flames can’t last out here.”

“Magical flames may not follow that rule,” Bené admitted. “But leave that. How damaged are we?”

The pilot hesitated. And though his voice remained calm and steady, there was no mistaking the seriousness of his tone. “That’s the bad news. We’re leaking fuel.”

Bené’s hands went ice-cold. “Am I to understand,” he began heavily, ignoring another crackle, “that…”

“I think I can still land us,” the pilot said. “But we aren’t going to make it to Misty Valley as we are. I need you to jettison the pods.”

“How are you quite certain?”

The pilot’s voice remained even, assurance audible despite the static that grew louder and more pronounced with every moment. “It’ll give all of us our best chance. If you jettison the pods now, they’ll land in the ocean. They should hit close enough to shore to be detected by local crafts which will pick them up. And without the weight of the pods and their cargo—human and otherwise—I think we might just barely reach the landing coordinates.”

“I understand,” Bené said. “But once the inhabitants of this realm see the pods, they’ll…” He smiled. “Lifeboats.”

Trimble had given him the plans for those as well—made of a strange, slippery fabric, something like the rubber Merlin occasionally procured from those merchants who traveled the south caravan route. There was one stowed in each escape pod. The pods could seat twelve adults or twenty children. The boats would seat the same number.

“Exactly. Bené,” the pilot said sharply, “does each pod have at least one person aboard who’ll be able to inflate the boat?”

Every passenger over the age of nine could. Bené frowned, remembering. Not all of the children he’d escorted here had been happy about it. Several had pleaded to stay behind. He’d refused them… But now he thought of it, he hadn’t seen them enter any of the pods either! Hastily, he peered into each of the open pods. His breath caught when he took in the inhabitants of the seventh. If any of the others… but no. The other eleven pods were fine. “Pod G,” he relayed. “The oldest aboard can’t be more than six. I could move one of the others—”
“No,” the pilot cut him off. “No, there’s no time to start mixing things up now. You go with them.”

“But—”

“You can’t fly this thing and I don’t need you here. The children do. Watch out for them, Bené. Make sure they have their star-cases with the maps. And when they’re able to seek us out,” the static was even louder now. Bené had to strain to make out the pilot’s instructions through the noise, “make sure that they know… that the watchword… is…” Another crackle almost completely drowned out the pilot’s final word. Almost, but not quite.

_Castaway._

Rumple had much to reflect on that night. Was he self-sabotaging again? It would scarcely be surprising if he was. Any time that his fortunes seemed poised to take a turn for the better, he never failed to stumble and fall flat on his face. If he was extremely fortunate, he merely ended up where he’d been in the first place and not even farther behind.

Becoming the Dark One had made the pattern more obvious, but that had been but one poor decision—a link in a chain of poor decisions both earlier and later.

Everything had been going so well. What had possessed him to kick _that_ hornet’s nest?

He wondered whether he could talk it over with Belle. He did want to; he’d have to be a fool not to see that she was upset that he still wasn’t opening up to her the way he had previously. The irony was that ‘previously’ he’d never let on just how much he was keeping from her. She’d been happy with him because she’d been blissfully unaware of his plots and schemes. And now… well, he was still closing himself off, still keeping things from her, but at least, he was being _open_ about it.

He sucked in his breath. She _was_ going to find out about this; if not from him, then from her father. He _thought_ he could rely on Regina’s discretion. In fact, he was almost positive he could. Moe French was altogether a different matter.

Rumple sighed. He might no longer be the Dark One, but he was still a coward. And since he hadn’t had the nerve to discuss his plans with Belle earlier, things were only going to be worse when she learned what he’d done. He’d deceived her too many times and far too recently. He’d kept things from her, hidden his plans beneath a web of glib talk and misdirection, and now, even though he’d meant well… Well, hadn’t that been his excuse so many times before?

The fact that he truly had been trying to do the right thing this time wasn’t going to help. She’d accuse him of reverting and…

…And maybe he was. Maybe he just couldn’t help himself.

Maybe he was still cursed, after all.

Maybe, he should reach out and discuss this with… He shook his head. No, he really didn’t want to talk this over with anyone. Not even anyone who had promised to be there for him if he needed a listening ear. He wasn’t going to call that number on his phone.

But knowing that it was there, knowing that it was an option, did make him feel marginally better. And perhaps, a cup of tea and a good night’s sleep might help.
Things might look better in the morning.
Maybe.

*Pacific Ocean, U.S. Coastal Waters, 11.8 nautical miles off the coast of Washington State, many years ago.*

Bené had never experienced freefall before, and certainly not for hours unending. Years later, he would learn how lucky he and the others had been, that had they been traveling even slightly faster, had the outer hull been even slightly weaker, they might have burned up in the atmosphere above and never survived the landing. As it was, when they hit, they hit hard.

Most of the children screamed. Bené wouldn’t remember doing so himself, but he would subsequently wonder whether some sense of dignity had blotted out that part of his recollection. And then a small hand slipped into his. “Uncle Bené?” a small voice said hesitantly in his mind. “Is this our new home?”

He took a breath. “It’s Tia, isn’t it?” he said. He’d recognized the little girl almost at once when he’d slid into the seat beside hers, but he sometimes had a poor memory for names.

“Yes.”

“Hi!” a new voice chimed in. “I’m Tony!”

And even a harrowing descent and a rough landing couldn’t dampen the exuberance in the boy’s voice. Bené smiled. “Well, Tony,” he said aloud, “and Tia,” he added, “I believe we have a task ahead of us. We need to get the hatch open and the lifeboat out.”

“And then?” Tia asked, still in his mind.

“And then, we need to get into the boat and await rescue.”

He didn’t want to think what might happen if none was forthcoming. But even if help did arrive, the local authorities would have questions. And children were not always circumspect in their answers. Bené weighed his options. Then he took a small vial from within the folds of his robe. “Is there any flatbread in rations?” he asked.

A boy with unruly sandy curls, who looked to be about six, reached over his head and pulled down a survival pack. “I think so, Uncle,” he replied, unfastening the ties. A moment later, Bené held a cloth-wrapped package in his hands, clearly labeled. He opened it and smiled. Twenty-four children in the pod. Yes, there was enough food and potion. It would do.

“What are you doing, Uncle Bené?” Tony asked, as he drizzled the potion over the bread.

“You must be hungry,” Bené remarked. “Here.” He tore off a piece of the flat bread and handed it to the boy. “And for the rest of you,” he went on, ripping off chunks and passing them around. The draught was odorless, tasteless, and harmless. But it would make the children open to suggestion for a short period of time. And unlike other means of altering consciousness such as hypnosis, it would not require regular reinforcement.

The children took the proffered food readily enough. Once they’d consumed it, Bené waited several minutes until he could be sure it had taken effect. Then he smiled sadly.
“Once you leave this vessel,” he said, “you will forget. You will forget Camelot and the Pebble Islands. You will forget everything of your lives before leaving this escape pod, retaining only your names, your ages, and the need to retain your star-cases, no matter what happens.”

“I don’t have mine,” a small voice piped up.

Bené regarded the speaker gravely. “Have you a sibling with you, Alexander?”

The little boy shook his head.

The Apprentice looked about. “Are there any here with a brother or sister in this pod?” A half-dozen hands shot up. He didn’t know most of the names, so perhaps it was unfair of him to single out the two he did. But decisions needed to be made and he wasn’t about to suggest drawing straws.

“Tony,” he said, “give Alexander your star-case. And now, you must ensure that your sister keeps hers and that you stay with her.” He took a breath. “You will each remember the importance of the star-cases, but you will forget the map concealed behind the front panel. Someday, somehow, those maps will make themselves known to you and when that occurs, you will begin to remember who you are and where you come from. You will remember,” he added, remembering the pilot’s words, “the name ‘Castaway’. So long as you retain that much, your people will always find you.” He looked at the children, committing each face to his own memory. “Do you understand?”

A chorus of yeses greeted his question.

“Very well.” He nodded to the six-year-old who had handed him the flatbread. “It’s time to open the hatch.”

Belle awakened in the middle of the night, or, going by the red digital display on the alarm clock by her bedside table, the wee hours of the morning. Everything was stiff and sore and she could barely rouse herself to stumble to the bathroom. Astrid was sound asleep and snoring softly, almost musically. It wasn’t an unpleasant sound, but Belle didn’t think she was likely to fall back to sleep now.

Sighing, she made her way to her small kitchen. She didn’t want herbal tea, nor any drink likely to keep her awake. As a child, she’d occasionally enjoyed a mug of warm milk, but while it wouldn’t be unwelcome now, she thought she’d rather something less… mundane. She pondered for a moment. Then she remembered something that Anna had purchased for her before they’d set out to visit the rock trolls. It had been a warm drink, milk-based, yes, but sweeter with an aniseed flavoring. Thoughtfully, she picked up her phone from the counter where it had been charging and brought up Google. Here it was. “Anijsmelk,” she said aloud. “Anise milk. I suppose that’s descriptive. And fairly easy to make; it’s just milk, honey, and aniseed.” She didn’t have whole milk, unfortunately, but two percent would suffice; the drink simply wouldn’t taste as rich. She smiled as she eased herself out of the chair and took a small saucepan down from an upper cabinet. She was rather partial to anise as a flavoring, for all that it seemed to be a taste that most people she knew loved to hate. It oughtn’t to be any odder than adding cinnamon to chocolate—a combination that Belle had a hard time wrapping her own head about. To each their own.

As she got the milk out of the fridge and poured it, first into a measuring cup, and then into the saucepan, she found herself thinking back to her father’s visit and wondering what she ought to do, or if she ought to do anything.
Rumple hadn’t consulted her, it was true, but then he seldom did. She shouldn’t be surprised or hurt by it; he’d always been close-mouthed about his affairs, even around her. But he was supposed to be trying to change.

*And she was supposed to be trying to trust him.*

Trying to change didn’t necessarily mean being more open and above-board about everything in short order. They were both still working on getting to know one another all over again, including the parts of themselves they’d tried not to let show. She still didn’t know for sure how much of her feelings for Rumple had been for him and how much for the Dark One who’d resided within him. And, at least to herself, she could admit that she was more than a little frightened of what she might find out. Because if she was attracted to Darkness in some way, however slight, and Rumple had lost that part of him… She didn’t want to be one more person he’d thought loved him only to reject him. She’d already rejected him too many times and this second chance had not been granted her easily.

But it was one thing to be attracted to Darkness and another to turn a blind eye to…

Rumple had never liked her father. So why had he sought him out today? Yesterday. Whatever, it might be after midnight, but it still felt like the middle of the night. Father hadn’t believed that—or cared whether—Rumple’s show of remorse had been genuine.

Belle cared.

Was her husband truly trying to make amends for the past…

…Or was he trying to exact some sort of retribution in a way that made him seem like the hero and her father, the villain?

And really, with or without Darkness fueling Rumple’s motives, either option might be valid.

She could talk to him.

She could, but even asking for an explanation could be perceived as a lack of trust. And right now, after everything he’d been through, not just with her, not just in the last few months, but for nearly his entire life, the last thing he probably needed was to suspect that the people he’d finally come to believe in and rely upon still questioned his every action, as though they were waiting for him to fail.

If she brought the subject up with him, she’d have to do so in a way that wouldn’t put him on the defensive. Emma and August seemed so good at that. Or, at least, he seemed more willing to discuss his reasons with them. Was it because they knew how to draw him out? Or was it because their rejection of his arguments would hurt him nearly as much as hers might? Probably, Belle allowed, it was a bit of both.

So, how could she make him feel safe enough to open up to her, when she wasn’t entirely sure that she wouldn’t reject a truth she didn’t want to hear?

She couldn’t.

And she couldn’t go back to her father and try to get him to tell her objectively what had happened, without coloring his account with past recriminations and current accusations.

Emma and August would sympathize with her. They’d understand. They’d try to help her find positive slants for Rumple’s actions—something she was having no trouble doing on her own; she
just wanted to be certain that such views were warranted.

So, she needed to talk to someone who’d actually been there.

She squeezed honey into a tablespoon, stirred it into the simmering milk and aniseed, and repeated the action. She needed to talk to Regina.

The children were frightened. They were island dwellers; they knew their way around fishing boats well enough, but they’d never seen a craft like this. No sail, entirely made of fabric—and not canvas sailcloth, made from cotton or hemp. No, this was slick and slippery, difficult for small hands to grip. It was fortunate that each child also wore a jacket made from similar fabric that kept them afloat in these rough waters. And that all but the very smallest could, if not swim, then at the very least, tread water.

“My case!” a little girl’s anguished cry caught Bené’s attention. Tia’s hair was soaking wet, which made it appear darker. He might not have known her, were it not for her younger brother, already aboard the inflatable lifeboat, and holding fast to the back of her floatation jacket. Bené saw the star-case, bobbing just out of her reach.

“Stay there,” he called. “I’ll get it.” He had a toddler on each shoulder and he thrashed his way over to the lifeboat to deposit them. He knew how to swim, but he was glad of his own floatation jacket.

Without the added weight of the children, he reached the case with swift, sure, strokes. As he turned to bring it back to its owner, he caught sight of something welcome: an approaching vessel. To Bené’s eyes, it was a metal fortress gliding toward them. He could just make out the image of a flag painted on its hull. Trimble’s ship had born such a device. They were saved.

And then, another thought struck him. No government would consider a boatload of small children to be spies or invaders. When they proved unable to answer questions about who they were, where they were from, or how they’d come to be adrift in the water, doubtless, it would be assumed that the older ones were too traumatized and the younger too inarticulate. They would be looked after. Perhaps adopted, perhaps apprenticed, but they would be taken in and cared for.

But only if he wasn’t with them.

He was an adult and old enough to give an accounting of himself. He might feign memory loss for a time, but sooner or later, these authorities would realize that he was not of them. They would have suspicions he wouldn’t know how to begin to allay. And those suspicions would extend to anyone found with him.

Bené looked at the approaching ship. He looked at the lifeboat filled with frightened children. And he made his decision. The children needed their best chance. And Tia? Tia needed her star-case, particularly since her brother no longer had his. He paddled back to the lifeboat and passed the case into the child’s outstretched hand. As soon as he knew that she’d grasped its strap tightly, he smiled.

And then, he let himself fall backwards below the surface of the water.

He could hold his breath for nearly three minutes without difficulty. Thanks to his master’s lessons, he could create a portal in less than one. By the time the rescue ship reached the lifeboat, Bené was gone.
He would pass the next few years in the realm of Misthaven, a land which its own denizens called ‘The Enchanted Forest’.

“So,” Belle said, “it—it’s not that I don’t trust him. I mean, I-I want to. But he and my father… I mean, the way they feel about each other, I don’t know what the real story is or what actually happened yesterday. And since you were there…”

Regina regarded Belle coolly. “I take it you haven’t discussed things with Rumple, then.”

Belle shifted guiltily in her chair. “Not yet. I…” she colored slightly. “I feel like I’m so afraid of doing things wrong that I don’t know how I dare to do anything. If I ask him about it, he might think I’m trying to interrogate him. Or that I feel like he went behind my back.”

“Do you?” Regina asked.

Belle sucked in her breath. “I’m trying not to.”

Regina sighed. “You realize that this is putting me in a difficult position. Because I’m not sure I ought to be going behind his back. If he hasn’t told you yet, it might not be my place.”

Belle looked up slightly. “Might not be?” she echoed, nearly pouncing on the hint that the mayor was wavering.

Regina sighed again. “Would it help if I were to tell you that Rumple’s going to see your father was only remotely connected with you?”

A puzzled frown came to the librarian’s face. “Then… why…?”

Now it was Regina’s turn to shift in her chair. And Belle thought she must be imagining the guilty look in her eyes. After all, Regina seldom felt guilty about anything. Why, even when she’d apologized to Belle for locking her up for thirty years, Belle warranted that it had stemmed, not from remorse, but from expedience. If saying a few words and seeming to mean them got her closer to foiling Zelena’s plans, then they were words well-spoken. But that didn’t mean that Regina regretted her past misdeeds.

Regina didn’t answer for a moment. Then, hesitantly, she asked, “Have either your father or Rumple ever told you the reason for the animosity between them?”

Belle blinked. “They didn’t have to. Back in our land, when the Ogre War reached our duchy, I’d persuaded Father to write to the Dark One and plead for his help. Rumple named me as his price. I accepted over Father’s protests.” She shook her head slightly. “Father called him a beast. Rumple laughed at him.” Her forehead creased in frown. “Are you saying that there’s more to it than that?”

Regina nodded reluctantly. “Quite a bit more, in fact. When you burst in here, you asked a question I didn’t answer, if you’ll recall.”

Belle nodded back. ‘Bursting’ probably was the best turn of phrase for it; she’d stormed into the mayor’s office without bothering to knock and asked—demanded, rather—to know why Rumple had gone to her father and why Regina had gone with him. Regina had reacted by looking her up and down coolly, in a way that made her feel like a child being dressed down by her etiquette tutor before calmly inviting her to sit down and making her a cup of tea. Belle reached for the cup now, even though the liquid that remained had gone cold.
“All right. I suppose, I may as well just come out and say it. The terms Rumple set for his assistance certainly didn’t start proceedings on the right foot. But that’s not the reason for your father’s animosity.” She took another breath and let it out. Then she looked Belle directly in the eye and said firmly, “I am.”

Ten minutes later, Belle practically ran out of the Storybrooke town hall, trying to put as much distance as she could between herself and that building before she broke down utterly. All that time when she’d been chained in Regina’s tower and later, locked up in the hospital basement, Rumple had thought that her father had… And then, Regina had prompted her father to rob… And Rumple had…

And Regina had just sat there, calmly, coolly, telling her all of this and finishing with an apology that, granted, had sounded more heartfelt than the one she’d extended a few short months earlier, but one Belle felt far less inclined to accept.

Rumple had never been the only monster in Storybrooke. He hadn’t even been the most monstrous. Well. If Belle never had to sit across a table from Regina again, it would be too soon. She and the mayor were done and that was all there was to it.

“I should’ve cheered that wraith on,” she muttered. She was almost at the shop and she took a moment to compose herself before she reached it.

Rumple was behind the counter, polishing the glass top with a dust rag, which he set down the moment she walked in. “Belle,” he greeted her with a nervous smile, as he came out to the main floor of the shop.

She thought she could guess the reason for his worry and she drew closer, nearly falling into his embrace. “Father came to the library last night,” she murmured. “Are—are you all right?”

The sigh of relief and the way he relaxed in her arms wasn’t her imagination.

Lily got up expectantly when Ursula came into the aquarium lobby at the end of her shift. “Okay,” the older woman said. “I got Andrina to trade shifts with me. I’ll have to work the weekend, but I’ve got Thursday and Friday off.”

“So?” Lily asked, cautiously.

“So,” Ursula said, “Wednesday after work, we’re going to Penn Station. We’ll catch the train to Great Neck and, once we’re there…” she smiled, “we’ll track down Cruella.”

“You’re sure she’s still there?” Lily asked. “I mean, the arrest was a couple of months ago. She might have moved on.”

Ursula shook her head. “I don’t think so. You see, Cruella and I go pretty far back. I know a few things about what she wants and doesn’t want. And I can tell you this: just so long as she can entice dashing young men to buy her drinks and take her to jazz bars… she won’t have gone anywhere.”
She looked at Lily sharply. “But unless you’ve come up with a decent plan, once we find Cruella and I introduce the two of you, that’s it. I may have a lousy job and a lousy life, but it can always be worse. And I’m not about to gamble away the little I’ve got unless there are some pretty compelling odds in my favor.”

Lily smiled. “Don’t worry,” she said grimly. “There will be.”
Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

A/N: According to the Celebheights Website, Emilie de Ravin is 157cm (Between 5'1½" and 5'2") tall and Amy Acker is 170.2cm (5'7¾").

Chapter Eight

Regina hated drinking alone. She also hated reaching out and asking for help. If someone approached her and offered assistance, that was different, but she'd been taught early on that asking for help displayed vulnerability, vulnerability meant weakness, and weakness meant offering others the opportunity to use and exploit you.

"Thank you, Mother," she muttered, as she poured boiling water over the teabag in her earthenware mug. "For ensuring that your lessons would stick." As she waited for the tea to steep, she considered. She didn't need to do this. She could just have the tea without adding anything more mundane than lemon, sweetener, or perhaps, some milk.

She'd seen Belle angry before, Heaven knew. For all that the librarian maintained an air of affable approachability, Regina had long known that something far less composed seethed beneath the surface. It was just so easy to forget most of the time, for Belle's temper seldom made itself seen. But when it did…

Regina had allowed her newest captive to cool her heels in her tower cell for nearly two weeks before she'd deigned to visit her. During that time, she'd watched in her mirror with some amusement while the young woman sought some means of escape. Belle made no attempt to flirt with her guard nor win his sympathies—not that it would have worked. Claude might not be averse to a bit of... companionship... but his loyalty was unquestioning. Regina hadn't even needed to take his heart to secure it. But while Belle hadn't made any overtures to her jailer, she had noted that the lone window, though narrow, was unbarred. Regina smiled as she observed her captive climb onto the window sill. It was a dizzying drop down and she was pleased that the young woman had, as yet, not tried it. All magic came with a price and Regina didn't care to pay it before it was absolutely necessary. Still, when she realized that Belle was actually unraveling her lone blanket and attempting to plait it into a rope, she recognized that the time was at hand. She made her way to the tower.

Belle was sitting on the hard cot that was really a shelf built into the wall with only a thin straw tick for a mattress. Not the most comfortable bed, but Regina wondered whether Rumple had truly given her even that much comfort. If he had, she reflected, it had surely not without demanding something in return. At the queen's entry, the prisoner sprang to her feet, eyes flashing dangerously.

"Just how long do you intend on keeping me here?" Belle demanded.

Regina smiled. "For as long as it suits me, dear. After that," she sighed, "I suppose I'll have to
arrange some fitting disposition for you, but that’s not likely to be for a good long while. So long," her gaze flicked from Belle's blanket—its unraveled edge carefully tucked down—to the window, "as you don't do anything foolish."

Belle lifted her chin and, had Regina not seen its slight quiver, nor noted the slight trembling of the maiden's knees beneath her long blue skirts, she might almost have been fooled by the show of courage.

"I do think that dress suits you better than that outfit you had on when I found you," Regina added. "Not everyone can pull off leather."

Belle didn't rise to the bait. "I'm the daughter of Duke Maurice of Avonlea," she said evenly. "I've committed no crime. By not releasing me, you risk war with my father."

The queen raised an eyebrow. "Even if Duke Maurice learned your whereabouts, do you truly imagine that he'd raise arms against me?"

"He'll—"

"The ogres decimated your armies, didn't they? I mean, that's why you turned to Rumpelstiltskin in the first place. Your crops were scorched, your fields salted. With the Dark One's help, your people won't starve this winter and next year's crop will probably sprout. But with so many soldiers dead or maimed in the fighting," Regina shook her head with mock-sadness, "it may come down to a choice: let the people work the land," her voice hardened, "or lead a battle-weary force of hungry, ragtag men and women to a strong, heavily defended kingdom..." Her forehead creased for a moment. "I'm forgetting something," she murmured in a tone meant to be overheard. "Ah, yes. I'm told you're quite the scholar. Have you ever studied geography, dear?"

Belle blinked. "Of course," she snapped.

"Good." A scroll appeared in the Evil Queen's hand and she unfurled it with a snap. "I trust you recognize this map?" She pointed to a small irregular shape to the northeast. "See? Here's Avonlea. And here," she traced a path several inches westward, "separated by three—or four, depending on the route chosen—other lands... This is where we are now. So, in order to rescue you, your father would need to lead an armed force through a number of uninvolved kingdoms, perhaps the odd duchy or earldom, none of whom are likely to countenance a military invasion across their borders. Your father would either have to turn back, or attack these other armies—all of whom would be, at this point, better fed, better equipped, and better motivated to fight. Probably greater in number, too. Not the best exercise in morale-building. You know, it wouldn't surprise me if the majority of your father's forces turned back. And if, by some faint chance, they didn't, and if, by some even fainter chance, Avonlea won those battles, your father would still reach my borders with a fraction of his armies—his tired, hungry, disheartened, battle-weary armies—set to face my forces." She smiled. "And here I thought you surrendered yourself to Rumpelstiltskin to save your people, not add to their dead. But if you've changed your mind..."

The map vanished and, a piece of blank parchment appeared in Belle's hand. She looked at it in confusion.

"Here," Regina said, thrusting an inkpot and quill at her. "Write to him. Ask him to come rescue you." She shook her head. "That is, if you aren't afraid to risk finding out how little you might mean to him. I mean, he was going to marry you off to a brute in exchange for the promise of military aid. And even if he protested the deal you struck with the Dark One, he did stand back and allow you to leave, didn't he? Maybe you're not as important to him as you think you are." She smiled. "Shall we find out?"
Belle gave the queen a furious stare. Tight-lipped, she held out her hand for the inkpot. And then, she flung it full force into Regina's face.

The queen let out a cry of shock and rage, but Belle was already springing for the window. It was a tight squeeze and a long way down; she felt her skirt tear as she got out onto the sill, but she ignored it. It was a sheer fifty feet down if it was one, but if she could just climb down far enough that the fall wouldn't kill her, Belle thought she might be able to jump the rest of the way. And then, well, she'd have to hope that if the queen had a use for her, then she'd balk at having her knights fire arrows after her.

There were vines scaling the tower wall and she grasped them, thankful for the handholds. And then, she felt them coil tightly about her wrists, binding them fast. Another vine wrapped about her ankles. Belle struggled, but the plant had already come partly away from the wall and it raised her higher, back toward the window she'd just escaped from, back into the tower cell.

The vines released her and she fell, sprawling on her knees before the queen, who looked down upon her grimly, no trace of ink on her face or clothing. "That was foolish of you, dear," she said tightly. "I'd been coming to tell you that the pleas and protests that you made when you accepted my hospitality hadn't fallen on completely deaf ears. I was considering offering you another chance. Unfortunately, after your actions today, I'm afraid you've squandered that opportunity."

"When Rumple finds out—" Belle started to say, but Regina silenced her with a wave of her hand.

"When your father finds out. When Rumple finds out. You might be able to save an enchanted prince, but you're rather useless at saving yourself, aren't you? In any event," Regina continued matter-of-factly, "Rumple isn't going to find out. And neither is your father. You'll be remaining here as my guest for the foreseeable future. And," she smiled as metal shackles closed about Belle's wrists and ankles, "be assured, I'm foreseeing a rather far off future."

Belle sprang up from the floor, then stumbled and sank to her knees again as a chain sprouted between her ankle shackles, linking them closely together. As she braced her hands on the floor to attempt to rise once more, a second chain fastened itself to each of her wrist shackles. A third, longer chain connected to one of the links of the ankle chain, its other end bound to a metal ring set in the stone wall beneath her sleeping shelf.

"You'll find you've length enough to reach the commode," Regina smiled. "And the door. The guards will be ordered to bring you your meals daily, though if you prove as recalcitrant with them as you've been with me, I'll allow them to exercise their discretion about whether it's safe for them to come within reach of you. So I trust you'll be suitably docile when you receive them." She tilted her head. "Clear enough?" she asked pleasantly.

A stream of bitter invective streamed from her captive's mouth and the queen laughed.

"It's plain your parents never taught you proper deportment. Or did you learn such language during your... time on the road with Claude?" A hint of steel crept into her tone. "I'd curb that tongue if I were you, dear. Particularly when addressing a queen. Or you're just liable to lose it." She turned on her heel.

"I think you should take a day or two to reflect in solitude on your behavior. Consider whether such rebelliousness is truly in your best interest. Yes, I'll see to it that, for the next forty-eight hours, you won't be distracted by such mundanities as food or drink, nor disturbed by myself or my guards, for any reason. And if you persist in your recalcitrance, I can always give you more time." Her smile never dimmed. "I can afford to be patient, dear. And I'll give you time to cultivate that trait for yourself."
She swept out of the cell, her eyebrows climbing ever-so-slightly as her captive released a new string of curses—delightfully inventive ones at that—after her.

Regina winced a bit at the memory. Belle might, might have forgiven her for that incident recently; Regina had been telling the truth when she'd admitted to Rumple that she wasn't certain her apology had been accepted, but the librarian hadn't received today's new information with anything approaching the equanimity she'd shown that other time.

On the one hand, Regina could scarcely blame her. On the other, hand, wasn't Good supposed to be more forgiving than this?

Regina shook her head. Tea definitely wasn't going to be enough. She made her way to the liquor cabinet and returned with two bottles. She was still shaking her head as she removed the teabag from her mug and added a shot of bourbon and a splash of her homemade apple cider. Then she went into the kitchen for a lemon.

She sucked in her breath. She was feeling sorry for herself, and as miserable as she was, she could recognize the thin ice on which she was treading. Trying to do the right thing and getting a slap in the face from Fate for her trouble was a recipe for more than the drink she was making in her living room. She was practically inviting her worst self to a pity party. And that… that was not a good idea. Not after all this time. Not when giving in to her worst self might result in something somewhat more serious than some hurt feelings on the part of the object of her wrath. And, Regina let out a heavy sigh, then took another deep breath, and she could hardly say that Belle didn't have a right to be angry. Or an obligation to accept an apology as though it could resolve the real problem.

Some deeds were just too egregious to be brushed off simply because the doer now regretted them.

Regret. Regina sniffed with a bitter smile. She'd finally begun doing more of that. And it really didn't have much to recommend it. But unless she wanted to have more to regret this evening, she needed to enact certain safeguards.

So, she reached into her pocket for her phone and punched in a number. "Robin! I... was wondering whether you'd care to join me in a nightcap. Have you ever had an apple cider hot toddy? Well, bring Roland, too, then. Henry's with Emma tonight; Roland can sleep in his room." She smiled. "I'll see you soon."

No, she wasn't about to sob on anyone's shoulder or rant on about the unfairness of the world. She didn't have to. She just needed someone here with her tonight who knew both the woman she had been and the woman she was today. And, if she did feel like opening up after a toddy or two…

…She suspected that Robin wouldn't judge her nearly as harshly.

Or at all.

Reul Ghorm was disturbed. For a number of weeks, there had been an unidentifiable 'something' in the air of the convent. At first, she'd told herself that after spending so many hours on the hospital's lowest level and returning home mainly to sleep, she'd simply grown unused to the normal routine. Her hours with Zelena had consisted of stony silence, punctuated by venomous invective and the odd chicken squawk. Of course the buzz of more genial conversation would sound strange to her now.
But gradually, she was coming to realize that it was more than that. The hum of conversation seemed to die down as she drew near—and it wasn't (as she'd initially assumed) because the discussion was dealing with the sort of frivolities she outwardly frowned upon but inwardly indulged. It did no harm for the novices to speculate on the personalities of the children that they might one day be assigned to as godmothers, nor the adepts to compare notes on how their charges had turned out. She couldn't say that she approved when the discussion turned to whether those charges remained appreciative or, in the course of time, seemed to forget the gifts their godmothers had bestowed. Good didn't expect gratitude, after all. Still, she didn't see the harm or the need to interject her own comments. Particularly since her mere presence generally served to remind the speakers to moderate their words and temper their judgments.

The quiet that heralded her approaches now, though, was of a different flavor. It was almost… disrespectful. Reul allowed that they might have learned of her earlier missteps. Snow was a dear friend, but even as a child, she'd rarely been discreet in speech or deed. And despite her lessons in diplomacy and statesmanship, Snow might never have been taught of the impropriety of discussing a fairy's actions with those of lower rank. Reul tried to curb her disappointment. This would pass.

"And Merry won't reconsider? Even after—?"

The whisperer was cut off in mid-sentence by another, slightly louder voice. "Shush! She'll hear!"

"Well, I wasn't saying anything wrong. I just thought, after everything Blue's done, Merryweather might've given some reason for—"

"Oh, please!" A new voice snapped. "She never explains anything!"

"I just think it wouldn't be so terrible if things changed around here, that's all."

"They are changing," the second speaker said ominously.

"I know." It was the third voice again. "It hasn't even been two days and it already feels like most of the life's been sucked out of this place."

"Yes," the first voice sighed. "I miss Astrid, too."

"Since Blue came back full-time, she was the only thing that made life here bearable." Nobody answered the second speaker and, after a moment, she added more wistfully, "I almost wish Merry hadn't stepped in."

"Blue told her to," the first voice protested.

"I know. I'm not saying she had a choice. But if she'd never stepped in, we'd never have realized how much better things could be and now, well, Blue's back and without Astrid, it's going to be so much worse!" Then, anxiously, "She's still at the hospital, right? I mean, she's not listening?"

"I don't…" The third speaker suddenly sounded nervous.

There was a whispered conversation, too low for Reul to make out the words, but from the tone they were arguing about whether one of them ought to check. Check whether she was nearby, Reul realized, with a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach. She ought to sail around that corner and confront those three gossips. She ought to remind them of their place in the hierarchy and that if any of them wished to contest her authority, then they were more than welcome to issue a formal challenge. She ought to tower over them with righteous indignation, instead of using a transformation spell to turn herself into a starling and soar out the open window as hesitant footsteps drew near.
"Everything okay?" Astrid asked, as Belle shut the apartment door with a bit more force than was warranted and stepped out of her shoes, trying not to bristle at the fairy's start of surprise.

Belle misread the reason for it. "Fine," she snapped. "I'm short. Deal with it."

Astrid blinked at the ire in Belle's voice. Then she shrugged. "I'm only five-seven when I get big. Back in our land, I spent most of my time at seven-five. Inches, I mean."

"Oh." Suddenly five-one-and-a-half didn't sound so bad. Belle sighed. "I'm sorry, Astrid. It's just… been a long day. And I still have to do those exercises before tomorrow's class."

So saying, she moved toward the center of the rug in the common area, pushed the coffee table to one side—but close enough to Astrid for the fairy to reach the bowl of grapes she'd been snacking on, and began on the hundred squats. She did ten before she began to feel the strain. At fifteen, she saw Astrid looking at her as though she had something on her mind. "What?" she asked somewhat testily.

"I was just thinking," Astrid said. "The squats and sit-ups… they don't target the same muscles, do they?"

Belle shook her head. "No," she said sinking into her sixteenth squat. "Why?"

"Well, maybe it would be easier if you switched back and forth. Like maybe ten squats and then ten sit-ups. So your legs get a chance to rest while you're working your stomach and then your stomach can rest while—"

"Got it," Belle cut her off. Then she smiled apologetically. It really was a good idea. "I'm sorry, Astrid. It's just been a…"

"…Long day," the fairy smiled. "You said."

"I did, didn't I?" Belle sighed. "I'll do twenty," she added, half-talking to herself. "Then twenty sit-ups. And then, I'll see if I want to keep that number or switch after ten for the rest, like you suggested." She let out a breath. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I found out a few things I wish I hadn't and I guess I got angry and I took it out on you."

"I thought it might be something like that," Astrid admitted. "I mean, I know I can be clumsy and mess things up, but I've been on my best behave—OH!" The bowl tumbled from the edge of the coffee table, spilling out its fruit. "Sorry!" she gasped. "I made sure to use a wooden one so it wouldn't shatter, but your food…"

"It's okay," Belle said, starting forward, but the fairy waved her off.

"I'll just…" A pink cloud engulfed the grapes, lifting them back into the bowl. For a moment, they seemed almost to sparkle. "There," Astrid said. "They're clean again. No point wasting good food."

Belle would have just rinsed them. Back in the Enchanted Forest, even in the castles of the aristocracy, food was seldom plentiful enough to let things go to waste simply because they fell on a relatively-clean floor. Particularly during the months when they'd been besieged by the ogre armies and their stores had dwindled. "Thanks." She finished her first twenty squats and got into
"I just… I guess I learned a few truths I didn't know before and I'm dealing." Briefly, she began outlining the basics of the animosity between Rumple and her father.

She hadn't even gotten to the fuel Regina had poured on those flames, before Astrid was shaking her head sympathetically. "So, your father and your husband… and you're caught in the middle."

Belle grunted. "Well," she panted, as she came up, "not really." She sank back down to the floor. "I mean," she puffed, "no more… than I have been before." Talk as you come up; that's when you're supposed to exhale. "Maybe… even less."

"Then…?"

Belle didn't say anything until she finished the set. Then, instead of starting another set of squats, she lay back for a moment, and then turned on her side to look at Astrid. "Have you ever," she said slowly, "done something stupid and not realized how stupid it was until it all blew up in your face, and then promised yourself you'd never do anything like that again if you could only have another chance… and then..." She shook her head. "Then something happened that made you think that you ought to do something only you're afraid it's the same stupid thing it was before and you don't want to squander your second chance, but you still want to say something, but you're not sure what you can say that won't be taken wrong by the person you hurt most the last time?"

Astrid blinked. "Sorry?"

Belle sighed. "I've been hearing that word a lot today." She joined Astrid on the sofa. "You see, after my father called on me last night, I thought I needed answers I wouldn't get from Rumple. So, I decided to talk to Regina and…"

Under the cotton-wool striped hospital blanket, concealed from the security cameras, Billina pecked at the leather cuff on her mistress's wrist. Zelena wondered whether this time, the chicken would be able to get the thing off, but she was fast losing hope.

"Come on, beautiful one," she coaxed. "Just see if you can peck it off."

The witch sighed. Chickens were generally written off as creatures of limited intellect, but Zelena knew that the reality was quite different. Back in her apartment, Billina had quickly learned where the chicken feed was kept and, more astonishingly, where the key to the locked cabinet was kept. Even more astonishingly, when Zelena had placed the key on a key-ring and the key-ring in a drawer in her bureau, Billina had not only known which drawer it was in, but—when an amused Zelena had indulgently withdrawn it and dangled it before her former-nanny-turned-pet—immediately lunged for the proper key.

"We've both been underestimated by people without the sense to know better," the witch said grimly. "Perhaps we shall be again."

She closed her eyes and tried to think, smiling a bit when she felt a slight tug at the cuff that meant Billina was after her treat again. Maybe she was going about this wrong. Maybe there was another way. She let her mind drift back to a happier time. A time when she'd just begun to set her plan in motion…

"So, just how did you die, Rumple?" she asked, peering at him through the bars of his cage.
The Dark One never paused in his spinning. "What could I do? The blade was true."

"Blade?" Zelena thrust the dagger toward him and he flinched. "This one?"

Eyes wider, focusing on her for the first time, he nodded.

"But whoever kills the Dark One becomes the Dark One. And yet... here you are. How?"

Rumple blinked in confusion. Then a canny gleam appeared in his brown eyes and a high-pitched giggle escaped him. "How?" he parroted. "How? But you just said it!"

She couldn't abide being mocked. A twist of the weapon in her hand had Rumple doubled over in pain and tumbling from his stool.

"Tell me!" she commanded.

"I... did..." he whimpered. "Or you did. You did, you did you did, you did..." His voice died away into a senseless mumble.

Zelena released an inarticulate cry of exasperation. She'd never get anything out of him when he was like this. And... had he just somehow defied an order? No. She'd used the dagger; he couldn't disobey. So, either his mind was so far gone that he couldn't reply coherently, or... Her eyes grew wide as an explanation suggested itself. She waited for his prattle to cease and for him to resume his spinning, before she demanded, "You stabbed yourself?"

"And became myself," he giggled. "So... necessary. So right. So right you are."

"Why?"

His spinning stopped and the confusion was back on his face, but Zelena waited patiently now. Rumple had his lucid moments. He would answer. But too much badgering, she could see, made those moments fewer and far between. Finally, a breath escaped him. "Pan."

"What..." Zelena said, feeling some confusion of her own. "Peter Pan? Neverland? What connection do you have with him or that place?"

It took a significant amount of time and a good deal more fortitude than Zelena had known she'd possessed, but she'd eventually gotten the story out him. Everything from his father rejecting him as a child to their final confrontation. At the time, she'd found the idea of the magic-cancelling cuffs interesting in a theoretical sense, but not something she'd felt a need to study in depth. She'd had other things on her mind then, like creating a working time travel spell and monitoring Snow White's pregnancy. To say nothing of her efforts to neutralize the savior. But now... Now, might be time to address that gap in her education.

Pan had been able to remove the cuff. She had to remember that. If he'd been able to get out of it, than it could be done. Yes, he'd created the thing, but crafting workable loopholes in such artifacts typically required only slightly less effort than fashioning the artifacts themselves.

"If he could do it, so can I," she gritted. And since he had, the question wasn't 'if,' but how.

"I created a time-travel spell," she reminded herself. "Something else that wasn't supposed to be possible. This ought to be easy in comparison."

She felt another slight tug on the cuff, peered under her blanket, and smiled at the chicken. "And
meanwhile, Billina, you keep on trying, too."

Astrid shook her head when Belle was finished. "No wonder you're angry," she said. "I would be, too. I mean, I was when I found out how Blue manipulated me and Leroy. Even if it was all so long ago, it felt new to me, since I was only just hearing of it."

Belle nodded. "It's not just that, though. It's…" She shook her head, thinking better of what she'd been about to say.

"Belle?"

She forced a smile. "Nothing. I'm being silly. Or overreacting. Or…" Abruptly she got up from the sofa and started another set of squats, forgetting that she'd meant to switch to sit-ups. As nice as it was to have someone sympathetic to talk with, Belle had the feeling that the fairy wouldn't be half so understanding if she knew how truly… unheroic Belle's thoughts were at the moment. Good didn't seek vengeance. Good didn't keep grudges. So, why did Belle feel, not just as though she'd never forgive Regina, but that she didn't want anyone else to either?

*Regina had helped Rumple*, she reminded herself. Not just in Neverland, when Pan's shadow had taken on her own likeness to try to trick Rumple into giving up on saving Henry. Not just by beating Zelena—even if that had been as much to save her own skin. No, she'd stood with Rumple against Belle's own father, even gone so far as to help him prepare for the confrontation. So, Belle didn't see how she could demand that Rumple now cut all ties with Regina, because of what she'd done to both of them in the past. Clearly, he'd moved on from that time. She was the one still stuck back there. Probably because, as Astrid had just put it, learning the truth now, made it all feel more recent than it actually was.

Rumple had never expected her to break off her friendly overtures toward Snow and David, even though they had imprisoned him in an underground cell for months and never seemed to spare a thought for him when they didn't need something from him first.

So why did Belle feel so… wronged, knowing that Rumple wasn't likely to abandon his association with Regina?

*I suppose I'm being small and petty and self-centered again. And I can't let anyone know. They all think I'm hero material and they'd be so disappointed if they learned the truth. But if I keep acting like the hero they all believe I can be, then someday, I know I will be. True, I'm not there yet, but it's not as though anyone needs to know that but me. Do the brave thing and bravery will follow. Do the heroic thing and heroism will follow. Do the selfless thing and…*

She was actually smiling, however slightly, as she finished her twentieth squat and started in on a set of sit-ups.

*Great Neck, Long Island. Wednesday, 8:15PM*

Ursula sniffed the air in the darkened restaurant with a frown. Lily turned to her with a puzzled look.

"Something wrong? Oh. That's fried shrimp, right? Nobody you… knew?"

Ursula made a scoffing sound. "You don't honestly think I ate nothing but seaweed under the sea, do you? No, that's not it. I was just thinking; even back in our land—your land and mine, I mean; she's from a different one—I never once saw Cruella without a lit cigarette in a silver holder."
Normally, I'd say to just follow the combination of gin and tobacco, but with the current anti-smoking bylaws, that's not going to happen here."

"So…"

Ursula sighed. "So, we look around and hope we can spot—" All at once, she seized Lily's arm in a tight grip with one hand and gestured toward the mirrored wall with the other.

Lily stiffened at once and started to reach into her pocket with her free hand, but she remembered where she was and who she was with before her fingers curled around the container of mace. "I told you not to touch me," she said evenly. Then she saw where Ursula was pointing.

A woman in a filmy sleeveless gown that practically dripped with sequins was draped over the torso of a man who must have been about ten years her junior. She wore a silver fox stole across her shoulders and a beaded, ostrich-plumed headdress atop hair that was white on one side and jet black on the other. Bangles glittered and sparkled on her bony wrists and forearms and, when she turned her profile slightly, Lily could see that she wore a rope of pearls that probably reached her navel when she stood upright. Whether the woman was capable of standing upright at the moment was open to conjecture as she practically oozed over her drinking companion. The Copa glass on the table before her was half-full of some clear liquid with pieces of lemon rind and a round ice cube reposing inside.

Lily blinked. "Are you telling me that…?"

"Yup," Ursula nodded. "That's Cruella De Vil. In the flesh and fur."
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* (published in 1954) was reincarnated as the musical *Hello Dolly!* a decade later. Those familiar with the latter will probably notice that the plot and character names are substantially the same, but certain scenes and lines that will be important later in this fic were exclusive to the Wilder play and not used in the musical adaptation.

Chapter Nine

Lily wanted to look away, but morbid fascination compelled her to stare. Cruella seemed intent on drinking herself into a stupor while abasing herself climbing over the man seated next to her. He seemed slightly more sober than she did, at least enough to hastily plunge one hand in his pocket. When he withdrew it, Lily could see that the band of gold that had glinted on his finger a moment before was no longer present.

"Clearly," Ursula murmured, "that is *not* her husband out on bail."

So she'd seen it too. Lily shook her head. "What do we do?"

"You still want her?" Ursula asked.


Ursula sighed. "All right. We need to get her sober or they'll kick us off the train when we try to get back to the hotel."

"Still can't believe we found a place for ten bucks a night," Lily muttered. "And it's not even a dump!"

Ursula smiled. "Never discount the deep-discount websites. Even if Long Island City is a *few* stops away from Great Neck."

"Still closer than Manhattan."

"But not close enough if she's going to be like *that,*" Ursula gestured toward Cruella, who was now stretched across her boyfriend's lap, her arms locked about his neck as she drew him down for a kiss. She sighed. "All right. Order some fruit juice; orange, cranberry, apple, whatever. For her. It'll help her get the booze out of her system faster. We'll follow up with coffee. And then," she sighed, "we'll go for a walk in the brisk winter air. Between the temperature and the exercise, we'll get her coherent." She sighed. "Even if she'll still have to sleep most of it off."

"How do you know this stuff?" Lily asked.

Ursula gave her a sad smile. "I don't know if you noticed, kid, but my life isn't great and it hasn't been for some time. You do what you do to cope, and you do what you do to function after you… cope."
"I hear you," Lily started to say, but the sea witch was already moving off in Cruella's direction. She took a seat at the bar and waited for the bartender to notice.

A moment later, she heard a deep contralto voice exclaim in tones that carried clear across the room, "Ursula! Dahhhhhhhhhling! Whatever brings you here?" The question was followed almost at once by a most unladylike belch and a muted thud, as the woman slid off of her companion and landed on the floor.

"For someone who's not much more than skin and bones," Lily muttered, "she's pretty danged heavy."

"It's her greed," Ursula deadpanned. "Combined with her ego, it must weigh more than she does by now." Both she and Lily had their arms around Cruella, supporting her back, while she had one arm draped over each woman's shoulder.

"Where are you taking me?" Cruella mumbled.

"Back to Long Island; we're staying in a hotel for the night," Lily said.

"And we're ankling it?" Cruella demanded, sounding a lot more alert—and outraged.

"Just to the train station," Ursula said reassuringly. "It's not far."

"You booked us a first class compartment, I hope?"

Ursula snorted at that. "First class, last class, no class… it's a subway, not the Orient Express."

Cruella stopped abruptly in her tracks. "You don't mean for us to sit in a public car with the riffraff?"

Lily gave her a hard look. "Well, unless you want to pawn that Swarovski crown you're wearing—"

"I'll have you know that this tiara boasts the finest blood dia—"

"Not so loud!" Ursula hissed. "People will hear! And the kid's got a point. We're doing this on a budget, so if the transportation's not to your liking, cough up some cash."

"I'll do better than that, dahling," Cruella sniffed. "Take a left here. It should be about thirty feet away."

"What should?" Lily asked, steering Cruella in the direction indicated after Ursula nodded assent.

"Here we are!" Cruella sang a few moments later, lurching out of the women's graspsto fling her arms about the windshield and driver-side window of a black-and-white Zimmer Golden Spirit that was parked in a handicap zone. She removed the citation on her windshield with a snort, balled it up, and tossed it on the sidewalk. "Pile in, girls," she added, getting into the driver's seat.

"Uh, Cruella dear," Ursula said, "I'm not about to let you get behind the wheel in your condition."

"Oh, please!" the other woman retorted. "It's not as though I'm half seas over; I'm just a little tipsy is all."

"Just a little too tipsy. C'mon. Give me the keys."

"You'll have to pry them from my cold, dead, fingers!"
"No we won't," Lily snapped, shoving Cruella roughly over onto the passenger side. Cruella started to surge back. Then she hastily opened the window hung her head out, and retched. Lily rolled her eyes in Ursula's direction. "Wonderful," she muttered, as Cruella slid down the interior car door and slumped sideways in the passenger seat, seemingly passed out. "You think you can get her into the back?"

"Yeah," Ursula said, "but if she comes to when I try to get the keys off her, I know from experience that she fights like a cougar."

"Yeah, I noticed she seemed a bit cougarish back in the restaurant," Lily said dryly. "But don't worry about it." She pulled a screwdriver out of her jacket pocket and held it to one of the screws in the steering column. "Keys might be helpful, but they aren't really necessary…"

"You first," Nicholas nudged Henry. "You're the one who wants to be a hero."

Henry tilted his head quizzically toward his friend. "What's heroic about checking a cast list?"

"Requires courage," Nicholas shot back. "If you can't even check if your name's on a piece of paper, how're you going to face down a witch who wants to turn you into a pot roast?"

Henry blinked. "Wait. I never had to do that; you did. So you ought to be able to go and read that list."

"I didn't," Nicholas said, studying his shoes. "I froze up. Ava did the work. Hey! Maybe you could ask her!"

"Ava?" Henry was positive that the stammer in his voice was too slight for his friend to have noticed. During the year he'd spent in New York, both he and the Zimmer twins had done some growing up. Ava, however, seemed to have grown up in rather… interesting ways. Not to mention more conventional ones; she was more than a head taller than Henry. She was power forward on the girls' basketball team and seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time with a certain center on the boys' team. While she was pleasant enough to Henry when Nicholas invited him over, it was clear that she saw him as 'her brother's friend' and not much else. And any time that Henry tried to approach her and suggest that maybe he could be a bit more than that if she'd give him a chance, everything he wanted to say to her flew clean out of his head and he was lucky if he could smile and murmur some pleasantry before beating a dignified retreat. "She's your sister. You ask her!"

"No way. She doesn't even know I tried out!"

"What?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I get tired of hearing about how great she is on the court. That's why I decided to go to the auditions; I thought maybe acting could be my… thing. If I get a part, I'll tell her. Otherwise, she doesn't have to find out I tried for it. If I ask her to check and my name's not on the cast list, she'll know I did."

Henry winced. It was a cast list, not his teenaged great-grandfather and a pack of homicidal youth. There was nothing to be nervous about. He hadn't even really wanted to try out for a part, but he didn't want to be rejected for one either!

"Hey, guys! Isn't it great?"

The two turned as one to see Grace Hatter bouncing up to them, the dangling beads on her ponytail elastic providing a neat counterpoint to her step.
"Isn't what great?" Nicholas asked.

"You didn't see? We all made the cut!" she waved toward the cast list on the bulletin board. "I'm playing Ermengarde," she pointed to Nicholas, "you got Barnaby, and," she turned to Henry, "you're Cornelius! I have to call my papa before lunch is over and tell him! See you!"

She bounced off again. The boys watched her go. "Barnaby?" Henry said, turning to Nicholas.

"Cornelius?" Nicholas returned.

Henry exhaled, partly from relief and partly from resignation. "Looks like we're going to be working together for a while."

"So what else is new?" Nicholas grinned. "Barnaby…"

Henry grinned back. "Cornelius…"

Zelena was not having a good day. Which was scarcely surprising; she couldn't say she'd had a good day since she'd come home from the clinic, eager to tell Robin that she was with child—and gently insinuate in his head the idea that, perhaps, Emma would be able to bring them back to Storybrooke so she could rub Regina's nose in it—only to find that Regina had arrived, blown her cover, collected Robin and Roland, and were already on their way back to Maine.

She might have stuck things out on her own. She'd never considered herself the mothering type, but the idea of producing an individual that would seek to obey her and please her, not from fear, but from love had a certain appeal. Then the eviction notice had been shoved under the door. Robin had taken everything remaining from the funds Regina had given them weeks earlier to help them get settled in the world outside Storybrooke, and Zelena had panicked.

She blamed pregnancy hormones for that. Yes, someone—Emma, Regina, she didn't know who—had created a criminal record for her that rendered her virtually unemployable, and the idea of working some entry-level job right when she knew she could look forward to more bouts of morning sickness like the ones that had sent her to the clinic in first place, certainly hadn't appealed. But what had possessed her to reach out to Emma, pleading almost-hysterically for assistance? Yes, she was alone, afraid, and—apart from the glamor charm she used to disguise her appearance and a few other small bits of magic—virtually powerless, but she had her pride. Or at least, she'd thought she did.

So now, here she was, still alone, still powerless, and still—deep down in heart of hearts—afraid. Afraid that once her baby was born, it would be taken from her and she'd never see it again. Afraid that Regina truly meant to keep her shut away down here for the rest of her days. Afraid that the damned cuff would never come off. Afraid. And hating herself for it.

The door opened without warning and a familiar figure in blue and gray serge stepped inside, a determined look in her steely blue eyes.

Perfect. Someone else to hate. Zelena felt her lips curl in a sneer as she practically spat out, "What do you want?"

The woods had been tranquil and it had been too long since Blue had taken pause there to refresh her spirit. When she'd believed herself to be a nun, she'd had ample time for study and reflection, both in the convent and out in nature. Since regaining her memories after the first curse broke, she'd had little time for introspection. The return of fairy crystals to the dwarf mines, the logistics
involved in processing the crystals to dust, overseeing classes for the novices, learning the names, locations, and needs of the fairy godchildren and how best to attend to them in this new land where magic wasn't necessarily the first recourse... all of these responsibilities had weighed heavily on her. Priorities had needed to be set, items of lesser importance set aside; that was always how things were done.

The fairies had still been whispering on her return. Not the same ones she'd heard earlier—at least, she didn't believe so, but the overall sentiments had been similar. They preferred Merryweather's brand of leadership to hers. They missed Astrid.

"Do you think we ought to approach her? Tell her how we feel? Maybe she'd listen?"

"I'm sure she would. But do something about it? She's got other priorities."

"In other words, if she can't resolve the situation within the lifecycle of a fruit fly, she'll throw up her hands and grab some task she can handle. Merryweather might not always know what to do, but at least, she's never afraid to wade in and try!"

The others had laughed, but not with the merry giggles Blue was used to hearing from some of the younger, more frivolous sorts. This mirth had a cynical, mocking edge to it that cut her deeply. But there had also been a painful ring of truth to it. They did see her that way. And, as much as she wanted to console herself by believing that they simply didn't understand how many duties she needed to perform or oversee, she couldn't help but notice that Snow White had voiced a similar criticism, and before her, Pinocchio.

"If one person calls you a satyr, you may laugh it off. If a second echoes the comment, take heed. If a third, consider learning to pipe."

Her own instructor had imparted that advice in a manner so straight-faced that Blue and her fellow-novices had never quite been certain whether she'd been joking. Thinking back now, Blue rather suspected she'd been serious.

"Tasks must be prioritized," she told herself firmly. "But, perhaps, I have been using those priorities to effectively shield myself from duties I'd rather not perform." It occurred to her that if her novices and acolytes were as dissatisfied with her as their overheard conversations would have her believe, it might only be a matter of time before she would be 'shielded' from needing to perform any duties. Right now, they seemed to be rallying about Merryweather, but if Merry persisted in her—quite admirable—loyalty, then if steps weren't taken now, the other fairies were apt to consider another candidate, perhaps one far less able.

She didn't care about power or authority; not really. But she did care about the disaster that a less-capable leader might precipitate. Perhaps, if the others observed that she was prepared to devote her time and care to a difficult case, they would reconsider their distaste for her administration. She considered. Pinocchio no longer required her guidance. Neither did Snow; not that she'd asked for it in quite some time. Rumpelstiltskin... well. There was too much history between them now for things to ever move beyond icy civility.

Another name loomed large in her mind and, at first, she shied away from it. Really, she'd had no dealings with the witch before Snow had requested that Blue attempt to rehabilitate her. She shook her head. Zelena's well-being should never have fallen under the jurisdiction of any fairy, particularly not herself. They helped the pure of heart. Besides, she had no history with Oz; she had her hands full with the former denizens of the Enchanted Forest.

You balk at assisting Rumple because you have too much history. You think to refuse Zelena
because you have too little. Are you looking for someone suitable to help, or are you looking for excuses not to?

Blue sucked in her breath. She had failed Rumpelstiltskin. She’d failed August. Perhaps, if she put forth some genuine effort this time, she might not fail with Zelena. Perhaps, a second chance was warranted. And, she reflected, she wasn't entirely certain whether it was she, or Zelena, who might need it more.

Zelena regarded her guest now and snorted derisively. "I thought I sent you packing the last time."

The Blue Fairy tilted her chin upwards. There were two red spots of color on her cheeks—and Zelena hadn't even slapped her this time—but there was something less imperious about the set of her eyes. And perhaps her nostrils didn't flare quite so much. "You did," she replied with a calm that infuriated the witch. "I thought we might try again."

"You mean… you're offering me a second chance," Zelena stated. Had the fairy not known better, she might have missed the veiled touch of sarcasm in her words. "Is my sister still on her rehabilitation mission, or is it Snow White I'll need to hold accountable for this intrusion?"

The fairy glanced about the cell, taking in its drabness. "Goodness," she murmured, "is this all you have with which to pass the time? Some outdated magazines and," she eyed the floor with distaste, "a messy barnyard fowl?"

"Are you insulting Billina?" the witch asked, with a cold glitter in her eye.

"Of course not. Still," the fairy continued primly, "I don't imagine that the state of the floor is to your liking."

"So, you're housekeeping, then?" Zelena laughed. "Well, have at it! Oh. I don't have any cleaning supplies. Did you bring them? Or could you magic them? Or do you just wave your wand and it all sorts itself out?"

"It would seem to me," Blue remarked coolly, "that you're currently suffering from a lack of options."

"Have you been filching Doctor Hopper's psychology books, or do you just naturally try to sound non-judgmental while you're quietly judging me?" The fairy's cheeks were practically glowing red now. Zelena smirked.

Blue closed her eyes and the witch could swear that she was actually counting to ten. Well, that never worked. When she opened them, though, her voice was steady. "I only meant to say that until now, you've had no option but to reside in this bird-dung-spattered cell. If I were to clean it, then that would be one more decision taken away from you." A faucet sprouted from the cell wall, trailing a green garden hose. "That color is, I believe, your preference," the fairy remarked. Next to the hose a bottle of dishwashing soap, a bristled scrub brush, a pile of sawdust, and a broom and dustpan appeared. "There," she said. "Hose down the floor, to be rid of the superficial droppings." Her gaze flicked meaningfully toward the drain in the center of the cell floor. "The detergent and brush will loosen the rest. Cover the residue with sawdust to dry; then use the broom and dustpan." A metal receptacle appeared in one corner, bolted firmly to the wall. "Dispose of it there. Or don't. From this point forward, whether you reside in squalor or not is a choice that you do have. I'll return on the morrow." The fairy smiled wryly. "And conversely, on that matter? You have no choice."
Zelena lunged forward, but the fairy had vanished before the witch could reach—and hurl—the scrub brush at her. "I'm not your newest benevolence project!" she shouted at the empty air.

Unsurprisingly she was greeted by silence.

A soft cluck drew her attention. Billina tilted her head uncertainly and the witch imagined she saw a questioning look in the hen's black, beady eyes. She shook her head. "So, this is what I've come to," she murmured. "Chambermaid to a chicken before I'm mother to a child."

Billina clucked again, somewhat disapprovingly and the witch smiled.

"Oh, it's not your fault, beautiful one." She let loose a sigh that sounded a good deal more resentful than it truly was. "I daresay after this task, even those obnoxious periodicals will seem moderately more enticing." She didn't want to live in squalor. And although she did her best to squelch the feeling, for the briefest of moments, she was actually grateful to the blue gnat for giving her the means to avoid it.

There was something very wrong, Cruella realized. Although she had a splitting headache, a dry mouth, and a laser piercing her closed eyelids—or, at least, that was her first assumption, until she realized that it was sunlight—she wasn't nearly as nauseous or achy as she'd usually awakened every day since the morning that the feds had stormed into her mansion and hauled her adoring pet of a husband away in cuffs.

She'd barely managed to salvage her furs, her cars, and the few stocks and bonds certificates she'd managed to transfer to her name with nobody the wiser. Her husband hadn't kept very good track of his holdings, but his accountant had been a bloody vulture—and not the sort she exerted any power over. It had been a struggle for her to acquire the paltry assets she'd been able to secure without either man knowing, but while she was homeless, she wasn't exactly destitute. She probably could have bought some modest little dwelling in an unfashionable suburb. Perhaps, some neighborhood in Islip like Holtsville or Lake Ronkonkoma… She shuddered. There were young families there. With children. Loud, rambunctious little brutes who, unlike other bothersome mammals, didn't at least have luxurious pelts as a saving grace.

Besides, if she spent her nest egg on a house, it wouldn't be long before her funds ran out. And then, oh, she couldn't bear to think it. She might actually need to work.

No, her best plan was to find another man willing to keep her in the style to which she was accustomed. She'd been interviewing candidates nightly at Great Neck's better gin establishments, but thus far, she had yet to find anyone suitable. Certainly not the callow youth she'd been with last night, if her surroundings were any indication. Not that she'd opened her eyes to look around, but she, most assuredly, was not lying on Egyptian cotton, nor even damask. This felt suspiciously like percale—and she didn't want to guess what manner of fabric softener had been used to launder it. She only hoped it had been laundered recently.

The sun had, apparently, passed behind a cloud during her ruminations, but now its beams stabbed again full-force and she gasped. What the hell was the sun doing on her face in the first place? Where was her eye mask?

"Ah," a sarcastic voice drawled from somewhere to her left. "So we don't need to go hunting for a prince to kiss you awake. Unfortunately, they're rather sparse in these parts."

She knew that sarcastic voice. But why the hell was it so loud? Or was that still the hangover. "Ursula?" she croaked. "What are you doing here?" She turned her head away from the sunlight
and forced her eyes open. Then she squeezed them shut again. "What am I doing here? My kennels have better décor!" She caught herself. "Had better," she amended. "I keep forgetting. I don't suppose you've a little hair of the dog to revive my spirit, dahling?"

"I don't think we want to be reviving any spirits, dahling," Ursula snarked back. "Better we let that sleeping dog lie." Cruella heard footsteps crunch softly on a worn carpet, followed by the clink of a glass being set down on wood. "It's orange juice," the sea witch said. "Drink it. Lily went to the drugstore to pick up some Motrin and bouillon powder. The faster you replenish your sodium, the better you'll feel. Once I realized that we weren't all that far from the ocean, I was about to tell her to save her money and we'd just take you to the beach for a dip, but she was already gone."

Cruella groaned. Then, shielding her eyes, she turned her head back toward Ursula, spied the glass on the night table by the bed, and stretched her neck toward it until she could just get her lips about the bent straw. She took a cautious sip, made a face, but managed to swallow.

"This is from concentrate!" she protested.

"Be glad it's not Tang," Ursula shot back. "Unlike you, Lily and I haven't spent the last thirty years coiled around some sugar daddy's neck like one of your ermine collars."

"They're called stoles, dahling," Cruella retorted. A faint frown creased her bony features. "Who is this Lily, anyway?"

"Maleficent's hatchling."

"What?" Cruella sat bolt upright in bed, wincing a bit as the light hit her eyes again. "How ever did you find her?"

"She found me. And you, for that matter."

Stunned, Cruella brought a hand to her forehead and massaged her temple. "After all this time… That's rather unbelievable, isn't it?"

"Believe it."

"Well… well… Well, why is she here? What does she want?"

"Exactly what the two of us have been hoping for since we got to this magic-forsaken place," Ursula smirked. "She wants the good times back."
One week in and Belle still wasn't sure if the kickboxing lessons were a good thing or a bad thing. On the one hand, while she still collapsed in her chair, stiff and sore after each class, she realized that she was somewhat less stiff and less sore than she had been on the first day. Standing with the other women, facing herself in the gym's ceiling-to-floor mirror, she still felt like a bear lumbering among the sylphs—a phrase her old dance master had used to describe one of her ladies in waiting, much to the young girl's mortification. At thirteen, Belle had been furious and argued for the man's dismissal. Her parents had informed her that the decision was hardly hers to make, but she hadn't dropped the matter.

"Dismissing him may not be my decision, father, but performing before him is. So long as you retain him to instruct me, I'll not dance a step in his presence."

Her mother had threatened to have her miss the social season; her father to bar her from the library. That last had given Belle pause, but when she'd stormed back to her bedchamber, Genevieve—whom the dance master had so embarrassed—had clasped her hand warmly. "I'll get you books, my lady," she'd whispered, "if you'll be discreet with them. But you shouldn't have—"

"Nonsense," Belle whispered back. "He had no right to speak to you so. And besides, I can't stand the way he taps the floor with that stick of his. I know it's supposed to keep the meter, but all it does is break my focus."

In the end, her parents had relented. Oh, they hadn't dismissed the dance master, but they'd noted that after decades in his profession, it might be demanding too much of him to have him instruct all the noble youths in the castle. They'd retained him for the young men and hired an additional instructor for the young ladies. They'd also told Belle plainly that it had nothing to do with the stand she'd taken and everything to do with not overtaxing a man getting on in years, but Belle rather thought she knew better. Still, she hadn't pressed the point. She'd stood up for injustice and won.

Well. Now, nobody had to call her a bear among the sylphs. She could see the truth for herself. But as inept as she looked and felt, as much as she knew she was out of step and lagging behind the others, she rather felt she wasn't lagging quite as badly as she had been that first day.

At any rate, she told herself, she'd signed up for a full ten weeks—thirty one-hour sessions. She wasn't about to quit a mere three lessons in. Especially since she did seem to feel less-inclined to punch her fist through the wall this week. Well. That or she just didn't have the energy.

She was just unlocking the library door when her father stormed up to her. She bit back a sigh. She loved him, but he did choose the worst times to drop in on her. "Good morning, Father," she said, trying not to let her dismay show. It wasn't that she wasn't happy to see him, but all she wanted to do was kick off her shoes—she ought to wear flats out on the street as well as in the class, but despite everything, she was still self-conscious about her height—and sink into her armchair and not give a hang if her ankles were crossed or her hands folded demurely in her lap as she'd been taught.

Her father barely waited for the greeting to pass her lips before he began ranting. "She's gone the bloody limit, she has! First she locks you away, then she sets me up for a beating, and now she's after my livelihood! This could ruin me, I tell you!"
Belle froze, one hand still on the key in the library door's lock. "Father," she said, fighting to remain calm, "what are you talking about?"

Less than a half an hour later, Belle did collapse in that armchair, her thoughts whirling madly in her head. Regina. Again, Regina. It seemed that the flower beds outside the Storybrooke Town Hall were provided for out of her father's merchandise every year. And this year, Regina had informed him that they would not be placing the customary order. Which, Belle tried to tell herself, was just so typical of Regina. She was so quick to punish those who thwarted her, always had been. From the moment that Belle had met her on the road from Rumple's castle, the Evil Queen had brought down misery, both on Belle herself and on her father. And now, because Belle had finally turned around and given the queen a piece of her mind, she was retaliating again.

Wait. The other day, when Regina and Rumple went together to...

Belle brought her hand to the center of her forehead. "I'm doing it again," she muttered. "It's not all about me." No. She probably had nothing to do with any of this. Unimportant... useless... inconsequential... This wasn't about Belle not accepting Regina's apology; this was about her father not accepting Rumple's.

And that... complicated matters. Because, since Belle no longer wanted to be on speaking terms with Regina, she'd been planning to talk to Rumple about intervening on Moe's behalf. True, after his last encounter with her father, Rumple had no real reason to step in, but she could have suggested that his actions now might have a greater effect than his words the other day. But if Regina was acting against her father out of support and solidarity...

"It's more than I ever did," she whispered. She'd always loved Rumple, but until that afternoon at the town line when, upon learning that Zelena had thrown her husband off of an embankment, Father had intimated that things might have been better all around if the attack had been fatal, she'd never spoken up for him. Maybe she'd never joined in when the heroes condemned him, but she certainly hadn't shown him any public backing.

And now that Regina was taking up his cause, how could Belle expect him to ask her to stand down? It wasn't just that her father had thrown Rumple's conciliatory words back in his face. It was that, from what Rumple and Regina had each told her—and Father certainly hadn't said anything to the contrary—Rumple had rehearsed. He'd planned. He'd put real thought into how to set things right. And her father had thrown it back in his face. On the one hand, she understood. Some wrongs were just too great to be put right by an apology and if she wasn't ready to forgive Regina, she couldn't really blame her father for not forgiving Rumple. But it would have been so much better if he had.

And now, Belle was caught in the middle, somewhere between loving wife and dutiful daughter, half-wanting to step in and arrange some sort of peaceful compromise, half-wanting to barricade herself in the library and curl up with a good book. But heroes didn't do that. They fought for what was right. They supported their friends. They were there for one another.

"Why isn't anyone ever there for me?" she demanded aloud.

She was startled when a slightly-nasal voice spoke up from the direction of the kitchen. "Belle?"

"All right, kid," Ursula said, draining her cup of coffee and reaching for the pot. Cruella snatched it up and poured a cup for herself. When she set it down again and Ursula grasped it, she made an annoyed sound. The pot was empty. "What's your plan?"
"I can put more to brew," Lily offered.

"It's fine," Ursula said. "Plan?"

Lily hesitated. "It's not fully-formed, yet," she admitted with some slight embarrassment, "but the broad strokes are there." Briefly, for Cruella's elucidation, she repeated her history, from her adoption, through to her meeting with the old man on the bus. When she pulled out the book, Cruella examined it with interest at first, but then shoved it back with disgust.

"I know the camera's supposed to add fifteen pounds, but really, I'd have hoped the illustrator would've been more accurate!"

"He was," Ursula remarked dryly. "I think that sketch must've been drawn around the time you discovered marchpane and fritters."

"Well," Cruella smirked, "at least I managed to undo that damage rather quickly. Tapeworms can be so helpful."

"Uh… TMI, here?" Lily interjected, not bothering to hide her disgust.

"Yeah, really," Ursula chimed in. "Just talking about those things is enough to make me lose my appetite."

"See, dahling? They work!" Cruella nodded in Lily's direction.

Lily rolled her eyes and decided to get back on point. "Okay," she huffed. "From what the old man told me, when the curse brought everyone over from the Enchanted Forest, it created a town for them and put a protection spell around the place so outsiders wouldn't be able to enter it. I… don't know how it works if you're just walking down the road and cross over the line—"

"You don't notice anything out of the ordinary," Ursula cut in. "As far as you're concerned, you just see whatever would be there if the town weren't; probably forest and beaches in that part of the world, I'd think. And the best protection spells have a sort of extra precaution worked in. The closer you get to the area of effect, the less interesting the whole thing seems. You begin to think that continuing on in that direction is pointless. There's nothing there. There's never been anything there. You're already so far off the beaten track, how much further do you really want to press on before you admit you're just being stubborn?" She shrugged. "A skilled magical practitioner, particularly one experienced in casting such spells, might realize what's happening—which, by the way is one of the spell's weaknesses. If you're aware that there's a protection spell, then you're also aware that there's something inside being protected. And if you're strong enough, you just might be able to break through. If you aren't stuck in a world with no magic," she added, with a disgusted sniff.

"Or," Lily replied, reaching into her jacket pocket with a sly smile, "if you have a magical object capable of breaching that protection spell." She placed a folded piece of paper on the table. "Courtesy of the Conjuring Arts Center on West 30th. The old guy told me that when I was ready to face my past and embrace my destiny, I'd find the key split between two specific texts in their catalog. I got to admit, I thought that after all this time, something could've happened to one or both of them. I mean, items get weeded out of libraries. Books get damaged. But, just like," she nodded to Ursula, "he was right about you being the first person I'd meet at the Hornby Aquarium, he was right about that."

Cruella snatched up the page, squinted at it, and thrust it toward Ursula. "You read this, dahling. Middle Elvish makes my head hurt."
"As do bright lights, big band music, and too much gin," Ursula sniped back. She scanned the page quickly, her eyebrows shooting up as she did. "Whoever that old guy was," she breathed, "he knew what he was talking about. There is some serious magic in this script. But in order to get through that barrier..." She looked at Cruella.

"Materials matter. The words may be right, but we need to copy this onto vellum or it won't work out here. I assume that's something you can procure?"

Cruella laughed at that. "Vellum, as in treated animal hide? Usually from a," her smile was almost predatory, "young animal?" She held out her hand. "One of you, give me your phone. I still have some connections that might come across."

"I don't mean to carry on like... like... I don't even know what," Belle murmured, as she poured Astrid a second mug of anijsmelk. She'd bought a quart of whole milk yesterday and she suspected she'd be buying it more often; it really made a difference to the drink. Astrid had compared it to lavender nectar, which Belle deduced was a compliment.

"You're upset," Astrid said soothingly.

"I'm all over the place," Belle corrected. "And I don't know why. I've never been so..." She hesitated. "Emotional, I guess. Out of control." Unbidden, her memory of that horrible night that she'd banished her husband rose large in her thoughts. That hadn't been the first time that she'd lost her temper, of course, but it was the first time that she'd said and done things she'd thought she'd never be able to undo. Not the last, though. Not the most unforgiveable.

"I wish," she said slowly, "that my wishing to be a better person was enough to make it so."

Astrid smiled sadly. "You know I was just scraping through my fairy godmother studies by the hairs of my wings," she murmured, "but if there's one idea I did manage to grasp, it's that wishing alone isn't enough." She reached out and, still smiling, touched Belle's shoulder. "There's a lot of hard work involved, not just for the fairy, but for the wisher! Haven't you ever wondered why there have to be all those quests and trials and what have you?"

"All magic comes with a price?" Belle ventured.

"All magic... all wishes... all choices." The fairy sighed, but she was still smiling. "The hard part is understanding the true value, both of what you're getting, and of what you're giving up."

Belle nodded at that, thinking about how the cost of her loss of temper in New York had very nearly been her True Love. She'd almost lost Rumple over a stupid accusation. Well. Not really the accusation itself, but the accusation on top of all the other times she'd ignored his efforts to do the right thing and focused on the times he gave in to his Darker nature. She'd noticed his plots and schemes, but never thought to delve into his reasons or suggest better ways to achieve his aims. And when she'd accused him of never choosing to do Good for Good's sake, she'd completely overlooked the times he had—and still lost out. She was his wife. She'd always seen the good in him when nobody else could. And for her to throw out such words, even in anger, even unthinkingly... had been a worse betrayal of his love than the betrayal she'd been so mortified that he'd discovered. "That's... not always easy," she admitted. "Until it's too late."

"What are you going to do?"

Belle raised her own mug, took a long draught, and set it back down. "What can I do?"

"Are you looking for an answer, or was that rhetoric?"
Belle's eyebrows lifted. "Is there an answer?"

Astrid took a breath and let it out. "Sleep on it. You don't have to do anything tonight. In the morning, maybe you'll have a better idea. Or it'll work itself out. Or they'll work things out." She hesitated. "Blue's wrong about a lot of things, but she's right about at least one: it's not up to any one person to solve everyone else's problems."

"But if I don't do anything, and things get worse…"

"And if you do do something and things get worse…" Astrid lowered her eyes at Belle's stricken expression. "I'm sorry. I'm not saying you have to stand there wringing your hands and watching things escalate. But you don't have to do anything tonight. And you shouldn't do anything until you, at least, know what to do."

"So, I should sleep on it," Belle repeated, with the faintest hint of a smile.

"Tonight, anyway. But for now…"

Belle sighed and got up from her chair. "For now, I'd better open the library, like I should have done almost two hours ago. Will you be all right here?"

Astrid nodded. "Belle? Thanks again for letting me stay with you."

"You're welcome. For as long as you want."

She was smiling as she entered the library from the apartment, but her smile faded quickly. Somehow, she had her doubts about a good night's sleep being the answer to all her problems.

"Come in, Rumple," Regina greeted him with a smile that froze on her face when she saw his expression. "What's happened?"

Uncharacteristically, Rumple's demeanor was hesitant, nothing like his usual air of calm self-control. "I met Belle for lunch," he murmured. "Apparently, you cancelled the town hall's contract with her father?"

Regina blinked. "I didn't renew it for the coming year, but…" Her eyes widened. "He thinks it's some sort of retaliation for the other day, doesn't he?"

The relief in his eyes was nearly palpable. "It's not, then."

"No. Mr. Weatherstaff informed me last week that his rheumatism is acting up and he won't be able to do the stooping and bending that tending the flower beds entails this year." She sighed. "For the first twenty-eight years, it was just seasonal griping, but now that time's moving again, well, he means it. I'm not about to force him to retire; but he's mentioned that he'd look for someone to assist him this year, someone he can train to take over for him, if it should come to it. But since there's a lot to teach and he's requested a reduction in his duties, well, I've decided the flower beds can be foregone this year. Instead, I've asked him to put down sod for now, and we'll deal with next year when it comes." She shook her head. "That's what I get for procrastination, I suppose."

"Pardon?"

"Mr. Weatherstaff informed me three weeks ago. I should have contacted Moe then to explain, but I knew that the town hall's contract with the flower shop would expire on its own this week and I
was hoping that in the interim, maybe that assistant would materialize and things would proceed as usual. If I'd called him before you and I went to see him, things would have looked rather different."

"You still could have explained to him now."

Regina lowered her eyes, acknowledging his point. "I suppose that, while revenge wasn't on my mind, I wasn't really in the mood to engage in a prolonged conversation. Shall I explain to Belle?"

Rumple shook his head. "I'll do that much," he murmured, trying to make it sound as though he was sparing her an inconvenience.

She wasn't fooled. "She's still furious," she deduced with a sigh.

"As I was when I learned you'd kept her locked away for over twenty-eight years." He shook his head again, but he was smiling slightly. "I got over it. And she's always been far more forgiving than I."

Regina's answering smile faded quickly. "Maybe," she said, "but keep an eye on her."

Rumple blinked. "Why?" he asked, honestly surprised at the directive.

"Well," Regina smiled again, "maybe it's nothing. As you imply, she's got every right to be angry. Still, while anyone can lose their temper on occasion, it seems to me that in her case, there've been several occasions in a relatively short span of time. Again, it might be nothing."

Rumple swallowed as he realized what Regina was thinking. "Surely not…"

"I could be wrong."

"I'll monitor the situation." He turned to go.

"Rumple?" Regina called behind him, "if there's anything I can do…"

He turned back then with a sad smile. "If it's what you suspect, I think we've both already done more than enough." He expelled a breath of air. "But thank you for bringing it to my attention."

"So, what happens when we get to this town, this… Storybrooke?" Ursula asked. "And don't just fob us off with some vague talk about revenge this time."

Lily sighed. "Until we know how things stand, I don't think I can get much more specific. One thing I do know is that a lot is going to depend on whether Emma broke that curse. Since she was supposed to show up there on her 28th birthday, odds are she did, but I don't think we can afford to take anything for granted. If she didn't, from what I can tell, as the person who cast the curse, the Evil Queen is the only person who ought to be… uh…"

"Awake," Cruella supplied.

Lily nodded. "If time's stopped for everyone else, and they don't remember from one day to the next, they won't know we haven't been there from the start; they'll just go through every day meeting us and thinking we must have been there all along and our paths just never crossed."

Ursula nodded. "Or they'll know we're new in town, but they won't realize that there's anything odd about it. So, if the curse is in effect, we just avoid Regina, who'll probably be running the place, and we'll be fine."
"Regina," Lily repeated, raising an eyebrow. "The Evil Queen, you mean? You know her?"

Ursula smiled. "Let's just say we go back far enough to be on a first-name basis. She and your mother were a lot closer, though."

"My mother," Lily repeated. "I can't wait to meet her."

"From what I recall of how excited she was when she learned that you were on the way," Ursula said, her smile taking on a surprising gentleness, "I'm sure that's mutual. Assuming she's awake."

"Well really," Cruella drawled, "how long does it take to break a curse unless you're a complete idiot?"

"Well, Emma wasn't a complete idiot when I met her," Lily replied, "but she had her moments. And even if she might have liked reading fantasy novels about magic, she had a hard time believing anything that wasn't right in front of her. So, while she probably has broken the curse by now, there's also a small chance it's still going strong."

"If it is, that'll be our good luck," Ursula said. "However, if good luck was a commodity that either of us had in abundance, I wouldn't have spent the last couple of decades shoveling plankton and Cruella wouldn't currently be slinking her way across Great Neck, one escort at a time. I think you've mentioned a few stormy seas in your life as well?"

Lily sighed. "Okay. Probably wishful thinking. In that case, we try to get in with nobody the wiser, find some place to hole up, and start off by doing some reconnaissance. Thanks to the book's illustrations, I've got some idea of what the main players are supposed to look like, but you've already met a few of them. You'll know what to expect."

"Maybe, dahling," Cruella said, "but remember: Regina knows what the two of us look like. If the others are awake, she won't be the only one to recognize us. You, on the other hand…"

"She's right," Ursula said. "If anyone's going to be spying out the place, it's going to have to be you."

"But… they won't know me. I mean, at all. Nobody will. How'm I supposed to explain who I am or how I got there or—?"

Cruella snapped her fingers. "Carter's Haven!" she beamed.

"Huh?"

Her fur stole flapped over one shoulder as Cruella gestured impatiently. "Some obscure little hamlet Regina completely annihilated a few years before she cast the curse. You claim that you're from there, that you happened to be off visiting relatives in another town or foraging for berries or something equally tedious and escaped the slaughter. Nobody will remember you from the Enchanted Forest because nobody else survived to."

Ursula nodded slowly. "It could work. There's still the matter of where you've been until now in the town."

"Oh please, dahling," Cruella retorted. "People like to keep track of everybody who's anybody, but how bothered can they be keeping up with somebody who's nobody? Now if you were Cinderella or Thumbelina, of course people would be interested in what you've been doing. But a simple village maid? Please." Her eyes narrowed briefly, then opened again, wider than before.
"You know, Lily dear," she said, "Regina cast that curse in the first place in order to get vengeance over Snow White. Give the little goody-goody and her dreary prince chisel-chin a fate worse than death. But after thirty-odd years… even if the curse hasn't been broken, maybe she'll be bored enough by now to consider plain old death for them. You might want to take a more direct approach. No hiding, no pussyfooting about. When you tell her why you're there, she'll likely give them to you with her blessing." She shrugged. "And if the curse has broken and they're still alive, it'll likely be because without magic she can't harm them and she'll be more than happy to join forces with someone who can. And then, dahling, the fur can really fly."

A slow smile spread across Lily's face. "You might have something there," Lily admitted. "Both about the Evil Queen and… Well, G-d knows I've held about a million dead-end jobs and most of the time, the customers didn't recognize me out of uniform. I mean, they could spend twenty minutes chewing me out for not letting them return something they bought on clearance, and then they'd stand next to me at the bus stop the next day and just strike up a conversation like it was nothing." She shrugged. "And if the curse has broken and they're still alive, it'll likely be because without magic she can't harm them and she'll be more than happy to join forces with someone who can. And then, dahling, the fur can really fly."

"You see?"

Lily nodded. "Okay. So, the way I figure, not everyone in town is going to get along like one big happy family—not that I'd know much about those. Especially not if Emma broke the curse and they all remember their pasts. And since we're agreed that's probably happened by now? Well, I'm betting all the feuds and arguments everyone brought with them from the Enchanted Forest are probably either still going strong or simmering below the surface, waiting for someone to poke at them with a stick." She smirked. "Now there's not a lot I'm great at in life, but I've got one skill. Call it a superpower. If there's a way to stir things up… I'll find it. We reopen some of those old feuds, get everyone at each other's throats… and then while they're trying to kill each other, we find my mom and with her help? We finish off anyone left standing who crossed us in the past."

Her smile grew murderous. "In my case, that'd be Snow White, Prince Charming, and their two-faced, backstabbing daughter..."...Who walked away from me twice, even after I begged her to stay. I'll never forgive her for that. And I bet my mother won't either. Next time we meet, it'll be her turn to beg...

The smug little bug hadn't given her a pair of rubber gloves, Zelena thought with a snarl. If this continued, her hands would be red and chapped in no time. The concrete floor wasn't as smooth as she'd thought before she'd stooped down to scrub it either. She could tell that she was going to learn each pit and crevice intimately by the time she was done. And the sawdust seemed to be giving her a rash. She thought she might be starting to show. It was early, yet; she was barely out of her first trimester, but according to one of those wretched magazines she'd been flipping through from sheer boredom, first-time mothers often did begin showing evidence of their condition some time between the twelfth and sixteenth week. It was hard to keep track of the time here, but she'd been roughly ten weeks pregnant when she'd learned of it and she thought that she'd been here two or three weeks. A month, perhaps, though likely not. It just felt like an eternity.

Her hands felt like they were on fire and she snarled an expletive—nobody here to hear it or care—and waved her left hand angrily over her right. There was a faint mist of green smoke and the rash vanished.

Zelena's eyes widened in shock. Despite the cuff on her wrist, she'd just managed to cast a healing spell. But that shouldn't be—Don't you dare finish that thought! she ordered herself. Magic is predicated on BELIEF. You may have cast that spell on reflex, because you forgot about the cuff, but you did just cast it, so it's possible!
Unhesitating, she dove under the blanket on her cot and waved her right hand over her left. For a moment, nothing happened. You did already this, she repeated to herself. No matter what everyone else thinks, it's possible. It is! She closed her eyes, blotting out her vision of the cuff, focusing only on the annoying stinging sensations pricking her left hand and how badly she wanted them gone. A cool wave of healing spread over that hand as well. She opened her eyes and saw that the rash was gone. Exultantly, she gestured at the cell door.

Nothing happened.

Come on! Open!

Nothing. And this time, no amount of determination seemed to have an effect. The instant she felt her power flicker, it died as though someone had smothered it. This was worse than when Regina had torn away her necklace after that fight in the barn and she'd thought Rumple was going to rend her limb from limb. Worse than when he'd appeared in her cell and nearly finished the job. Then, she'd known her magic was gone. She'd reached for it and her mind had closed on empty air. But now… now, she could feel it striving within her to break free but it kept hitting an impenetrable wall!

Stop. Think. You cast a healing spell. You got that to work. So, what's different now?

For a moment, confusion reigned. Then she realized what it had to be. The healing spell had been directed inward. The force she was trying to hurl at the door was—quite obviously—directed outward. What if the cuff didn't cancel magic? What if it dammed it up so that it couldn't leave the caster? If that was the case…

Zelena took a deep breath and smiled. If that was the case…

"I think I know what sort of escape clause Pan built into this wretched device," she whispered, feeling the first stirrings of real hope she'd felt since they'd thrust her into this underground dungeon. "I believe I begin to see how I might avail myself of it..."

In the back room of his shop, Rumple sat silently, one finger circling the rim of a rather particular chipped cup. He should have known. He should have seen the signs without Regina pointing them out. At the very least, he should have been aware of the danger.

Instead, he'd been caught up in the tidal wave of love and appreciation that had washed over him when he'd watched Henry's recording of Belle's speech at the town line, realizing that there was still hope that they could reconcile. And there was, there was.

But when Belle had acknowledged her inner darkness, Rumple reflected, she might have flung wide a door that was only meant to be cracked open on occasion. Because the aim of darkness was always to snuff out the light. And Belle's light had been powerful enough to pierce even his Darkness.

He shook his head and unconsciously drew the cup closer. When he'd become the Dark One, he'd reveled in his newly-acquired magic and power. He'd rushed to settle old scores and right old wrongs. He'd ended the Ogre War with barely a shrug and, for a brief moment, reveled in the thanks and adulation.

And his Darkness had fed on it and grown stronger.

He'd barely known how to resist it; a lifetime as a peasant with a lot only slightly above slavery in the first place did not breed the sort of person likely to mount much opposition to a powerful force.
For Bae's sake, he'd tried though. And even when he'd chosen power over Bae, he'd still kept that small
crap of love and humanity that kept him from giving up on crafting the curse that would
reunite them, notwithstanding the time, the work, and the myriad setbacks along the way.

But he'd also understood what he'd now become and honed his bargaining and negotiating skills on
himself long before he'd started striking deals with others. He'd fought to retain some semblance of
his humanity and, even if those about him saw only the monster, even if he himself believed that
there was little left of the man he'd once been, he'd always balked at sacrificing those last fading
embers of the Good-if-weak person who'd taken on the Darkness for the power to spare his son—
and all the other sons and daughters drafted to the battlefield—from the all-but-certain death that
awaited.

His Darkness had seized hold of him almost instantaneously.

But it was working on Belle in ways that were subtler, playing on her fears and insecurities,
showing her those parts of herself that didn't fit the mold in which she'd tried to cast herself and
suggesting that she allow them freer rein than might actually be advised.

He could be wrong. Regina was struggling with her own past, much as he was. When one was
sensitive to one's own Darkness and the likelihood of sinking back into an abyss from which one
had only lately climbed up, it was easy enough to see shadows everywhere. Even in Light like
Belle's.

And Belle had faced more than one brutal shock and ugly realization lately. Almost anyone could
be reasonably expected to be at loose ends emotionally.

And if he confronted her with what he and Regina feared, there was no guarantee that she wouldn't
turn about and blame him for darkening her soul. Or accuse Regina of trying to steal their
happiness as she had in the past and lash out at him for not recognizing it. Or…

A ragged breath escaped him. He couldn't discuss this with Belle. Not yet. Not until he was certain.
But he was going to stay alert for any signs that might prove or, more hopefully, disprove Regina's
suspicions—which were now his, as well.
Rumple had breakfast with Emma at Granny's. He knew that she sensed something was amiss and he half-wished she'd ask him about it. Not that he'd tell her, not in public where anyone might overhear. Not with Leroy seated mere yards away enjoying his coffee; dwarf hearing was sharp. The last thing Rumple wanted was to see and hear the dwarf running down Main Street roaring Rumple's 'terrible news' at the top of his lungs.

Like so much of his life to date, this wasn't fair. Had he actually succeeded in darkening Emma's heart, as he'd meant to do weeks ago in New York, he might have—well, 'appreciated' was hardly the accurate term, but—understood the irony in having that same fate now seeming poised to overtake Belle. But he hadn't done it. He'd fought the inclination, even going so far as to try to send Emma back to Storybrooke while he remained behind to live out the time remaining to him far from home, his last hope gone. He'd done the right thing then and he'd struggled to keep doing it since. He wasn't even the Dark One anymore! So… why was Fate exacting such a price?

"Gold?" Emma was waving her hand in front of his face. He blinked.

"Pardon?"

She smiled apologetically. "You just zoned out for a bit. Is everything okay?"

No, everything was not 'okay', but so long as there were others about, he wasn't going to admit it, much less discuss what was really going on. Well. Not unless she pressed the matter. "Yes, of course," he murmured. "Forgive me. I… fear I'm somewhat preoccupied."

There. He'd just given her the perfect opening to probe further.

Emma didn't take it, though. "No problem," she said with a smile. "It's getting around time for me to be at the sheriff station. Guess I'll see you around supper time when I come by the shop to collect Henry."

He nodded and began to push his chair back from the table, for once wishing that she wasn't so meticulous about not prying into his affairs unbidden.

And then, she asked him something he wouldn't have expected in a million years.

"Gold? You want to join us later? It'll just be me, my parents, Henry and Regina. Bring Belle, too if you want."

Shocked, he replied with the question that immediately darted into his head. "Have you asked them yet?"

Emma grinned. "It was my mom's idea, so she's probably talked it over with Dad. Do you want me to take a poll or…?"

He shook his head, hoping he didn't appear too stupefied. "I-I'll talk to Belle," he murmured. "And I…" He smiled. "Well. I should be delighted."

Emma's grin grew wider. "You close at six, right? We'll swing by your place around a quarter to seven?"
"Fine," he replied, still feeling somewhat dazed. "That should be… fine."

It had been two days since August had finished the Battleship set that Rumple had commissioned and started on Killian's. To be more accurate, he'd whittled out the pegs for both sets first thing, getting the monotonous work out of the way first. And now, the ships for Rumple's set were done and he was working on the ones for Killian's. Two different kingdoms, two different sets of naval vessels to replicate. Because, after all, where was the fun in making both sets identical? He was enjoying himself and he suspected that his father was too. After all, August had been a child of seven when he'd left the Enchanted Forest. He hadn't known much about seagoing vessels. The boat to Pleasure Island had been a passenger craft. The raft his father had fashioned inside the great whale that they'd ridden through the storm to safety had been even less. So, since he'd wanted the game-pieces to resemble the warships from the realm of his birth, he'd needed his father's expertise.

He could have gone to Killian, he supposed. And he would have, had the pirate known that Rumple had also commissioned a game set from him. But he didn't want Killian to wax rhapsodic on the sails and rigging of a North-Coastal galley and then wonder why the ships in his game represented the navies of the Black Sands Archipelago and the Alder Peninsula. August was almost certain that each man had commissioned the game to give the other as a gift and the last thing he wanted to do was accidentally spoil the surprise.

Besides, his father was happy to share his knowledge and expertise. In his younger days, he'd crafted many a model boat, some to be sold intact, others meant for the buyer to assemble and paint. And since, for some years, such toys had been in large demand, it had behooved Geppetto to ensure that his works were as perfect in scale and detail as possible, the better to outdo his competition. He'd even had a few of the old pieces gathering dust in the garage and he'd been delighted to bring them out for examination.

And somewhere in the middle of the technical discussions and the history lessons that his father couldn't seem to avoid teaching as he explained the reason for this figurehead on the prow or that manner of rigging the sails, they'd found time to talk of other things: shared memories of their too-brief time together in the Enchanted Forest and later in Storybrooke, the turns their lives had taken once they were apart, things they were proud of and things they weren't. And somehow, those last weren't quite as difficult to discuss as either had thought.

As August put the final touches on the hull of an iron dragon—a ship that reminded him of a Korean turtle ship from this realm's eighteenth century—he was startled by a knock on the door that adjoined the garage with the rest of the house. He looked up and smiled. "Papa, you don't need to knock," he protested.

Marco smiled back. "Rumpelstiltskin, he's in the living room now. He's asking to speak with you. I thought I'd see if you could come to him or if I should send him to you."

Here? And let him see the mostly-completed iron dragon, flagship of a navy that wouldn't be in the game August was giving him? He immediately shoved the model into one of the cabinets behind him and locked the door. "I'll be right up," he grinned. "Just let me wash my hands and get this dust off my clothes."

"And wipe your shoes on the mat," Marco added genially.

"Yes, Papa."
"All right, Beautiful One," Zelena cooed. "Come and get your treat." She was sitting on her cot, her blanket tented over her head. As a child, she'd often amused herself that way, pretending at times that she was in a cave or a castle, her dolls at her side. Her mother—foster mother, though she hadn't known it at the time—had still been alive and her father—peculiar that she still thought of him that way after everything else that had happened—still sober. Those had been carefree days that she might have savored more had she known how abruptly they'd come to an end with her mother's death.

She hadn't made a blanket tent in years and she'd forgotten how delicious it could feel to be safe in her own little nest, shut away from prying eyes… and CCTV cameras. Inviting Billina into this makeshift sanctuary was mainly for effect; while the blanket concealed her, it might not conceal the movements she made beneath it. Let whoever was watching think that she was merely engaging with her pet. Nothing suspicious there. And if she was wrong, and some guard did hasten to her door to see what she was up to, well, she'd still hear the tread at the door and have an extra moment to compose herself and act as though nothing was amiss.

Billina was strutting about on the mattress, pecking at the corn. "That's a girl," the witch murmured. "Now, we shall see…" She closed her eyes and reminded herself that her power would not extend past the cuff. But within those confines… A smile came to her face as she searched for a happy memory. This time it wasn't hard. Her early years were still fresh in her mind. And that gave her an idea.

"She couldn't have been more than five or six years old. She'd been on her way to the barn to milk the goat when she'd chanced to see her reflection in the water of the horse trough. Intrigued, she leaned closer. It wasn't that she had no idea what she looked like. She'd seen herself in the tin spoons at the table and her mother's burnished copper kettle. But the metal distorted her face, making it look too long or too full. And, in the case of the spoons, upside-down. She didn't think she'd ever seen herself quite so clearly.

"Zelena!" her father called from the house. "Don't dawdle, girl! We need that milk for breakfast!"

"Yes, father!" she replied hastily, tearing her eyes from the trough and dashing toward the barn door.

Although she was still smiling, she couldn't quite suppress a twinge of sadness. She'd been so young, then. So innocent. So unaware of the turns her life would soon take. But, more to the point for her purposes, so small. "Direct my magic inward," Zelena murmured, her eyes still closed beneath the blanket. Her smile became a grin. "Ohhhh, yes!" Wait. She had to remember that even if the cameras couldn't see beneath the blanket, her activity might not go as undetected as she needed. Now how to counter…? After a moment, the answer came to her and she lay down abruptly on the cot, rolling to one side and making sure that the blankets were still up about her head. Billina squawked a protest and began fighting her way back into the light and air. Zelena let her go. It didn't seem as though the hen would be needed after all. She knew the spell she wanted to cast now, and she believed that it would work. No. She knew it would. There wasn't even an iota of doubt in her mind.

Rumple looked up at the sound of August's step in the hallway. "I trust I didn't tear you away from anything that couldn't be delayed," he murmured.

"Nah, I needed a break," the younger man replied with a ready smile. "What's up?"
Instead of replying, Rumple lifted his head and cast about the room, trying to gauge whether Marco was still within earshot. "Is there someplace more private where we can talk?"

August was suddenly glad he'd locked away the game piece he'd been working on before leaving the garage. "Uh, yeah," he shrugged, jerking his head toward the doorway from which he'd just come. "This way. Uh… step into my office."

Huddled under a hospital-issue blanket, a red-headed six-year-old giggled as she looked at the magical cuff, now hanging loosely on an arm nearly half of its former circumference. Triumphanty she shook her arm and the cuff slid off.

"Trust Pan to create a trap only a child could escape," she whispered, resuming her natural size and age. Well. The cuff was off. She could leave at any time. But something stayed her.

She looked down at her belly. curled up as she was, she couldn't really see the slight rounding, but she knew it was there and she knew that it—and she—would only grow larger and more unwieldy over the next few months. And she'd never been pregnant before. While she'd made academic study of the condition in the past, the better to insinuate herself with Snow and monitor the princess's progress, experiencing it first-hand was rather different. Zelena had to admit that she wasn't entirely clear on how to distinguish between symptoms that were 'annoying but normal for the condition,' like the morning sickness that had sent her to the clinic in New York and those that might present a clear cause for alarm. And right now, she was in a facility where there were staff members who were trained in making that sort of distinction.

Moreover, if she were to escape now, the so-called heroes would tear the town about searching for her. She didn't know that she wanted to be on the run and hiding out in her current circumstances. And if it came down to another witch-fight, she'd be risking the child—and any leverage she might retain over her half-sister's True Love. She had no idea whether she was mother-material in any way, shape, or form, but the baby she carried might be the only thing standing between herself... and exile on the other side of the town line. Robin's code of honor would mandate that he intercede for the mother of his child—or child-to-be, as the case was currently—but if she were to lose it, she doubted he'd be willing to speak in her defense.

She flashed once more on Rumple—imprisoned by Snow White and her debatably-charming consort in the last months before the Dark Curse had transported everyone to this land. She'd watched events transpire in her crystal ball then, taking the measures of the foes she meant to defeat one day, wondering whether Regina even had the talent to cast the curse or if she'd need to pay a visit of her own to that underground cell to gloat to her erstwhile teacher about how he'd chosen the wrong sister after all. And one thing she'd learned from her crystal ball was that Rumple hadn't been nearly as confined as everyone had thought. He could have escaped at any time, had it been in his best interest to do so. But, as he'd told Regina moments before the swirling purple fog engulfed the land, he'd been where he wanted to be.

Zelena mulled over her options carefully. The cuff was off. She had her magic. And if anyone threatened her or her unborn child, she could defend herself. But an escape at this juncture would not be the wisest course of action. Her child-to-be was her greatest asset within this room, but it was also her greatest liability outside of it. Moreover, should any complication arise with her pregnancy, she had to admit that she was already in the best place possible.

"I am where I want to be," she whispered, a wondering smile spreading across her face. "At least... for now." Once the child was born, it would be a different matter entirely.

With a wave of her hand, a leather cuff appeared once more on her forearm. It was identical to the
one she'd just removed in all respects save one: this cuff was mere cowhide with no magical properties whatsoever. Let everyone else think her caged and magic-less. By the time they learned their error, it would be far too late.

The last thing she did before pushing back the blanket again was shrink the real cuff to a fraction of its size and slip it into a newly-created pocket in her long tartan skirt.

"So," August smiled, waving Rumple toward a wooden stool and sinking down onto another one, "what's so top secret you couldn't discuss it in the house?"

Rumple sat down, folded his hands in his lap, and studied his fingers for a long moment, before he looked up. "In New York," he began hesitantly, "when you realized what I intended for Emma… How was it that you were able to prevent it?"

August blinked. Then he shifted a bit on his stool. "I didn't really do all that much," he said slowly. "I mean, even when I suspected what you were up to, I thought I could be wrong."

"But you did do something, Rumple pressed. Almost absently, he rubbed two fingertips over the middle finger of his opposite hand. For the first time, August noted that the skin around that nail was rough and raw.

"You should put lotion on that," he murmured. "I should have some Neosporin around here somewhere."

"Yes, yes, yes," Rumple replied, not interested in pursuing the topic. "I'll see to that. Answer me. Please."

August let out a sigh. "Okay. Truth? I told Emma what I knew about the Author ink and that if you were planning on making some, she was at risk and why. She asked me if I had any idea how to stop you and," he paused, for a moment and looked away, then steeled himself to meet Gold's questioning brown eyes once more. "And I'll admit I suggested she head back to Storybrooke right away, make up some excuse about an emergency—which it kind of was—with or without Belle and I'd stay on and do what I could for you."

"You would have stayed on?" Rumple said, doing his best to hide his astonishment. "Despite what I was plotting?"

"You were plotting to save your life," August said quietly. "Are you seriously going to sit there and tell me that you can't see why I, of all people, wouldn't judge someone in that situation as harshly as you seem to think I should have?"

Rumple's eyes widened for an instant. Then he shook his head and a genuine smile flashed briefly across his face. "No, of course not," he murmured. "But thank you, all the same." He took another breath. "However, I deduce that she rejected your suggestion."

"Almost out of hand," August nodded. "I mean, it wasn't that she thought I was wrong or lying, but she didn't want to leave you behind without proof that my suspicions were correct. She asked me to keep an eye on things and call her out if she seemed to be headed down the wrong path—something I was already planning to do anyway—and promised to be extra-careful herself." He shook his head. "And then you opened up about why you lied about the dagger and what you were going to do with the hat and, well, I think after that point, the only way she was going back to Storybrooke without you was if I tied her up, threw her in the trunk of her bug, and drove back myself. And since one, I'd promised to stand by you, and two," he shrugged, "I don't actually know
how to drive a car; just a motorcycle… well, that wasn't going to happen.” His eyes narrowed. "So why bring this up now?"

Rumple hesitated. "I thought that since you seemed to have a certain level of expertise in determining when someone was at risk of falling under the sway of Darkness, perhaps you might be in a position to make that diagnosis for another."

August's eyebrows shot up. "Are you asking," he began slowly, "if I think you might be backsliding?"

"No," Rumple said at once. Then he frowned worriedly. "Although, if you should develop a concern on that front, perhaps it's best that you advise me directly. No. I was wondering whether you might have noted anything untoward…” He sucked in his breath once more and, almost absentely, pulled at a hangnail.

"Mr. Gold?" August prompted.

Rumple closed his eyes, exhaled, and took another breath and forced the words out. "…In Belle."

"Belle?"

He opened his eyes once more and nodded. "Regina suspects something amiss," he said, his words nearly tumbling out now. "And I'm not at all certain she's wrong. I-I hope she is. But…"

"But when it's someone you love, you want to believe the best of them," August finished softly. "I… Belle and I don't usually... uh… hang out that much when you aren't around. But I'll try to pop by the library sometime this week. She doesn't help you in the shop anymore, does she?"

Rumple shook his head. "Not at present, though I'm sure that will change in due course."

"Yeah, well, don't rush 'due course'. I'll visit the library this week," he repeated, "and see if I notice anything." He flashed Rumple an uneasy smile. "I'm a writer, after all. I'm supposed to be observant."

Rumple's answering smile was just as forced, but there was no mistaking the genuine relief in his words. "Thank you, Booth."

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Tony Castaway smiled when Carey set a fresh mug of coffee down on his desk. "You know that phone won't ring any faster if you keep staring at it," she said.

"I know," he replied. And she was quite right. The phone would ring precisely two minutes and nine seconds from now, and it didn't really have to. He and Tia had never needed a telephone to communicate with each other over short distances and now, after considerable time and practice, longer ones, as well. Although he couldn't have told it to many people, an incidental reason for his trip to Sri Lanka had been to test just how far apart he and his sister could be and still be in touch. Apparently, even with some 8700 miles between them, they could still connect, though it required a great deal of focus and Tony had felt a tension headache coming on after less than five minutes. In contrast, New York was only about 2300 miles from Tia's home in Misty Valley; they could probably speak mind-to-mind for hours. If they did, though, there was a greater likelihood that people would discover them in a state that—at least to most people—bore a strong resemblance to catatonia. Tia was lucky; she lived among many who shared their talents and would understand. Tony, on the other hand, had chosen to migrate eastward at Uncle Bené's request, and his current location required him to be more circumspect.
"Carey," he said slowly, "have you ever felt like you grew up without meaning to?"

"Pardon?"

Tony smiled. "I mean… one day, you're off having adventures with your siblings that you know the adults would never understand… and then suddenly, you're one of the adults yourself. And you realize it'd be better for you and everyone else that you play that part, but still, you can't quite believe that a chapter of your life has closed and there's a part of you that would do anything to read it again?"

Carey blinked. And for a moment, she seemed to be struggling with a decision. "Mr. Castaway?"

The phone on Tony's desk rang then, startling her and, as Tony picked it up, she recollected herself and exited the office hastily. A new shipment of old books sat on her desk; she'd signed for the delivery an hour ago. Time to start entering them into the catalogue. She was carefully lifting them out of the box when she realized that her employer had come out of his office.

"I'm going to have to go away again," he said apologetically. "I know I only just got back, but it can't be helped."

Carey nodded. "Will you be gone for long this time?"

"I really can't say, but from what I've been told, you should be able to reach me if there's any cause."

"No cell phone trouble this time out?" Carey asked with a smile.

Tony was uncharacteristically serious. "There shouldn't be. But if there is…" He hesitated for a moment before scribbling a number down on a Post-it note. "That's the number for Misty Valley Cooperative. They have," he smiled back easily, "better ways to get hold of me, if they have to."

Carey frowned. "All right," she said dubiously. "But where will you be?"

"Maine," Tony replied, snatching something off of his desk and shoving it into the pocket of his khaki cargo pants. "A little town called Storybrooke."

And then he was shrugging into a blue puffer coat and out the door before Carey could ask him why on earth he was taking a harmonica with him on a trip that seemed to be so urgent and unexpected.

"Dinner," Belle repeated, trying to smile. "Rumple, that's wonderful." She meant that. At least, she meant that it was wonderful for him. But at the same time, she was thinking, Dinner at Granny's. I haven't stepped foot in there for weeks—I sent Astrid in alone to order that other night—and I still don't know if I can face doing it. If Mrs. Lucas mentions anything about what I did, I'll probably tear out of there. Or even if she suggests steak, I'll wonder whether it's because that's the special or because Blue needed one for her eye after what I did. And Regina will be there, too. I can't. I just… She finally managed that smile. "But would you mind if I gave it a miss? I'm just tired tonight."

Rumple frowned. "You do look a bit worn, now that you mention it," he murmured. "In fact, I believe you've seemed rather peaked all week. You're not ill, I hope?"

"Ill?" Belle repeated. "Oh, no! No, no, it's..." She took a breath. "I've been taking kickboxing lessons," she admitted, wondering why she felt so nervous about saying so. Maybe, because she
knew that Rumple perceived her a certain way, and that that way certainly did not involve kickboxing.

Rumple's eyebrows shot up. "Kickboxing?" he repeated with a smile that betrayed surprise, but no mockery. "I'd no idea that was something that interested you."

Belle sighed. And then, realizing that he seemed interested in hearing more, she went on. "I was so sure that after I hit Blue, Emma would have to arrest me for it that I decided to save her the trouble and turned myself in. As it turned out," she said, heaving another—more annoyed-sounding—sigh, "Blue decided not to press charges, so I needn't have bothered, but Emma suggested I ought to look for a better outlet if I wanted to punch something again. And I've been..." She hesitated for a moment, then steeled herself and went on. "I've been getting so angry lately. At me, at us, at things we're still trying to... to move past. My father coming by the library to unload on me when I'm trying to work. Finding out what Regina did and knowing that things would be so much easier if I just tried to be the better person and do my best to forgive and forget like I always do..." She felt moisture welling up in her eyes and swiped at them irritably.

Rumple caught her hand in his. "Is it helping?" he asked seriously. "This course?"

Belle took another breath. "I think it might be," she said. "At least, I think I'm less likely to pummel the next person who annoys me, if only because, after pummeling on command for an hour a day, three days a week, I'm too sore and tired to lift my hand against anyone else. But it does feel... good... to be allowed to strike out, if that makes sense?"

"Oh, it does," Rumple nodded. He was no stranger to violent fits of temper and the catharsis that followed them. And he did know something about not wanting to pursue an activity of his own free will after having been in a situation where he'd been compelled to pursue it. Granted, a class in a gymnasium setting was hardly a cage, and signing up of one's own free will to have an instructor order one about was markedly different from having someone use magic to force one to spin for hours on end, but there were enough similarities for him to comprehend her feelings.

"But maybe not. He'd lived in Darkness long enough to know that he'd been most vulnerable to its whispers when he'd felt himself alone, adrift, and unsupported. When he'd distanced himself from Belle in New York, Emma and August had rallied to him. And on returning to Storybrooke, he'd been astounded to discover additional support on the parts of Henry and Regina. Even Emma's parents, while somewhat more hesitant, had made friendly overtures. But while he'd been trying to wrap his head around these changes in attitude, he wondered whether anyone had spared much thought for Belle. She'd chosen him long ago and that choice had also created a bit of distance between herself and the other 'heroes' of the town. Nothing so wide or insurmountable as the abyss he'd always imagined yawning between those heroes and himself, but there nonetheless.

And she was now, however unconsciously, increasing that distance, pulling away from Emma, lashing out at Blue, and now shutting Regina out of her life.

He'd lived in Darkness long enough to recognize what was happening and understand the urgency of arresting its progress now. But he also recognized mentioning his concerns to Belle might turn her away from him now, whether because she'd become incensed at the very idea that she might be turning to Darkness, or whether because she'd blame his past influence for making her susceptible to it. And there was still no proof, only the suspicions that Regina had shared with him. They might
both be imagining things that weren't there.

And Belle knew that things weren't quite right; why else would she be looking for healthy ways to release her feelings? Other heroes were tempted by Darkness and passed the trial. Maybe this would all sort itself out.

But a show of love and support might go a long way toward bolstering the chances that it would.

He smiled. "Well, it sounds as though you could use the rest," he said. And then, hesitantly, he went on, "I wonder…"

"Rumple?"

If August had warned him about rushing to have Belle working in the shop again, he'd likely balk at this idea, as well. But surely... He closed his eyes and twisted his hands together in his lap for a moment. Then he opened his eyes once more, locked them hesitantly on hers, and ventured, "D-do you think it would be premature if you were to move back… under my…" He smiled again, a bit more warmly. "Un-under our roof?"

Belle's eyes widened. Then she flung her arms about his neck with a glad cry. Rumple hugged her back. In his heart of hearts, he wasn't positive that he was ready for this step. But if there was a chance that it could help his wife find the strength to triumph over her inner Darkness, he would do his best to rise to the occasion.

The cafeteria was cold at this hour. At lunchtime, filled to capacity, it was generally a bit on the warm side and, with the windows kept shut against the winter chill, kind of stuffy. But now, with only twenty-odd students and the drama teacher-slash-director present, Henry found himself wishing he'd gotten his jacket from his locker before reporting for the first script read-through.

At least, the custodian had already cleaned up. The scent of lemon floor cleaner was strong and sharp in his nostrils, but it was better than having to smell food on an empty stomach, or see the remains of everyone's lunch on the tables and floors.

Henry looked around at the others in the circle of chairs. It was a small school and he knew everyone by sight, if not by name. Grace and Cecily—a new girl who'd arrived with the second curse—had their math books out and were clearly trying to get their homework done in the time before the rehearsal started. Nicholas was devouring a cupcake. A number of other students were chatting with one another or sitting idly and looking about, much as Henry was.

Finally, Mr. Quince cleared his throat. "Is everyone here?" he asked.

"Maybe you ought to take attendance," a boy a grade behind Henry suggested.

"Mr. Quince?" a girl named Marie waved her hand. "Could you tell us a bit about the play, too?"

Peter Quince smiled. "Marie, our play is The Matchmaker. It's the story of a man hoping to marry an heiress who doesn't realize that the matchmaker he's hired to arrange the meeting is hoping to marry him for herself. And he also doesn't realize that two of his clerks are planning to skip work and also visit the city in hopes of love and adventure, or that his niece is eloping with her boyfriend in his absence."

"Love?" a shrill voice piped up with a disgusted squeal. "You mean kissing? Ewwww!"

"Skippy!" Cecily whirled around to face her younger brother who had, until now, been quietly
reading a comic book. She turned back to the director, a flush coming to her pale face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Quince. Mama said I could only come to rehearsals if he stayed with me because there's nobody at home today and he's too little to stay on his own."

She turned back to the corner where her seven-year-old brother was sitting. "He promised that he'd be quiet!" she added in a voice that was somewhere between a hiss and a stage whisper.

Mr. Quince stifled a smile. "As long as he is, he can stay. But otherwise, I'm afraid your mother will need to make other arrangements should this situation crop up again in the future."

The flush had now spread to Cecily's ears. "Yes, Mr. Quince," she mumbled.

"All right. As for taking attendance, suppose we all introduce ourselves by our real names and the parts we'll play. Starting with you, Cecily."

Cecily nodded, closed her eyes, and visibly tried to pull herself together. Then she took a breath, lifted her head, and announced, "My name is Cecily Lapine and I play Irene Molloy."

"My name is Marie Bonfamille and I play Dolly Levi."

One by one, names and parts were announced, but Henry felt his heart begin to pound as realization struck. He'd already read through the script and right now, there were only two things going through his mind. First, Cecily Lapine was kind of cute. And second? His character, Cornelius Hackl, was going to end up with Irene Molloy in the play. He noticed that she was looking back at him and he smiled nervously. Her answering smile was equally nervous, but no less genuine.

From the moment that Lily had entered the Hornby Aquarium, Ursula had found herself vacillating between hope and doubt. Life had not been good to her in any of the three realms in which she'd made her home. She'd had her singing voice cruelly ripped away in Neverland, nearly been a Chernabog's dinner in the Enchanted Forest, and been reduced to eking out a living waiting service on the very creatures that would have been serving her, had she remained in her father's palace. It was only natural that, when a newcomer appeared dangling the promise of something better, just past the horizon, something in her would leap for it.

But then, commonsense and the desire to keep afloat resurfaced. The game, as it were, was rigged. The happiest ending that she could hope for was a life of mediocrity, forgotten by Fate and by anyone who ever knew her. Still, seeing Lily's hope and determination, she'd wanted to believe that things might be different. But before she threw her caution to the winds, she'd wanted to be sure that the young woman knew what she was doing and was able to present a plan with some hope of success.

Mentally, she'd set conditions. If Lily could demonstrate that she knew where the other denizens of the Enchanted Forest resided, that would be enough for Ursula to ally with her. Then, she'd decided that if she had a plan for what to do when she got there, that would suffice. Ursula had agreed to help her find Cruella, but she'd had her doubts about whether Lily would be able to convince the animal charmer to join them. Cruella, for all her melodrama and love of cheap gin and expensive furs, was not a stupid woman. Shallow, yes. Also selfish and conniving—not that Ursula had a real problem with those traits. But there was no way that Cruella would jump on Lily's bandwagon if she didn't think that there was something in it for herself. She'd not only declared herself to be 'in', she'd procured the vellum Lily needed to transcribe the spell that would allow them into this 'Storybrooke' in hours. Back when they'd (mercifully briefly) shared an apartment upon arriving in this realm, Cruella had needed three quarters of an hour to make Minute Rice. She had no problem speeding about in her car, top down, hair—and fur stoles—flying in the breeze. But under her own
power? If the woman had been granted a pouch full of magic beans, she'd waste them in a day—in her own house, just to save herself the bother of walking from room to room.

Sitting in the hotel room on her twin bed, Ursula studied the young woman hunched over the writing desk, watching as she carefully, meticulously copied the symbols on her paper onto the vellum. And she made her decision. She didn't know whether this scheme would succeed, but she did know that she wanted it to. She wrestled with herself for another moment, asking whether she really wanted to gamble the paltry assets she'd managed to accumulate in this land for the chance of regaining some of the power she'd lost and the vengeance she'd been denied decades earlier. And then, she pulled out her phone.

"Hi, Jacintha? Ursula. Uh... listen, I really appreciate your looking after my fish while I'm away and I was wondering... Something's come up. I'm going to be out of town a bit longer. Do you think you'd mind—?" She heaved a sigh of relief as her next-door neighbor rose to the bait and promised to continue tending the aquariums. "Thanks. I don't know when I'll be back exactly, but I'll be in touch when I do." She ended the call, took a deep breath and exhaled. She'd made her decision.

"Storybrooke. Lily will finally meet her mother. And Captain Hook and the Dark One? Will finally meet my tentacles. She looked out the window at a January snowfall and smiled. Revenge was a dish best served cold, after all..."
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

A/N: Passing reference to Beyond Witch Mountain (Disney, 1982) and to Uncle Bené's grandson Gregory.

Chapter Twelve

"Well," Lily sighed, finally pushing the chair away from the desk, "that's that. I think. I mean, it's not like I can actually read this stuff; I just copied over in ink what I copied in pencil from those books in the first place. If I messed up then and wrote the wrong symbol or left something out…"

Ursula held out her hand for the vellum. "I can't speak to missing passages. You're the only one who saw the original. But I don't see anything here that's making me squint and think it's not right."

"You can read what it says?" Lily asked, passing it to her.

Ursula sighed. "After a fashion. Fairy and Mermaid are…" she drew her eyebrows together in a frown as she tried to think of an analogy. A moment later, her lips curved in a smile. "Well, I'd say they're about as related as English and German. There are a lot of common root-words and shared vocabulary, for all they may look and sound different at first blush. And, like Cruella said earlier, spells are generally written in Middle Elvish. That's an older form of the language and the words are harder to understand, but it's even more similar to Old Mermaid. So I can kind of get it. To a point."

"So, like if I tried reading Shakespeare without the annotations?"

Ursula thought about that. "Maybe a bit harder than that. Try… somewhere between the Canterbury Tales and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." At Lily's blank look, she shook her head sorrowfully. "Not a fan of English Literature, I take it. Ah, well. At any rate," she went on, "while I can't give you a word-for-word translation, I can get the gist and it certainly reads like something a sorcerer would write."

Lily blinked. "You've… read a lot of sorcery? I'm sorry!" she added quickly. "I guess I never thought that…"

Ursula smirked. "You do know that they called me 'Ursula the Sea Witch,' right? They weren't kidding. Yes, I know a bit of magic," she confirmed. "Fortunately. A talent I've always possessed. Now, maybe I'm not in the same league as your mother when it comes to sorcery, but even so. Water magic? Protection? Heart-ripping? I can get by." She sighed. "If I'm in a land where magic exists."

"Well," Lily said, "we're going to a town that can only be accessed by magical means. Maybe that magic isn't just ringing the boundaries. Maybe it's inside, too."

Ursula was still a bit nervous about raising her hopes too high. They always ended up dashed in the end. Still, she found herself smiling at the possibility. "First things first, kid," she said finally. "Let's find the place and cross the boundary. Don't expect too much beyond that." She paused for a
moment, then smiled. "But if you're right… we'll have those heroes wrapped around my suction cup before they know what's happening."

The malevolence of Lily's answering smile was so like Maleficent's that it almost made the Sea Witch's breath catch.

Belle had the apartment to herself when she closed the library that evening, but not for long. Astrid bustled in, excitement practically radiating from every pore. "I have a job!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"You do?" Belle perked up at once. "Astrid, that's wonderful! When…? How…?"

Astrid laughed. "I was waiting for Leroy to get off work and I went back to that diner for another milkshake—uh, I took the money out of that change jar, like you said I could," she added a little nervously, her gaze flickering toward the kitchen, where a blue ceramic ginger jar sat on a corner of the countertop.

"That's fine," Belle reassured her. "But the job…?"

"The job," Astrid nodded. "Yes! Well, I was having the milkshake and Mrs. Herman came in and she was looking frazzled. She was saying that, as much as she loves children, six of them going through the terrible twos at once was a bit much. And… I've always been good with children. It's why I thought I wanted to be a fairy godmother in the first place. But I realized that, wings or no wings, I can still work with children. So…" her smile grew wider, "I start tomorrow. We're going to try it mornings for a month. And then… we'll see. I mean, I do still have a bit to learn, but I really think I can do it."

"Of course, you can!" Belle exclaimed.

"So…" Astrid hesitated. "So, I'll be able to pay rent for my share of this apartment. I mean," she continued hurriedly, "I mean, I know you didn't say anything about it, but I've been staying in your home, eating your food, reading your books—"

"Astrid! I love sharing books!" Belle protested. "And as for the rest—"

"Please, Belle," Astrid pleaded, "let me contribute something."

Belle hesitated. "All right. For now. Whatever you think is fair. I mean, Rumple owns this building; he's never charged me rent in the first place. But I'm going to be moving back in with him soon and if you want to stay on, I guess he'll expect some sort of payment. I'll talk to him," she added. She knew how her husband generally felt about fairies, but she also knew that his stance had begun to soften somewhat, at least, with regard to Flora, Tinkerbelle, and even Fauna. And Astrid had left the convent after a showdown with Blue. Maybe Rumple would appreciate that enough to charge Astrid a reasonable rent.

But any further thoughts on the matter were cut short when the fairy leaped forward and engulfed her in a hug. "I'm so happy for you!" she gushed.

And Belle laughed and hugged her back.

In the back room of the shop, Rumple sat on a wooden stool with a low, curved back, drop spindle in one hand, and a piece of yarn roughly a foot and a half long in the other. This wasn't the sort of spinning he'd learned as a boy, but he'd caught on quickly enough, once Flora had shown him how.
At any rate, the wheel still brought him too many bad memories of the year he'd spent as Zelena's slave. The drop spindle had no corresponding ill effects.

It only took a moment now to attach the leader yarn to the spindle and set it twirling. He reached into the basket beside him for a bit of combed wool fiber and joined it to the leader, twisting the spindle all the time. It was a challenge keeping the thread even as he added more fiber, but it was one that he was more than up to—which was more than could be said about the other challenge he'd set for himself today. He closed his eyes and reached into the basket again for more fiber, trying to lose himself in the soothing rhythm. Almost unconsciously, he rocked slightly back and forth, controlling the twist with one hand, pinching the thread and drafting out fiber with the other. And all the while, reaching out toward a door that he knew still existed in his mind, if he could only find it again.

The thread was as long as his arm now, and he stopped to wind it on the spindle shaft—a narrow cord of undyed silvery-gray wool. He'd expected as much, though he'd dared hope for better. He had the feel of the spindle now, but there was something missing. He reached for more fiber and began again.

Nearly an hour later, he was winding more thread with a sigh. He was beginning to think that the Apprentice had been wrong. That the Darkness had simply been tired of its previous host and looked for someone weak enough to give into its blandishments, no more, no less. The only thing unique about him had been his desperation and the motivation to do what needed done to transfer Zoso's Dark power to himself.

And then he blinked. Hurriedly, he held the last two or three inches of thread taut between the thumb and index finger of each hand as he examined it more closely, squinting a bit as he leaned in.

He hadn't spun a particularly thick yarn. Knitted, he imagined it might give five or six stitches to the inch. But right at the end of the yarn, only in the last two inches or so, some of the fibers bore a metallic glint. And he'd taken particular care that there were no metal fibers at hand when he'd begun.

So were the tiny sparkles he now saw in his yarn simply gold dust that had collected in this workshop from previous spinnings... Or had he made them happen now?

A wondering smile stole onto his face. He wasn't sure if he'd done it. But if he had, it was only a matter of time until he did it again. And if he'd done it once... Then he did have magic, even without the Dark One's power. And with time and practice, he would be able to unlock it consistently and by design.

For now, though, he could feel a tension headache coming on. As eager as he was to continue, the work would have to wait. But perhaps, in the interim, it would be worth perusing some new texts. And if he set out to acquire them now... Yes, the little gnat was probably at the hospital. And in her absence, he rather thought that someone else at the convent might not reject his request out of hand.

On his way out the door, he called to Henry to lock up if he hadn't returned by closing time.

Tony Castaway sat on a bench in Madison Square Park, cupping his fingers around an empanada he'd bought along his way. Tia was late, but driving in Manhattan was never easy. He resisted the urge to reach out to her with his mind. Even the best driver could run into trouble from a moment's distraction and while Tony had no qualms about getting into a car with his sister behind the wheel,
he couldn't truthfully say whether she was the 'best' driver or merely 'very good'. She'd gotten her license on her second attempt, though, and he'd had to take the test five times before he'd passed. And then he'd moved to a city where traffic was always heavy and parking was always expensive, so it was fair to say that he was out of practice.

Of course, there were ways to compensate for that, but using his abilities had a price. His resources were finite and if he wasted them keeping a car under control when he could be using his eyes and hands, then he might not have enough in reserve if he needed it later.

Uncle Bené hadn't asked for assistance in… well… ever. At least, not from him and Tia. Not since he'd needed them to recover the grandson they'd never knew he had, but been called away before he and Gregory could be reunited.

"We never knew you'd had kids!" Tony had exclaimed.

"One," Uncle Bené had corrected. "A daughter. I was… not much older than you. My master had sent me on a journey in search of an ingredient he needed for his work. It was common to the Pebble Islands, but best found in the rainy season. I'm not certain if you're old enough to recall, but that region was prone to monsoons and flash floods. I took refuge in a cave above the high-water mark and found it already occupied by a girl my own age with similar instincts for shelter.

"We shared our stories to pass the time. As well as our food. And… other things." He smiled a bit shamefacedly. "We were both young. And I'll confess it never occurred to me that anything had come from our time together. Until I returned to the Pebble Islands during Malagant's rise, nearly two decades later. Alysandé had married another by then. Our daughter was nineteen, already a wife herself, and mother of a boy not yet a year old." His voice caught. "My grandson. Gregory."

"What happened to him, Uncle Bené?" Tia asked gently.

Bené sighed. "He was on the same vessel on which we left Camelot, but in a different pod."

"Not…?" Tia's voice trailed off.

Bené nodded. There was no point in rehashing his earlier rashness. If they'd only remained inside the pod like most of the other refugees, the cloaking technology would have shielded them from Earth's sensors and they would have been retrieved like most of the other pods were, once the other vessels reached the landing site and were able to launch a rescue mission. Worried that they'd run out of oxygen before they were found that he'd elected to get the children to the surface and into the lifeboats. It hadn't been a terrible idea. The rescue mission hadn't found one of the pods in time and the children inside had, for whatever reason, not attempted to leave until it was too late, if they'd tried at all. But another pod—the one Gregory had been on—had drifted southward and beached—still cloaked—nearly 120 miles from where Tony and Tia's raft was intercepted. Both groups of children were assumed to have been shipwreck survivors, a guess not all that far removed from the truth, and while no craft was ever found, somehow nobody asked many questions.

Tony sometimes wondered whether they all hadn't instinctively used their abilities to stifle certain suspicions on the part of the local authorities. At least a dozen children in each pod old enough to understand that their fate was uncertain, each one thinking something like, 'Please don't hurt us, please let us be safe, please believe we're just kids', and, in the case of the second pod, whose passengers hadn't been spelled into forgetting their origins, 'Please don't think we're from a different realm altogether'… Well, it would explain how they'd managed to avoid being held in some government lab or worse. They'd probably never know for certain and, after all this time, it probably didn't matter anyway.
"I've been trying to find him since my return to this realm," Bené continued. "But my time draws short. Soon, I shall be needed elsewhere."

"I don't understand," Tia said, speaking for both herself and her brother.

Bené smiled. "In time, you will. I hope that the three of us will be able to find him quickly. But if I'm called away before we do, then it will fall to the two of you to complete the mission..."

And he had been called away. Tony and Tia had found Gregory and brought him home to Misty Valley. But for almost a decade, there'd been no word from Uncle Bené. Until the day that he received an alert about a research center in New York that was seeking a new director. And the email had been forwarded from an address he didn't know, but using a cipher he recognized at once. Uncle Bené was back.

Tony's instructions had been straightforward: run the center—easy enough after his studies in management and business administration—and keep an eye out for anyone seeking to examine two specific tomes at the same time. If anyone did request those volumes, he was to allow them access as he would any other, but alert Uncle Bené via email at once and await further instructions.

When he'd called Tia, he'd learned that Uncle Bené had contacted her as well.

That had been over fifteen years ago and he'd almost forgotten about it until Carey had received that request. And now...

Now, he was waiting for his sister to pick him up so that they could help Uncle Bené against a foe he didn't think he could handle on his own. Tony was trying not to worry about that. Not when he could just worry about where the heck his sister was—

"Sorry I'm late!" Tia dashed up, slightly out of breath. "I just had a hard time finding a parking spot; the nearest lot was full. Come on. I'm parked over on East 21st."

Okay. Maybe now was the time to worry about what sort of threat might be too big for Uncle Bené to manage by himself...

Rumple stopped off at home first, checking the collection of spell books in his basement in hope that he might be spared a trip to the convent. The results were less promising than he'd hoped. He'd never restricted the contents of his library to works of Dark wizardry; most spells had elements that were neutral or could be repurposed for his ends. However, it seemed that when he'd been freed of the Dark One, he'd also been shriven of certain magical basics.

He could feel his frustration levels climbing and he knew he couldn't afford to let loose with so many rare, fragile, an irreplaceable manuscripts about. His gaze fell on the stereo system in the corner. He didn't think he'd played it since he'd regained his memories with Emma's first arrival in Storybrooke, but it ought to still be in fine working order. And some music might be precisely what he needed to calm his nerves. He looked at the CDs stacked neatly beside one of the speakers and, after a moment's reflection, selected Grieg. As the first strains of the Piano Concerto in A Minor began to play, it occurred to him that the problem facing him now was rather analogous to attempting to play a piece on a piano with the white keys removed. While one could certainly play the C-major scale, and even a number of basic pieces without any black keys, the reverse did not hold true.

He shook his head, trying to avoid the obvious conclusion. He might have a number of tomes that pertained to Light magic, but they were advanced, meant to be used by one who had already
mastered the fundamentals.

He knew the basics of general spell-casting; he'd applied himself to those early on, refusing to rely solely on the skills and knowledge that he'd gained with his Darkness. But perhaps, he reflected somewhat guiltily, he hadn't worked at them as hard as he might have, knowing all the time that magic was his to command, with or without intensive study. He'd focused on acquiring more spells, tracking down rare components, and forging his own enchantments. But perhaps, in his quest for a way to reach his son, he'd hurried past the dull foundations of the art, intent on mastering the advanced sorcery that would be of more direct use.

He was paying for that oversight now.

And if he was to reacquire magic at this point—and be able to use it reliably instead of in random spurts and flashes (and occasional golden glimmers in his handspun yarn)—he would need to truly master those foundations. In Light magic.

And unfortunately, if he didn't have the requisite tomes in his possession, then the convent was the only other place in town where he could hope to find them.

Blue returned to the convent in a better mood than she'd been in weeks. Really, this was the happiest she'd been since the Dar—since Rumpelstiltskin's return. She'd felt no small relief when she'd believed him gone for good, and into a land without magic as she'd intended nearly two centuries earlier. She hadn't wanted to believe that Belle and the others would bring him back; she knew that it would only be a matter of time before he'd be conjuring up some Dark scheme or other. And knowing his animosity toward her, perhaps she might have been excused a sense of foreboding when she'd learned that he'd returned after all.

She'd done her best to mitigate the threat, of course. In her opinion, the savior could likely handle the Dark One and she'd be on her guard. But Pinocchio had always been somewhat gullible and prone to over-confidence. If she'd expressed her concerns, she had no doubt that the young man would shrug them off. So, rather than trouble herself with that pointless exercise, she'd taken the necessary steps. She might not know what the Dark One was plotting, but she couldn't risk his hurting Pinocchio. So, though it had pained her, she'd done her best to remind the former puppet of his past experiences, hoping he'd make the connection and realize the danger.

She hadn't planned on Rumpelstiltskin divining the situation first. And she certainly hadn't expected Snow White and her husband to take his side against her. Still, she'd accepted Snow's rebuke with as much good grace as she could and tried to fulfill the terms of her prescribed penance. At least, she'd intended to until she actually met Zelena.

Still, things seemed to be looking up on that front. The witch had actually been, well, almost pleasant today. Perhaps it had simply been the squalor of her surroundings that had accounted for her ill-humor in the past and, now that Blue had given her the agency and ability to rectify that situation, she'd be more open to rehabilitation going forward.

Yes, Blue thought, as she pulled open the convent's front door. She might have questioned Snow's judgment in laying this challenge upon her, but now that she was finally making some headway, perhaps she could admit that the young princess's instincts had been correct. Maybe, Blue reflected, she had been overly hasty in considering the witch past saving. Maybe…

She froze.

What on Earth was the Dark One—former Dark One, she reminded herself—what was
Rumpelstiltskin doing in *her* domain, standing in *her* very foyer?

Rumple hadn't been fully certain what sort of reception he could expect at the convent. While he'd deliberately planned his visit to coincide with the time when Blue was most likely to be at the hospital, he knew that old reputations—particularly those as notorious as his—died hard. And, it needed confessing, just because he was no longer the Dark One didn't mean that he had any warmer feelings for fairy-kind in general. That said, he was somewhat better-disposed toward certain *specific* fairies than he might have been in the past.

Tink had greeted him with a warm smile which only widened when he explained the purpose of his visit. "Elvish spell books?" she'd repeated.

"The more elementary the better, I'm afraid." Rumple confirmed with a self-deprecating smile of his own.

The warmth in the blonde fairy's voice didn't waver, even as her merry expression turned serious. "Don't be," she said. "I don't know how many people I've seen fail because they were too afraid or embarrassed to ask for help. Wait here. I'll be back in a few moments." She gestured toward the polished wooden bench against the foyer wall. She took several steps, then turned back to face him. "I'm sorry," she said. "Could I offer you some refreshment?"

Rumple shook his head. "Thank you, no," he returned. "But the book would be appreciated."

"Of course." She moved off again.

Something made him call after her, "I must confess to having felt no small surprise to see your name added to a…" he hesitated, "…a-a roster that was handed me together with a contact number. While I appreciate the gesture, it's… well… a trifle unexpected."

Tink walked back to him. "On the ship from Neverland," she said quietly, "for all I try to make a point of not eavesdropping, it wasn't a large vessel and I couldn't always avoid hearing conversations that weren't meant for my ears. From what I did overhear… Well. I've always been a believer in second chances."

"Some might say that my subsequent actions wasted that opportunity."

"Some might," Tink acknowledged. "I've got this nasty habit of not paying attention to sentiments I disagree with. Or did you not hear how I lost my wings and found my way to Neverland in the first place?"

Regina had told him of her past history with the fairy. He'd been able to guess the broad strokes of what must have come afterwards from Reul's reaction when she'd seen Tinkerbell in Storybrooke. "I heard," he admitted. "I take it you haven't learned your lesson?"

Tink rolled her eyes ceiling-wards. "I'm afraid I'm simply an *abysmal* student," she replied with an anguished wail that was too over-the-top by half to be mistaken for genuine. A moment later her sunny smile was back. "And for your sake, I suppose that's fortunate. Wait here."

This time, Rumple let her go, a bemused expression gracing his face. He settled back on the bench, but after a few minutes, he felt the need to get up and move about. He wasn't at ease in this place where the Reul Ghorm's influence seemed to seep out of every crack and corner. The pious saints—a legacy of the first Curse when this cloistered building had truly been a convent—seemed to peer down at him from their gilt-painted frames with *her* sanctimonious smile, silently judging and finding him wanting. He got up from the bench and began pacing the length of the foyer.
So lost in thought was he that he didn't hear the front door open behind him, nor realize that anyone had come in, until a voice practically hissed, "What are you doing here?"

It took Tink longer than she'd expected to find the spell-book. She'd carried it with her to Neverland when she'd lost her wings, hoping against hope that she could still work some small magic with it. But belief in one's abilities was the first step and after Blue had expelled her, that belief had been badly shaken. When she'd regained it, she'd resumed her studies almost where she'd left off and the little leather-bound hardcover with leaves and flowers embossed on the spine had been relegated to a packing box in the narrow closet of her new room at the convent. She'd amassed several such boxes.

Finally, though, the book was in her hands and she made her way triumphantly back to the foyer. As she walked down the hallway, she could hear voices ahead. And while she was still too far off to hear the individual words, the tones—one hard and accusatory, the other quiet and conciliatory—were clear enough. She quickened her pace.

"Here we are!" she announced briskly, drawing both Blue's and Rumpelstiltskin's attention. "Sorry for the delay."

"Green," Blue looked at her coldly, "I'd hoped I might expect better of you in light of your past history."

For a moment, Tink felt herself falter. Then something about the resignation in Rumpelstiltskin's brown eyes seemed to add steel to her spine and resoluteness to her voice. "My history?" she repeated, almost too innocently. "Surely you aren't referring to my insistence that Regina might find her way back to the light? Because I think we've flown over that particular patch of moss already."

Blue lowered her voice, but it was plain that her words were intended for their subject to overhear as well. "Surely you can appreciate the danger in giving him access to magic!"

"Light magic," Tink replied, still smiling.

"Any magic is too dangerous in his hands. Clearly you have no idea the lengths of which he's capable. He—"

"—is standing not three paces away," Tink cut her off. "You needn't carry on as though we're alone."

She turned to Rumpelstiltskin and met the surprised approval in his eyes with an apologetic smile. "And now, I'm doing it, too, of course." She held up the spell book. "Kitchen magic," she added brightly. "And quite elementary, I'm afraid. Most of us learn these spells even before our real training commences. But if you're hoping to launch some scheme in motion by un-curdling milk or... or... keeping ground spices from losing their bite after six months, I suppose I'll be properly impressed."

"Green! I forbid this!" Blue exclaimed, even as Rumpelstiltskin reached for the small volume.

Tink shook her head. "I'm sorry, Blue. I made a promise and even you can't force me to renege on it. Why if word got about, I can't see how anyone would ever believe in me again." And she had. A fairy's word was her bond and when she'd agreed to fetch the spell-book, it certainly hadn't been necessary to add, 'I promise' to the statement. Such was understood.

"I don't believe in you, now," Blue rejoined icily.
For a moment, Tink seemed to wilt. Then her eyes narrowed and, before Blue and Rumpelstiltskin's eyes, she shrank to just over five inches in height. A pair of wings sprouted from her back, somehow poking through the fabric of her blouse and blazer without tearing it. A broad grin split the fairy's face. "That's quite all right," she said calmly. "It seems it's sufficient that I believe in myself." Her expression turned pensive for a moment. "And now, I wonder whether that wasn't always so."

She hovered for a moment in front of Rumpelstiltskin. "If you need some help getting started," she said, "you needn't have any compunction about asking me. There is a bit of a trick to that uncurdling spell that frustrated me at first." She smiled once more and looked at Blue.

"I suppose I'm banished again?"

Blue seemed to cloak herself in serenity once more, but it was a threadbare cloak. "No, Green," she said primly. "Some disciplinary measure will be warranted, of course. I'll summon you when I've worked out what it shall be. But I think it best you remain and continue with your studies for now." She gave the fairy a thin smile. "I pray your faith in the former Dark One is not misplaced. But if it should be," she went on pragmatically, "it will likely take all of us to thwart his schemes."

"I'm right here, dearie," Rumpelstiltskin murmured, and there was no mistaking his amusement.

"Then you know we'll be vigilant," Blue countered with more than a little smugness.

Rumple made a scoffing sound. "I'd scarcely expect otherwise. Well," he slid the book into an inner jacket pocket. "Since I have what I came for, I'll take my leave." He nodded to Blue. "Being in your presence has been, well," he smiled, "as pleasant and edifying as always."

His smile was warmer when he turned to Tink. "I thank you for your assistance, Lady Bell," he said formally. "And your offer."

Rumple was still smiling as he made his way to his car. A glance at his wristwatch told him that it was past time for Henry to have locked up, so there was no returning to the shop now. But he still had time to return home, shower, and change his clothes before Emma and the others came 'round to take him for supper.

He wasn't much for small talk, but it didn't seem to matter that he spent most of the evening just smiling and nodding. The conversation ebbed and flowed about him and, unlike past occasions where, even when he'd attended, people had spoken around him as though he wasn't present, he had the sense that his input would be welcomed tonight... if he had anything worth saying.

Still, as the evening wore on, he got the impression that there was something else worrying on the Nolans' minds. Finally, when the dinner plates had been removed and they were steeping their teabags while waiting for dessert, he fixed each of them with an inscrutable look and remarked, "One can't help noticing some preoccupation on your parts. Is everything quite well?"

David and Snow looked first at him, and then at each other.

"Yes," David said quickly.

"No," Snow said at the same time.

The two looked at each other once more.
"Yes," Snow amended.

"No," David spoke over her.

Rumple sighed. "May one assume that there's room for improvement, then?"

"Mom, Dad…" There was a note of warning in Emma's voice.

Snow let out a breath. "It's… we're trying not to fall back into old patterns. And we didn't just invite you to dinner because we wanted something from you."

"But you do want something," Rumple stated.

"If it's possible," David admitted. "But if it isn't, we'll understand. I'm not even sure if it's something you can do any—" He caught himself, embarrassed. "If it's something you can do," he repeated firmly.

So. Magic was involved. "Well," Rumple said somewhat waspishly, even when I was the Dark One, I was no mind-reader. What is it you're after?"

And still, they hesitated. Finally, Snow seemed to gather courage as she closed her eyes and gripped the edge of the table with both hands. "We made Emma a promise recently. One we want to keep. Only," she opened her eyes, "we don't know how to start."

Rumple gave a slight nod, indicating that she should continue.

"Thirty years ago," David went on, "we gave our daughter her best chance by stealing someone else's."

"We want to find out what happened to Maleficent's child," Snow said. "Can you help us?"

Rumple regarded them silently for a moment. And when he spoke, it was with far less hostility than he might have in the past. "Well," he said, "I won't waste time telling you your aims are admirable, if a trifle reckless. There's no reason to believe that Maleficent's spawn would be any more forgiving of your actions than your own daughter was initially. In fact, considering that her offspring's darker side is at least twice what it ought to be, one might expect a far less forgiving nature."

"We've considered that," David nodded.

"Then consider that it might be better to leave the child where they are."

"Easier," Snow corrected. "Not better. Is there a way? I mean… Maleficent's dead. Since her child would be her heir, would that mean that a locator spell might work if we could find something of hers here? Since whatever Maleficent owned would pass on to her child, I mean."

Rumple raised an eyebrow. "That… is a very imaginative solution to the situation. Not that it would work; the child would, at the very least, need to have been in possession of the artifact, however briefly, at a juncture when it was legally theirs. You banished a hatching egg," he reminded her with a half-smile. "No help there, dearie."

"Well," Snow said, sounding disappointed, but not surprised, "if that child has our daughter's darkness, could we use that? Sort of like blood magic only…?" She cast about trying to find the right words. "You know what I want to ask, don't you?"
Rumple nodded. "I'm afraid it wouldn't work," he said gently. "The offspring in question may have Emma's potential for darkness—which may or may not have been fully realized, I might add—but for blood magic to be effective, one does require that they share common…” His voice trailed off as realization struck.

"Rumpelstiltskin?" David asked after a moment.

"There may be a way," Rumple whispered. "Blood magic would work."

"But there isn't anyone here who shares the child's blood," Regina, silent until now broke in. "Or do you mean to say that the father has been here all along? Because I think I would have noticed a second dragon in town."

"As to that," Rumple returned, "I have no idea who the father might be or if he's present. But we don't need him." He smiled. "Not when we already have Maleficent."
"Wait," Emma said with a frown. "Maleficent's dead. I-I mean, I ought to know. I killed her."

Rumple nodded. "I'm well aware."

"I didn't think magic could bring back the dead," David said with a puzzled frown.

"Present company excepted?" Rumple asked smiling archly.

David reddened slightly and looked away from him, diverting his glance for a moment to a nearby table where Henry was sitting with Nicolas Zimmer and a few other kids his own age who had come in about twenty minutes earlier and invited Henry to join them. "I guess so," he muttered.

Rumple's smile, though still jovial, took on a more serious note. "The laws of magic have a bit more flexibility when it comes to magical beings. Not a great deal of it, mind you, but there's still a degree of mutability. But then," Rumple smiled, "you needn't just take my word for it." He turned to Regina. "Correct, your Majesty?"

Regina sighed. "When I wanted to retrieve the failsafe from under the library," she admitted, "I needed to create a diversion to get to it. Dead or not, Maleficent was still guarding it, and any attempt to remove it would… wake her up."

"Wait," Emma said, "what do you mean… 'Dead or not'?"

Regina was silent for a moment. Then she took another breath and said, "Well, technically, she's neither."

"What?" Snow breathed.

"Maleficent's immortal. Killing her… doesn't automatically cause her to die."

"Hang on," Emma fixed wide eyes on the queen. "Are you trying to tell me she's undead? Like… like a vampire or a zombie or something?"

"Not like a vampire or zombie," Regina replied, "but yes, I suppose that 'undead' would be the correct term. She's currently in a dormant state and, since the enchantment only awakens her when the failsafe is threatened, and the failsafe is no longer in her domain, she ought to remain so."

"Ought to?" Emma echoed nervously. "Seriously? Defeating her the first time took almost everything I had, and now you're telling me she could come back?"

"From what your parents just related," Rumple broke in, "I believe that they're hoping for it. But," his expression was now deadly serious, "for what it's worth, I share your misgivings."

"Misgivings noted," David said, "but if there is a way to revive her, I think we need to know."

Rumple sighed. "As you like. Maleficent can be resurrected with the blood of those who wronged her most." He glanced at Emma. "For the record, dearie? You don't fit that criterion. Defeating her in a duel when your only viable options were to kill or be killed? Hardly a great wrong to preserve
your life when she would have slain you, had you not." He turned again to Regina. "The same goes
for you, your Majesty. Though I do grant you'd be a better candidate. Imprisoning her in an
underground warren for twenty-eight years? Based upon some personal experience of much shorter
duration," a slight smirk twisted his lips as Snow and David each looked down at their cake plates
for a moment, "I'm willing to gamble that tossing her a light repast afterwards wouldn't begin to
make up for that sort of suffering; particularly since he got away in the end."

"I'm missing something, aren't I?" Emma remarked.

This time, Rumple's smirk was more pronounced. "Ask the captain when you see him next. I'm
certain he'll be happy to share."

"I was a different person then," Regina murmured with a sort of weary resignation. "Not that I'm
making excuses, but I'd have gone a different route if I had to do it again today."

Emma blinked. Then her expression hardened. But before she could say anything further, her
mother spoke.

"Us," she said nervously. "David and me. We're the ones who wronged her the most."

Rumple chuckled, but there was no good humor in it this time. "If you're suggesting that
kidnapping her infant, promising to return it, corrupting it, and through your actions, separating
parent from child for decades has sent your names to the top of the list, well, I'd have to agree."

"So, we can bring her back," David said.

"You can…" Rumple hedged. "But be advised that nobody I know has ever accused Maleficent of
having a forgiving nature. And if my own feelings are anything to go on, well, my antipathy for a
particular fairy has only intensified through the centuries after she took my child from me."

"Uh…" Emma cleared her throat nervously. "Neal told it a little differently. Sorry." She added
quickly.

Rumple acknowledged her correction with a slight nod and an inscrutable expression. "While the
Blue Fairy may have given him the bean so that Bae would have a means of freeing me from my
Darkness, knowing now what I didn't know then, I think it's fair to say that she manipulated the
situation more than I'd guessed at the time. And as she has encountered several of my predecessors,
it'd be disingenuous to claim that she had no way to predict how the Dark One would react to any
ploy to remove his power. Between that and," he shook his head, "knowing what she knew of me,
and of my experiences when once I'd held such a bean in my hand in earlier years, let's just say that
she must have has some inkling of how I'd react to the plan she suggested to my son. Or, let us say
rather that while she might have hoped otherwise, she had to know the odds that events would
unfold in the way they did." He sighed heavily. "At any rate, if you resurrect Maleficent, there is
an excellent chance that she'll incinerate you before you can begin to explain your desire to rectify
that past wrong. My advice to you," he smiled, "would be to let sleeping dragons lie."

"Noted," David said again. "But if we wanted to try, are there precautions we can take? Some way
to temporarily neutralize her, long enough so that we can say what we need to?"

Rumple looked from him to Snow and shook his head with a weary sigh. "I suppose I can try to
find out," he allowed. "But don't expect an answer too quickly. And don't be so certain that it'll be
one you want to hear."

"I think," a new voice broke in startling them, "that whether we want to hear it or not is about to be
rendered academic. And," the Apprentice continued as he drew closer, "two pairs of hands may halve the search time."

"Wait," David said, "what's so urgent?"

The Apprentice regarded him soberly. "I've received word that your dormant problem may not remain dormant for very much longer."

Blue knew that she was being too lenient this time. Green's query had been quite reasonable: her obstinacy was grounds for banishment. So, the fairy wondered, what had stayed her hand? Perhaps, she thought with some irritation, she'd been thinking to compensate for that earlier occasion when the judgment she'd meted out had been—as she now believed—too swift and too harsh. She'd been furious then, and the sentence she'd decreed at that time had been one passed in anger.

Blue knew that she was being too lenient this time. Green's query had been quite reasonable: her obstinacy was grounds for banishment. So, the fairy wondered, what had stayed her hand? Perhaps, she thought with some irritation, she'd been thinking to compensate for that earlier occasion when the judgment she'd meted out had been—as she now believed—too swift and too harsh. She'd been furious then, and the sentence she'd decreed at that time had been one passed in anger.

She'd been angry again today, and she'd been wise to refrain from deciding anything until she was calmer. Except, Blue reflected, she had made a decision. She'd decided that, however she might choose to penalize Green, banishment was off the table. Foolish. This wasn't the first time that Green had challenged her authority. In the past, she'd merely gone behind her back to do it. But in recent weeks, first with granting Belle and the savior access to the library and now this business with the spell book, Green had defied her to her face. She was disrupting the serenity of their order and she ought to be expelled from it.

And yet, their order hadn't been at all serene lately, had it? First her method of protecting Pinocchio had been challenged—and when word of her actions had trickled back to the other fairies, there had been questions from that quarter, too. Oh, they hadn't brought their misgivings to her directly, but there had been whispers behind her back. And then, when she'd taken a temporary leave and appointed an interim head to fill in for her, while she'd deliberately chosen a capable and well-liked fairy for the task, she allowed that she hadn't expected Merryweather to be quite so capable and quite so well-liked.

It was fortunate that Merryweather had also proven to be quite loyal, with no aspirations to lead the order on a more-permanent basis.

But then there was the business with Nova flouncing off and not—as Blue might have expected—shamefacedly creeping back with an embarrassed apology. And, like Merryweather, Nova had been well-liked.

Blue sucked in her breath and let it out. There. That was the problem. Merryweather, Nova, and now Green, all were popular and held in good regard by the rest of their order. Blue's authority had always required that she hold herself aloof from the others and now, that distance was hurting her. The fairies she'd heard whispering in the corridor the other day hadn't been the first or the last to intimate that they preferred Merryweather's leadership to hers. Nova's presence was keenly missed. And Green? Green had quickly become among the more sought-after for counsel and conversation once she'd rejoined their order after those long years in Neverland. And if Blue banished her now, she had to acknowledge a real possibility that the whispers and murmurs against her would grow louder and more overt.

She didn't crave power or authority. Had a more-able candidate to lead their order existed, she would have happily deferred. But while Merryweather had potential, Blue knew that the younger fairy wasn't ready to deal with a real crisis, should one arise. And none of the others were even close to qualified. So, while another fairy might have stepped down and secluded herself somewhere to brood for a time, Blue knew that she didn't have this luxury. For the good of the order, she needed to lead it. And likewise for the good of the order, she couldn't simply exile
anyone who might be perceived to oppose her. Far better to adopt a gentler approach in dealing with Green's insubordination and show that she in no way felt threatened by the novice fairy's actions. Because she didn't. Why, the very idea was absurd.

She broke out of her ruminations when she heard the knock on her office door. Well. At least, Green had learned to be punctual. "Enter," she called.

Green sauntered in, her face penitent, but her walk altogether too jocular for one in disgrace. "Submitting myself for disciplinary action, as ordered," she announced crisply.

Blue nodded, her expression severe. "As you have chosen to part with your primer of kitchen magic, one can only assume that you've become expert in such spells. Therefore, you will confine yourself to the convent kitchen for the next three months, and you will confine your spell-casting during this period to such spells as were in that volume."

Green winced, but her voice was steady as she lowered her eyes and replied, "Yes, Blue."

Blue allowed herself a faint smile as the novice left. True the penalty was light relative to the offense, but she had little doubt that Green would be bored to tears inside of a week. Perhaps that would suffice to get her to fall into line. Blue hoped so. Trying to get through to Zelena was challenge enough without facing difficulties on the home front.

"Her daughter is coming here," Snow repeated softly, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

"She won't be pleased to find out about her mother," Regina murmured. She turned angry eyes on the Apprentice. "And you gave her the directions."

"I gave her a map," the Apprentice replied, "her family history, and the means of finding this place. But that was over a decade and a half ago. At that time, her mother was very much alive and, given the nature and longevity of dragonkind, I had no reason to anticipate that state changing."

"Really, dearie?" Rumple snorted. "I don't know whether you're aware, but this town boasts no small number of heroes. Heroes have an annoying tendency of slaying dragons."

The Apprentice nodded. "I'm not gainsaying that. In my defense, I really hadn't expected the young lady in question to take this long to start her journey." He nodded again, this time in Emma's direction. "Much as you were in years past, she's found it difficult to remain in any one place for any great length of time."

Emma frowned. "Did the curse do that? Make everyone from the Enchanted Forest want to stick together, even if they didn't know it?"

Rumple cleared his throat. "I didn't intend that for everyone," he murmured. "But I needed to ensure that you would find us. I didn't specify how it would happen. I certainly didn't anticipate," his gaze flicked fondly to his grandson, still in deep conversation with his school friends, "that you would have a child whom Regina would later adopt and who, ten years later, would bring you here. Fate appears to have a fine sense of irony on occasion. I suspect, however, that had Henry not found you in Boston, your... bail-bonding would have set you on a journey to coastal Maine later that same evening. Or you'd suddenly have been seized with an irresistible urge to hop into your little yellow car and take a night-time drive on Interstate 95 and see where you'd end up." He smiled. "The Curse would have brought you here before your 28th birthday ended; the only question would be whether it would have interpreted that deadline as midnight, or as a full 24 hours from the precise time of day that you were born."
"Correct," the Apprentice said. "The Curse wouldn't have drawn Lilith here." He fixed Emma with a penetrating stare. "But you have."

They were stuck in traffic on the Triborough Bridge when Tony slapped his hand to his forehead. "We have to go back!" he yelped.

Tia sighed. "You forgot your toothbrush? We're not exactly going to a third world country, and even if I hadn't packed one for you along with some of your old clothes, I think even third world countries have basic hygiene products these days."

"Worse," Tony clapped a hand to his forehead. "I mean, no, I don't have my toothbrush—thanks for bringing one—but that wouldn't matter; I bet every service station and rest area on the interstate sells them. But the spell, the one that this… this…" It wasn't easy getting the crumpled paper out of his pocket with his seatbelt on, but he worked it free eventually. "This Starla Hogyndraig copied over… I was in such a fluster when you called to say you were coming—and incidentally, you never told me you learned how to teleport—"

"You never asked," Tia shrugged. "It was faster than booking a plane. Cheaper, too."

"I shouldn't have had to ask! Anyway, I just grabbed my coat and ran to meet you—"

"Wait," Tia took her eyes off the road for an instant to throw a horrified look at her brother. "You mean, you forgot your harmonica?"

"No!" Tony said. "I got that. But the spell! I never copied the spell!"

Tia sighed. "Don't worry about that, little brother. The protection spell on the town is basically a magical lock to keep outsiders away. And I've always had a talent for opening locks." She smiled. "Hey. You knew that while you were acting as Uncle Bené's watchman out here, I was taking advanced studies back home. What did you think they were in?"

"I thought you were getting your Ph.D. in history online through Kansas State!"

Tia laughed. "I did that fifteen years ago! Tony, I've been exploring my powers, learning how to use them in ways we never thought about or had to when we were kids. I must have told you."

Tony started to shake his head, but then he paused. Come to think of it, she had mentioned something like that in passing some time back. He'd just blipped past it. His own gift, while powerful, wasn't anywhere near as strong as Tia's. He'd learned enough to keep it under control and stop it from leaking out at inconvenient times—not really so difficult, since he had a lot of trouble with even simple spells if he wasn't using his harmonica to cast them. In fact, the only time his abilities gave him problems these days was if he just wanted to play the instrument without doing anything magical with it. He hadn't touched the thing in ages; residing in the outside world among people who didn't share his talents, it was much easier to live like they did. But Tia had stayed behind in Misty Valley at the foot of Witch Mountain, among their people. He shouldn't be surprised that she'd sought higher instruction. He sank back in his seat and exhaled noisily. "So you…?"

"I know how to neutralize the protection spell. At least temporarily, so we can get inside this Storybrooke place. I'm not sure if I'll be strong enough on my own, but as long as you've got your harmonica and you can follow my lead…"

Tony grinned. His raw power might not match his sister's, but the harmonica was a pretty good equalizer. "I think I can handle that," he said, brightening. "Just like the old days."
"I don't understand," Emma said immediately. "What do you mean, I've drawn her here?"

The Apprentice fixed her with a penetrating stare. "When your parents fed your darkness into Maleficent's daughter, your fate and hers became inexorably tangled. Tell me," he said abruptly, "of all the places you could have run to when you were thirteen, why did you set your sights on Minnesota?"

"How did you know that?" Emma demanded. Then her eyes widened. "Wait. You said her name is 'Lilith'. Lily?"

"You've already met her?" David blurted.

"Yeah," Emma said, still looking stunned. She turned to Regina. "You remember that friend I mentioned to you? The one I pushed away when I found out she'd lied to me?"

Regina nodded. "That was her?" she guessed, her expression mirroring that of the sheriff's.

"Maleficent's kid. Yeah." She turned back to the Apprentice.

"I didn't exactly plan on Minnesota," she told him. "I was just… trying to put as much distance as I could between me and that group home in Boston."

"And yet, you stopped in Hopkins, Minnesota."

Emma shook her head. "I guess there's no point asking how you know that either. I was at the Greyhound terminal, looking for the first bus out of Boston. I didn't have enough money for LA, so I settled for Minneapolis. And once I got there… I don't know. I didn't really care where I was; it was early in the morning and I needed a place to sleep," she admitted with a slight laugh. "I didn't see Red Roof Inn as an option; I wasn't even fifteen then and I sure didn't look old enough to check into a hotel on my own." She shook her head. "A good thing, too. Even back in 1998, they probably would've wanted a credit card for a deposit. Anyway, the Greyhound station in Minneapolis had connections to local buses and I had some money left over. I figured I could get on a bus with a good long route and take a nap; it wasn't like it mattered to me where I was, just so it wasn't Boston." She shrugged. "There was a 612 loading passengers at the stop. I joined them and found a seat. When I opened my eyes again, it was just pulling up to Excelsior Boulevard in Hopkins. I met Lily a few hours later."

"How?" the Apprentice probed, still fixing her with that stare.

Emma found herself unable to break eye contact. Still, her face reddened as she related the circumstances of that meeting. She'd come a long way from the thief and con artist she'd once been, but that didn't mean her past didn't embarrass her.

"…Once I realized she'd been lying to me," she finished, "I just… I couldn't deal. She was pleading with me to forgive her. Part of me wanted to, even then. But I was too angry." She shook her head. "She went back with her dad and I…"

"…Were sent back to Boston?" the Apprentice asked.

Emma blinked. "No. They were going to ship me back, but until the paperwork got sorted, I went into the system in Minnesota. I ended up with a family in Mankato. It was supposed to be temporary, but… well, after Lily showed up again and things went south," she sighed, "we parted ways at the bus stop. She got on and I… hitched my way to Oregon."
"And after that," the Apprentice remarked, "you never really settled down anywhere."

"Not until here," Emma confirmed. "Wait. Are you telling me…?"

"That when you left Phoenix for Los Angeles, she was already there, working at a filling station in West Adams."

Emma's jaw hung open. "But… But I was in Artesia." She turned to her parents. "That's not even thirty miles distance from West Adams!"

"After that, you moved to Henderson, Nevada. Six weeks later, she was in Las Vegas. She stayed less than five months. After that, she ran into some trouble with a local casino owner and made her way to Los Lunas, New Mexico."

Emma frowned. "Just how far is that from Albuquerque?" she demanded.

"Less than twenty-five miles. Shall I continue?"

"Tallahassee?" Emma asked hesitantly.

"You were in Oak Ridge for two years. She moved to Falls Chase three months after your arrival and left two weeks after you did."

"How?" Emma demanded. "How is this possible?"

"As I told you," the Apprentice replied calmly, "your fate and hers are intertwined. You are drawn to one another, even as you are repelled."

"Where is she now?" Snow spoke for the first time.

The Apprentice turned to her. "At the moment, I'm not certain. But she was in New York City less than a week ago. And before that, she was living in Lowell, Massachusetts."

Emma looked like she'd been sucker-punched. "That's only a stone's throw from Boston." She looked around the table sharply. "And not all that far away from here, either."

"So, she's coming here," Regina said. "Assuming that this 'Lilith' you mention is the same person as that other name you mentioned. This… Starla, is it?"

"Starla Hogyndraig," the Apprentice nodded. "Hogyndraig is Welsh for 'Dragon's daughter'."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"Well," Rumple ventured slowly, "I suppose that renders academic the question of raising Maleficent to find her."

"Now, hang on," David said. "We may not need to go searching for her, but once she arrives and finds out that her mother's dead, if her intent isn't hostile already, it will be then."

"And raising Maleficent could well mean that mother and daughter will present a united front against us." Rumple's expression was deadly serious. "Bringing her back from the dead by no means guarantees that she'll be any friendlier now than she was when you," he turned to David, "force-fed her a certain magical potion, or when you," he nodded toward Regina, "fought her for possession of the Dark Curse." He looked at Emma. "Or when you slew her," he added, a bit more softly.
He looked at the Apprentice. "Or are my concerns misplaced?"

The Apprentice shook his head. "They are, I'm afraid, quite valid."

Regina released a small huff of irritation. "Could someone please explain to me why we're all so nervous about one young woman being able to cross the town line? I mean, even if she has magic, it's not as though she'll realize it or know how to use it." She looked at Emma. "From what you told me later, it took my mother's attempt to rip out your heart before you discovered that you had the power to stop her and even then, you couldn't begin to use your magic at will until Neverland."

"Magic comes in many forms," the Apprentice replied. "Spells are but one of them. Other forms are more... innate."

Rumple sucked in his breath and his eyes grew wide. "Maleficent's daughter," he said slowly. "Are you saying that she can also turn into a dragon?"

"She was hatched from an egg," the Apprentice reminded him. "It would be foolish to discount the likelihood."

Regina shook her head, dismay plain on her face. "I think that things just became a great deal more complicated."

Rumple's lips twitched into a mirthless smile. "I think that might just prove to be the understatement of the year."
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

A/N: Some dialogue taken from S1E21: An Apple as Red as Blood. I'm taking the tack that, back in S1, Regina wouldn't have tried to get into Mary Margaret's apartment again after planting the knife, and therefore wouldn't be aware of August's added security. Also, I quoted a few lines from the last chapter of my earlier fic, Heartstrings near the end.

Chapter Fourteen

The zipper sounded impossibly loud in the small apartment at the back of the library. Belle didn't have many possessions; unlike the other residents of Storybrooke, she hadn't spent twenty-eight years in a home of her own, replete with furnishings, clothing, keepsakes, and mementos. She'd obtained more than half of her wardrobe from Rumple that first day, when Jefferson had freed her from her cell in the hospital basement and the curse had broken. She'd lived in his house for nearly a week and then, he'd arranged for her to take possession of this—already furnished—apartment. She'd bought a few minor items: some throw cushions for the sofa, a welcome mat, another bookcase… Rumple had given her a number of knickknacks to decorate her mantle shelf—including the ginger jar she used for petty cash. Father had given her some potted plants and vases for cut flowers. But, once she'd boxed up her books—minus the one she'd loaned to Astrid—apart from the bookcase, all of her worldly possessions fit easily into the lone suitcase.

It wasn't even her suitcase, she reflected with a pang. Well. She supposed it was, since it belonged to Rumple, she was his wife, and he certainly wasn't selfish with his possessions. Not his non-magical possessions, at any rate.

She looked around the small apartment once more. Already, it felt alien to her, a temporary dwelling she didn't expect to return to. The few signs of habitation that remained—a pink hooded sweatshirt on a kitchen chair back, a 'to do list' on the refrigerator door, some cosmetics in neutral tones on the bathroom ledge, were Astrid's.

The fairy was out with Leroy tonight and Belle meant to be gone by the time she returned. She glanced at her wristwatch, just as someone rapped politely on her back door. Or was it the front door? She wasn't entirely sure; it was the door that opened on the lane behind the library, not the one that opened into it. She just thought of it as the back door or, on occasion, the private entrance. And now, she was leaving, so it didn't really matter how she thought of it anymore. She pulled the door open and smiled at the man on the other side. "Good evening, Marco."

Marco took one hand off of the hand-truck he was gripping to doff his cap. "Are you ready, Belle? Or do you still need some time to finish up?"

Belle looked around the apartment once more and smiled. "No," she said softly. "I'm all finished here."

"So, just the boxes and the bookcase, then?" he asked genially. "I'll load them into the truck for you."
Belle moved aside to let him enter. "I can help you," she murmured.

Marco made a scoffing sound. "Please. The day I can't manage these few things will be the day I turn my business over full-time to my son." He bent to lift one of the boxes and grunted in surprise.

"Please," Belle said. "I'm sorry; that must be the one with my dictionaries."

Marco shook his head. "It's not a problem. But," he added, "I suppose if you insist..."

Belle forced herself not to smile as she helped him load up.

Ursula shook her head disapprovingly as she watched Cruella load up a capacious cloth shopping bag. "When I said that the price we got for this room was a steal, I didn't mean we should walk off with the towels," she snapped.

Cruella didn't turn around. "Really, dahling," she drawled. "We're on our way out to who-knows-where and we're not about to be out in public until we know the lie of the land. And if I'm going to be living in hiding," she said decisively, "I'm going to need sheets and towels."

"Wait," Ursula said. "Sheets? Oh, no, no, no, 'darling'. That's going too far. There is no way in the watery abyss that you're going to be able to fit those in that little tote."

"But they will fit in a garment bag," Lily said, startling them as she closed the door behind her.

Ursula turned around to face her. "Do I want to know what you're going to do with the clothes you had inside it?" she asked. She'd wondered why the young woman had trundled the thing along on the train from Manhattan; Lily's clothing so far had seemed to run extremely casual. Nothing that would suffer from being stuffed inside a knapsack, to her mind.

Lily smiled. "Who says I had anything in it?" she asked.

"You planned this?" Ursula demanded.

Lily shrugged. "Not this exactly, but I thought the bag might come in handy if we needed to store something." She cocked her head quizzically. "Cruella's right. We're going to have to hole up somewhere, we may not have all the essentials, and if we take these sheets and towels, we'll be miles away by the time they realize anything's missing. Or would you rather grab everything we're going to need once we get where we're going, when we already have no idea what to expect? I mean, what if, once Emma broke the curse, the place went totally medieval and started putting shoplifters in the stocks? Or hanging them?"

Ursula glared and spun away from both women. "Just remember," she snapped, "if you get caught, I don't know either of you."

"Dahling, until you can dress a little more fashionably," Cruella rejoined, as she squeezed the clock radio into her bag, "I'm not exactly about to broadcast our acquaintanceship either."

Ursula flung up her hands in irritation and went to see if the other women had already cleared the toiletries out of the bathroom.

Emma looked around the table, her eyes stopping finally on her mother. "I know you're trying to make amends for the past," she said. "Don't think it's not appreciated. But I'm not so sure bringing back someone who can roast you alive is a good way to start."
"I defeated her once," David reminded her.

"Yeah, and I killed her once. That doesn't mean things will go as well if we face her again. Seriously? It's great that you want to do this, but… don't."

"Emma's right," Regina said flatly. "You two need to look at the big picture. Maleficent's likely to be fighting mad if she comes back. If we can't calm her down, then after she's done making martyrs out of the pair of you, she just might decide to take a leisurely flight across town." She paused for a beat before adding, "Raining fire down on everything she passes over. If the two of you want to risk your own lives, that's one thing. But you're not about to risk the rest of us. You want to wait for Tiny to raise another crop of beans and find a nice empty realm where you and Mal can have it out? Fine. Otherwise, we leave her where she is and you can try out your apologies on her daughter when she arrives."

"I'll be there, too," Emma said. "We were friends once. Maybe we still are. Or can be."

Rumple nodded. "I think that's a wiser solution than awakening what is nigh-certain to be an angry dragon. Something I'd hesitate to consider, even if I still had my former magic. Without it," he shook his head, even as he turned once more to Snow and David, "what you suggest is tantamount to suicide."

He turned then to the Apprentice with a slight frown. "In fact, from everything I've read on the subject, if Maleficent's daughter does manage the transformation, she will have the strength and powers of a mature dragon, but the knowledge and control of an infant. In other words," his frown deepened, "virtually none to speak of. Subduing her is likely to prove rather difficult."

"Well, we can't just kill her, if that's what you're suggesting," David said.

"We might not have a choice," Regina said quietly.

The Apprentice cleared his throat. "Fortunately," he murmured, "I've summoned reinforcements. They're likely to arrive here at some point tomorrow…"

"Is it just me," Emma remarked, as they were getting their coats on, "or are we getting more traffic across the town line now, when Ingrid's barrier should technically still be keeping the outside world outside? Not that I'm complaining," she added hastily.

"It's an interesting observation," Gold nodded. "And while there's no cause for complaint, one might argue that any change to the status quo might be a reason for concern. This town was never meant to accommodate outsiders."

"I'm not sure Maleficent's daughter qualifies as an outsider," Snow murmured. "I mean, she was born in our land. Or at least, she was in the middle of… hatching."

"Yes, but the Apprentice was not. And these two allies of his… how much has he told them? How far can we trust them, for that matter? It sounded to me as though he's been out of contact with them for a number of years. Perhaps their allegiances are not as he believes."

David sighed. "It wouldn't be the first time we got suckered," he admitted, "but for now, let's prepare a welcoming committee. Hope for the best, but be ready for the worst." He looked at Gold. "If you have any suggestions, we're happy to hear them."

Gold shook his head. "I'll need to give the matter more thought. But speaking from personal experience? If Maleficent's daughter means us harm, we may need to subdue her before any
attempt to dissuade her can be undertaken. But if she herself is uncertain of her motives, greeting her with suspicion and hostility is likely to provoke a reaction in kind."

"And we may not know her intentions until it's too late," Regina said.

"It wouldn't be the first time that sensible caution backfired catastrophically." He glanced at Emma. "Just how much faith do you place in that talent of yours?"

Emma hesitated. "It's let me down before," she admitted, "but if it tells me someone's lying, it's always been right before. It just... won't always tell me." She gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry to bring up a couple of bad memories but," she turned to Regina, "When you gave me that turnover and told me you were okay with the compromise I was suggesting, I didn't sense any lie. I guess, because you assumed I'd eat it and be... sleeping."

Regina shook her head with an arch smile. "Not exactly. If you'll play back the conversation, I think you'll find I never actually said I agreed to it..."

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The turnover was almost finished baking and Regina was thinking about how she was going to get Emma to eat it. The sheriff wasn't stupid; she'd be suspicious of any purported peace offering. Regina debated sneaking into the apartment and leaving it on the table with a forged note:

Emma,

Thought you might like this.

—Mary Margaret

No, too risky. If Mary Margaret came home first, the plan failing would be the least of Regina's problems. Once Emma and Mary Margaret realized that someone else had been in their apartment, they'd start trying to determine who. They'd probably recall that an alleged murder weapon had also been planted in their living space and wonder at a connection. And while Regina had needed to reach into another realm to retrieve the cursed apple, the fact that she possessed an apple tree would certainly arouse Emma's suspicions.

She wished that the sleeping curse would work more than once on the same person. Then she wouldn't need to sign the note, and it wouldn't matter which woman ate the turnover. Either way, a thorn would be out of her side. But no, it had to be Emma.

Leaving the turnover at the sheriff station was out of the question. There were too many cameras and, while Regina knew their blind spots, after Sidney's little stunt with the bugged flowers, she wouldn't put it past the sheriff to have rearranged them or installed new ones.

Using Henry was completely out of the question. Sidney had taken numerous photographs when Emma had first come to town, including one that showed her son tossing away an apple that—going by the expression on Emma's face and the position of her hand—the sheriff had clearly been holding a second earlier.

And then, the doorbell rang, she went to answer it, and found Emma on her doorstep.

"We need to talk."

Regina didn't need to hide her surprise. But she forced herself to smile and invited Emma inside, thinking that maybe this was going to be a lot easier than anticipated. So, she heard the sheriff's hasty speech about ending their vendetta, her (unexpected) promise to leave town, and the terms of
her agreement.

She had to admit that they sounded reasonable. If Regina hadn't retrieved the apple, if the turnover wasn't already in the oven, she might even have accepted them. Or gone to her vault later that day to retrieve the heart of one of her former soldiers and instruct him to tamper with Emma's car. It was an old car. All sorts of things might go wrong with it, with nobody suspecting foul play. But if she miscalculated, if the soldier was sloppy...

She'd narrowly escaped implication in Katherine's disappearance. She didn't want to risk anything tying her to Emma. And so far as she knew, for all this realm's technological advances, there was no piece of scientific equipment capable of detecting a sleeping curse. Yes, when Emma was found comatose with the turnover beside her, there would be an investigation. There would be tests. But the only elements they'd detect in the turnover would be cinnamon... and raisins.

"...Let's be honest," Emma was saying. "We both know the world where I'm not in his life no longer exists, and there's no one who can do anything about that."

The time rang then, finally, and Regina said quickly, "You're right. Would you mind following me for a moment?" And as she led her into the kitchen and took out the turnover, she continued, "So, what are you proposing?"

Emma shrugged. "I don't know. Just figure it out as we go."

"But he's my son," Regina stated, and Emma agreed.

When the sheriff left, the turnover went with her.

"I never actually said I accepted your terms," Regina finished. "I just didn't make a big thing about saying I didn't."

Emma's eyebrows shot up, but she only nodded. "Actually, that proves my point. My talent can always spot a bald-faced lie. And," she tilted her head in Gold's direction, "after dealing with you a few times, I'll admit I've started turning words over in my head before taking them at face value."

Gold nodded back with a slight smile, completely unoffended.

"The thing is," Emma said, "when something is implied instead of said outright, my superpower won't kick in. And," she sighed, "just like with magic, a lot hinges on belief. If you believe that something is true when you say it, then whether it actually is doesn't matter. I'll read that as an honest statement. So," she took another breath, "if Lily lies to me outright, I'm pretty confident I'll catch it. But if she thinks she's telling me the truth or," she nodded toward Regina, "she words things in a way that I can misinterpret what she actually means, I could miss something."

"Does she know about your gift?" Gold asked seriously.

Emma sighed. "Yeah, I told her when we first met. Maybe she's forgotten, but I wouldn't bet on it. And the last time I met her? She was pretty good at keeping things from me."

"A pity," Gold replied. "I was hoping it might prove to be more of an advantage, but if she's aware of it, then she's likely to be on her guard."

"Well," Snow broke in brightly, "at least we know she knows. That's something."

"Moms!" Henry called, approaching at a run. "Is it okay if I go to the arcade with Nicholas and the
Regina considered. "Did you finish your homework?"

"Yes."

"Any tests tomorrow?"

"Nope."

She looked at Emma. "What do you think?"

Emma frowned. "Well, it's a school night, but it's still early. I... guess if he's home by ten?"

Regina's eyebrows shot up. "I would have thought nine-thirty, but since he's sleeping at your place this week..." She smiled at Henry. "All right. Ten it is."

Henry beamed. "Thanks, Moms."

"Ten," Emma repeated, firmly. "And call if you're running late!" she called after him as he jogged back toward his friends.

She shook her head with a smile when he pretended not to hear her, not missing Regina's nod of approval.

Ursula was grateful for her seatbelt. As soon as they'd hit the interstate, Cruella had accelerated to eighty miles per hour, windows open to the winter night air, as the wind whipped her hair back behind her.

"We're gonna get pulled over!" she warned, yelling to be heard over the gusts of icy air.

Cruella laughed. "Don't worry, dahling. The laser jammer is still under warranty!"

Ursula groaned and tried to pull her head down inside the upturned collar of her coat turtle-style. "I feel so relieved," she muttered, wondering when and how she'd become the mature member of their ghastly little trio.

"Hey, kid," she called, trying to turn her head toward the back seat while keeping as much of it inside her collar as possible, "you okay back there?"

There was no response. Ursula glanced into the rearview mirror. "Lily!" she exclaimed, this time loud enough for the young woman to glance up, startled. She laughed incredulously. "How can you read and not be carsick, especially as fast as we're going?"

Lily shrugged. "High speeds never bugged me," she replied. "Give me a break; it's boring back here. I've already done the alphabet backwards and forwards."

"What?" She turned to Cruella. "Roll up the windows, Cruella; I'd like some intelligent conversation."

"I can hear you just fine, dahling," Cruella beamed.

"I said, intelligent, Cruella dear. Come on, it's freezing and we're not all wearing fur, here."

Cruella pouted, but she did roll the windows up. Ursula sighed with relief. "That's better. Okay,
Lily, what were you saying about the alphabet?

"You've never…?" Lily exhaled. "Just a stupid game I sometimes do on the road to pass the time. Looking at the road signs and trying find the alphabet in order. So, first I look for an A, once I find one, I look for a B. J's are pretty scarce. Sometimes, I make it harder; like it only counts if it's on a green highway sign, not one of the blue ones for tourist attractions."

"Scintillating, I'm sure, dahling," Cruella drawled.

"Well, as long as you find it fun," Ursula said dubiously, surprised to find herself siding with Cruella, as Lily went back to her book.

A moment later, the younger woman sat bolt upright with a loud expletive.

"Lily?" Ursula asked.

Lily sucked in another breath. "No way!" she exclaimed then, eyes wide.

"What?" Ursula demanded.

For answer, Lily passed her book—the same book she'd shown Ursula several days earlier—toward the front seat, her fingers, pressed to the inside back cover. "The… the endpaper was peeling away and this was underneath it..."

Ursula accepted the book and flipped to the back. "A map?" she said, looking at it.

"Of Storybrooke," Lily breathed.

"Looks like somebody didn't want you to have all the details until you were ready," Ursula murmured. Her eyebrows shot up.

"Cruella," she said, for once without condescension, "once we cross into Maine, get off the interstate and switch to Route One. It'll get us up the coast. Something tells me that these people might be watching the main road in. But Route One goes up along the shoreline. If there's a place where we can get off the road and onto the beach..."

"They might still be watching," Cruella warned, suddenly serious as well.

"They might. But we're in the northeastern United States in the middle of winter. The tourist season is over. The fishing season is long over. And everything Lily's told us points to their not really expecting visitors to start with. Oh, they'll probably still be keeping an eye on the usual points of entry, though they might not bother with a regular patrol if security cameras will do. But we'll be likelier to avoid notice if we sneak in the back way, wouldn't you say?" She hesitated. "And if, when we get into town, we discover that there's more magic about than just the protection spell around the perimeter, the closer we are to the ocean, the better the chances of my being able to tap into some of it."

Cruella smiled slowly. "At least, with these temperatures, I'll be driving on snow and ice, not sand and mud. Route One it is."

Rumple was pensive on his drive home. As usual, the heroes had asked for his help. They'd been hesitant about it, far more so than they'd been in the past. But, refreshingly, they hadn't asked for more assistance than he'd been willing to give. Nobody had asked the price of his aid, neither seriously nor sarcastically. And when he'd voiced his reservations, they hadn't shrugged them off.
Nobody had called his caution cowardice or expressed sorrow that, without magic—at least, so far as they knew—his ability to be of use to them was far more limited.

The town might be facing a new threat—or an old one—in short order. But for the first time, Rumple felt that, while he was no hero and doubted he ever would be, for once, he and Storybrooke's Heroes weren't merely uniting against a common danger. They were truly on the same side.

Unbidden, a wondering smile spread his lips. It froze slightly as he pulled up to his house and saw the light on in the living room. Belle had arrived. And as much as his heart leaped to know that she was there, he still worried. It might be too soon. It might be for the wrong reasons. It might be his usual fears and disbelief standing in the way of his happiness once more.

And he'd never know for certain if he sat out here in his Cadillac all evening. He drove around the corner to the narrow lane that led to his detached garage. Not entirely detached; an underground passage connected it to his cellar so that he wouldn't need to brave an icy path in the dark with his ankle. Still, it would have been a good deal easier if the curse could have given him a house with the garage attached. Or created a town in a warmer climate, where one could park out on the street in winter without concern for impeding an overnight snow plow. Next time, he thought with no small irony. Meanwhile, if walking some fifty-odd yards from his car to his living room was the greatest hardship he'd need to face in the next week or so, he would count himself fortunate.

Belle had spent the better part of the last few hours settling in. For now, she'd taken back the room that Rumple had given her when she'd first emerged from the hospital when the curse broke. There would be time for greater connection in the future, but as much as she might have wanted to move completely back into his life and pick things up where they'd left off, she knew that Rumple was wise to maintain some distance, yet.

This second chance they were taking had not come about easily. And it had only come about when both of them had acknowledged that their previous relationship, for all the hope and promise that had gone into it, had never been as solid as either might have hoped. That first day in the shop after Rumple had felt recovered enough from his ordeal to reopen for business, they'd finally had their first real conversation since New York. And they'd finally admitted that things couldn't go back to the way they had been.

"But, Belle," Rumple had added, just when she'd finally been ready to accept that she'd truly lost him, "would you truly want to? To a marriage built on a foundation of deception and distrust? One where we each hid the parts of us we didn't want the other to see, stifling them until—as you've just noted—they finally broke free from our control and lashed out in the most painful way possible? One where neither of us probed or questioned too deeply out of fear of what we might uncover? Because, that was what we had, wasn't it?"

His words had struck a chord deep within her and she'd come face to face with a truth she'd been shying away from, nearly from the start. They loved each other, truly and deeply, but love alone wasn't enough to build a marriage on. Not when she was so certain of his feelings for her that she thought she could take them for granted, threaten to leave him if he didn't do as she wished, compel him to do her will when he would have refused, and then think that a tearful apology would wipe the slate clean. And not when he was so terrified of losing her love, so certain that—given his previous experience—she would eventually tire of him and walk away, no matter what he did, that he lied to her, tricked her, and eventually created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But even as she'd admitted how right he was, she'd also caught the slightest note of hope in his words. Because love, however true, might not have been enough of a foundation to support a
marriage all by itself, but it was a start. It was hope. And then, she'd heard her own voice saying, "What if we were to start fresh? If we built a new foundation, one created from mutual trust and honesty? On talking things out instead of assuming we each know what the other would say. On…"

And for the first time in weeks, she'd seen it. That plain, open, sincere smile that was reserved for her and her alone. And she'd known then that however long and hard the road ahead might be, the destination would be worth it.

She was reminding herself of that, now. Because Rumple keeping her at arm's length, only letting her in a bit at a time, and only so far and no farther… hurt. And as much as she told herself that after everything she'd put him through, it was understandable, even deserved, it still hurt. Just like it hurt that he was turning more to others for support, when once he would have confided in her alone.

Belle's hand flew to her mouth. *I wanted to be everything to him. I wanted him on my terms and never once considered whether he had any of his own. Am I hurt now that he's shutting me out more? Or am I resentful that, with more support, he's less dependent on me?* Her gaze fell on the mantle shelf, where Rumple had set the puppets she'd so recently made to try to convince him to give them another chance and she picked up the last one she'd crafted. 'The monster,' she'd called it. "I guess it takes one to love one," she murmured. "Because if I could take his love and use it against him so cruelly, then I deserve the title as much as he ever did." Her eyes grew wide. "But if he's no longer the Dark One… if he's not a monster anymore… then where does that leave me?"

Behind her, she heard the cellar door open and she whirled, startled, to see Rumple standing there, his lips parted in a welcoming smile and nervous hope in his eyes. "Belle," he greeted her warmly, slowly spreading his arms as though he couldn't quite be certain that such a display of affection would be welcomed.

She crossed the distance between them with alacrity and practically fell into his embrace. "Rumple!" she whispered, closing her eyes and tilting her face toward his for a kiss.

For a moment, all was right with them and the world. A moment she wished would never end.
Chapter Fifteen

Tony unlocked the motel room door with a pained smile. "You just had to stop in Salem, didn't you?" he demanded. "I mean, living at the foot of Witch Mountain isn't enough? You have to make it a theme?"

Tia laughed. "We had to stop somewhere. I teleported a couple of thousand miles today; caffeine only holds off the effects for so long. Or did you want me to risk falling asleep at the wheel?"

"I could have taken over," Tony pointed out.

"I know," Tia admitted. "Do you want to just keep going? I mean, we don't have to stay; it's not like we're paying a fortune for the room."

Tony considered for a moment before he shook his head reluctantly. "I better not," he admitted. "I haven't been behind a wheel in a couple of years and I get nervous at night on the highway," he admitted. "Plus it's harder for me to sense ice ahead when I also have to focus on my driving."

"Same here," Tia replied with a smile. "Besides, I spoke to Uncle Bené when we stopped for gas in Hartford. He said it was better for us both if we hit Storybrooke after a good night's sleep. And I'd rather not deal with a dragon and a migraine if I can avoid one by showing up eight or ten hours later."

"You never used to get migraines from using your powers," Tony said with a worried frown.

"I never used them to do so much in so short a time," Tia countered. "You remember Uncle Bené's first lesson, just after we got settled in Misty Valley, don't you?"

"How could I forget?" Tony nodded.

Tia chimed in with him as he chanted, "All magic comes with a price!"

"You've been awfully quiet tonight, sister," Leroy remarked. Then, frowning, "I guess I should have asked you before I brought you here. Probably wouldn't have been your first choice."

"Oh, no!" Astrid exclaimed, leaning toward him across the wooden table. "It's fine. I mean, I've never really been anywhere except Granny's and... and... there's this all-night diner—I don't even know what it's called, but it's near that kickboxing gym, so, well..." she smiled a bit self-consciously, "I guess, as small as this town is, there are still many places I haven't been and... and it's all so new to me." She hesitated. "Do... do you come here often?"
Leroy hesitated. "I guess I used to," he said huskily. "During the curse, I… liked my beer—and my whiskey—a little more than I probably should have. And after it, I guess old habits die hard." A slow flush came to his cheeks. "I guess if we're being honest, I started liking them before the curse, too."

Astrid's eyes widened. "Oh," she said. "Is that still… something you… do?"

Leroy didn't answer for a long moment. Then, finally, with a nervous frown, he said, "I don't really know, sister. Before I met you, I'd have a mug or two to relax after a hard day's work. But after I... thought that I was standing between you and your dreams and I stepped aside, it became less about relaxing and more about," his frown deepened, "trying to numb the pain in my heart that stabbed me every time I remembered the pain in your eyes the last time I saw you."

"But we're together now," Astrid said. "Aren't we?"

"I want us to be," Leroy said fervently. "But this," he gestured to the beer mug before him, "has become a habit. It's one I want to break. Trying to, actually. At least, I haven't gotten drunk or anything since time started moving again, but I don't know if my having a pint or two most nights is just... something I want to do, or something I have to."

"Have you tried stopping?" Astrid asked. "I mean, just out of curiosity?"

"Yeah," Leroy replied. "Sure. I've gone a couple of weeks without it, no problem. But then I get back into the habit."

"Oh," Astrid said again. Then, hesitantly, "Is... Do you mean, you think it could be alcoholism?"

"I don't know," Leroy admitted, with a relieved look in his eyes. "It's something I've been doing for a long time to help me... deal, I guess. Under the curse, every morning, I woke up in a cell with Sheriff Graham telling me to behave myself and smile if I wanted him to let me out, and every night I came here and drank until I passed out." A faint smile came to his face. "I guess I might've gotten a little rowdy before the passing out happened. After the time started moving again?" he shrugged, "I guess I drank less than I had since we got to this realm, but more than I did back home. I don't think it's alcoholism. I mean, it's not that I can't stop. I think that until now, I just haven't wanted to." He sighed. "But I remember watching some late-night movie about it," he added. "And I remember one thing some character explained," he continued carefully, "is that sometimes, people who have a problem with the drink will try to give it up for a time to prove that they don't. But they almost always go back to it. For me? So far, everything seems under control. But I don't know if it's because I haven't got a problem, or because I'm just... in denial about it. Not something we looked at the same way back home," he added with a mirthless laugh. He looked up a bit nervously then to meet her eyes. "I guess that's probably giving you some second thoughts about us."

"Not really," Astrid replied, and though she was smiling, her eyes were deadly serious. "I don't mind if you like a drink or two to relax. And under the curse... honestly, I shouldn't think that doing the same thing over and over again really counts as a problem, considering that every day was mostly the same. And the curse made us all, well, different. But if you do think that it's more serious than that," she wasn't smiling now, but she reached across the table and covered his hand with her own, "then please, tell me. Or tell Dr. Hopper. Having a problem doesn't give me second thoughts. Not doing something to try to fix the problem though... that's something else."

Leroy tore his gaze away from her for a moment and turned it to his half-finished beer mug. Then he pushed the mug away and smiled. "I guess I'm relaxed enough for tonight. Uh... you want to try some?"
Astrid's eyebrows shot up, but she gave him a smile that was equal parts joyous and nervous and she pulled the mug toward her. "I've never had any before," she murmured, raising it to her lips. She took a hesitant sniff and paused.

"You don't have to," Leroy started to say.

"I know," she smiled, and took a gulp. Her eyes widened and seemed to bulge slightly. For a moment, Leroy thought that she was about to spit it out, but she managed to swallow. Then she made a face, grabbed her nearly-finished milkshake, clamped her lips around the straw and noisily sucked up the dregs.

"I should've warned you," Leroy said, fighting a smile.

"No, no," Astrid said. "I love surprises. Well," she grinned impishly, "most of the time."

Leroy grinned back. She giggled. He guffawed. And then, still laughing, he said, "How about I go back to the bar and get us a couple of ginger ales? Uh, don't worry, sister. Those are just sodas. There's no real ale in them."

Astrid nodded. "I know," she said with a wide grin. "Just plenty of bubbles."

Belle went up to her room shortly afterwards. Rumple looked in on her a half-hour later and found her already asleep. He couldn't say as he was surprised. To hear her tell it, she'd been up early for that kickboxing class she was taking. And moving, in Rumple's experience, was always stressful and usually exhausting, even if one didn't have many possessions to pack up. Small wonder she was tired.

He was pensive as he walked the short distance from her bedroom to his. Coming home tonight, seeing her again, had been a moment of almost unfathomable joy. It was almost as though they'd never been apart, as though the lies and deceptions had never happened… as though he'd allowed True Love's Kiss its magic back in his castle in the Enchanted Forest.

And he wanted that moment, that feeling, to go on forever.

Maybe Regina had been wrong. Perhaps his usual fears were letting him see danger where none existed. Possibly.

But he'd watched Henry's video, heard Belle's speech at the town line, and, although it had warmed his heart to know her true thoughts, he wasn't blind to the danger.

Belle had never truly learned to deal with the darker side of her makeup. She'd suppressed it. She'd ignored it. She'd denied it. She'd fought it. And, occasionally, painfully, she'd given in to it. But now, she was trying to accept it, as she was finally accepting him. And while he recognized and applauded the sentiment, he knew better than anyone that Darkness unleashed could easily overwhelm its host—whether it was a separate entity taking up residence in one's skull, or an innate part of one's heart and soul.

He recalled a conversation he'd had with Emma recently with regard to a person's potential for Light being equally matched by their potential for Darkness. And Belle's potential for Light had been—was—so great that she'd even been able to break through his walls to find the small scrap of him that the Dark One hadn't quite managed to overwhelm.

So. If she had that much Light in her…
Regina could still be wrong. He could yet be imagining problems where none existed.

But he'd have to be a fool to dismiss such suspicions out of hand. Especially given Belle's recent behavior. To say nothing of Fate's penchant for irony. He'd so recently attempted to Darken Emma's heart; even though he'd ultimately thought better of that goal, he'd be a fool to think that Fate wouldn't exact retribution for that scheme by having the condition rebound upon one of the people he loved most.

Rumple shook his head slowly. It was only natural, when one was used to suppressing one's anger and resentment, for those emotions to erupt far more vehemently and violently than they might have, were they to be allowed expression at the proper time. It might be that Belle's ire—currently directed against Regina, the Blue Fairy, and her own father—was emerging now, precisely because she'd stifled it on so many other occasions. Perhaps, her outbursts, while uncharacteristic, were understandable—even normal.

Perhaps.

But his doubts kept him awake for some time, and the skin around several of his fingernails was red and raw before sleep finally claimed him.

The arcade was dimly-lit and noisy. Although no food or drink was permitted in the gaming area, the mingled aromas of freshly-popped popcorn, stale beer, and fish 'n' chips wafted over from the concession area. As Henry stood behind Nicholas and Perry, waiting for his turn at the Dragon's Lair game, he couldn't help but notice Cecily hanging back. "Uh… Amy," he nudged the mousy-haired girl with the upturned nose and friendly smile who stood next to him, "could you save my spot, please?"

Amy considered his request with mock-seriousness. "I suppose I could," she returned. "If you hurry back when I call you for your turn." She smiled knowingly. "And if it helps, Henry," she added, jerking her head in Cicely's direction, "she likes you. Good luck."

Henry's eyes grew wide. He hadn't realized he'd been that obvious. But he grinned back and hoped that the low lighting was hiding the blush he could feel spreading across his cheeks. "Thanks, Amy," he mumbled, heading off in Cicely's direction.

"Cicely!" He hoped he wasn't being too loud, but between the music coming in over the speakers, the beeps, bleeps, and explosions from the games, and the hum of conversation—to say nothing of the cheers and yells that punctuated each hurdle surmounted or high score achieved, he wanted to make sure she could hear him.

She did. "Henry," she said, stopping her slow creep toward the door.

"You okay?"

She sighed. "Yes. I just had a text from my mother, is all. She wants me to come home early. I've got to go."

"Cicely? Is… is anything wrong?"

The girl sighed. "I just… I love my brothers and sisters, but sometimes I wish I were an only child!" she blurted. "Or at least, not the oldest," she added. "There are eight of us all together and Mama needs me to pitch in. And usually, I don't mind, but…" She shook her head. "Not your problem. Sorry. I just thought I could have one night out with friends my own age and not have it cut short, but I guess that's not happening." She shook her head once more, this time a trifle
"I really wanted to try one of those," she said wistfully. "You've never played?" Henry asked.

"We didn't have arcades in Sherwood Forest," Cicely said with a wry smile. "But Mama's putting the babies to bed soon, and Tagalong—uh, sorry—Aggie wants a story, and I've got to help Skippy with his spelling and…" She shook her head again. "I just really hope I don't have to quit the play. But Mama's already saying that the rehearsals are taking up too much time and they're only twice a week, now! When we get closer to the end of the year…"

Henry nodded.

"Anyway, I'd better go."

Henry looked at his watch. It was a quarter past nine. He glanced at the Dragon's Lair game, just as a loud whoop punctuated by a raised fist emanated from the Donkey Kong game beside it.

"Cecily? Are… are you living in the forest? With Robin Hood's men?"

"Close enough," Cicely muttered. "I mean, we've got a house—it's just up the road from that empty farmhouse I heard a witch was living in a few months back. But it's going to take me more than half an hour to get there and Mama will scold if I'm late."

Henry hesitated for a moment. Then he cast one more look at the Dragon's Lair game, before smiling at Cicely. "Come on," he said, motioning toward the coat racks. "I'll walk you."

Cicely blinked. "Oh, no," she protested. "Henry, you shouldn't have to cut your night short, too. And it'll probably be colder on your walk back."

"Don't worry about it," Henry said. "My mom said to call if I was going to be late. I'll ask her if she can pick me up at your place in about forty-five minutes." He paused. "Or do you want to walk alone? I'm sorry; I'm not trying to be pushy. I just thought you might want company, but I guess you don't get much time to yourself, so if you'd rather—"

Cecily shook her head. "No, I don't want to walk alone," she said. A dimple appeared in her cheek when she smiled. "You're not being pushy. And, actually, it might be kind of… nice… to talk to someone my own age for a change." And then she ducked her head shyly. "Unless you were just offering to be nice, but you don't really want to—"

"I…" Henry sucked in his breath. "Well, I guess I was trying to be nice, but I do really want to. If you're okay with that," he added.

"I'm okay with it," Cecily nearly whispered. When she smiled again, the dimple was even more in evidence.

"I didn't realize some of this was private property," Ursula muttered, seeing the barbed wire fence in the headlight beams.

Lily made a scoffing sound. "Like anyone's going to be around at this time of year. These are mostly vacation homes. We've got them in Hopkins, Minnesota, too."

"Well, I'm not about to ruin the paint job on this beauty, dahling," Cruella said, stopping in front of the fence. "So, unless you've got a pair of wire cutters, I'm heading back to the road."
"Yeah, hang on," Lily muttered, unfastening her seatbelt and opening her door. "They should be in the makeup case in the trunk. You wanna pop it for me?"

Cruella's eyebrows shot up. "I thought I was being rhetorical," she remarked as she pulled her key out of the ignition and opened her own door.

Ursula sighed. "Just hope it's not electrified, or she won't be good for anything but eel chow," she said.

It only took a minute for the younger woman to snip the wire. "Don't go too fast," she cautioned Cruella as they got back into the car. "Betcha there's another fence at the other end of the property."

There was.

But it proved to be the last domicile they passed for several miles. The ground they were driving over turned rocky and Cruella muttered darkly with each jar and jolt. Until this point, there had been some sort of illumination, whether from bollards or the occasional lighthouse. Now those disappeared. They had the ocean on their right and rocky bluffs on their left. Rising up from the bluffs were coniferous trees, tall and densely packed.

After half an hour, Cruella stopped. "I'm turning us around," she said flatly.

"What?" Lily exclaimed. "You can't. We're almost there."

"Almost where, dahling?" Cruella demanded. "We're in the middle of nowhere following a map you found in a book of fairytales! We're chasing a dream and it's time to wake up!"

"Every story in this book is real!" Lily snapped. "I mean, you're in it, for crying out loud!"

"Lily," Ursula sighed, "Richard the Lionhearted is in Ivanhoe. On Bewitched, Samantha Stevens once met Henry the Eighth. That doesn't make either of them historically accurate. I'm sorry, but… Cruella's right. This… Storybrooke isn't real. Or, if it is, we took a wrong turn somewhere."

"Where?" Lily shot back. "Because I don't see how we could have missed it; it's right on the coastline!"

"And it's a big coastline!" Cruella snapped. "Look, dahling, we're not in an all-terrain vehicle and I think we've done it enough damage for one night! We must be practically in Canada by now!"

"But…” Lily caught her breath. Her eyes widened. "Let me take the wheel," she said decisively.

"You are living in a fantasy if you think I'm about to do that!" Cruella laughed.

"No, I'm serious. We're close."

"Lily—" Ursula said gently. "It's not real."

"The fact that you're both telling me that at the same time tells me it is," Lily countered. "Remember yesterday when you were explaining about protection spells? Going by the way you're talking now, I think we've just hit one."

Ursula's eyes widened.

"Of all the—" Cruella scoffed.
"No," Ursula said, cutting her off with a frown and gesture. "I-I think she could be right. There is something about this place."

"It's deserted, desolated…"

"Lily," Ursula said, "that spell you copied. Pass it over."

Lily hesitated for a moment. Then she reached into her pocket and, somewhat nervously, handed her a small rolled scroll. Ursula unrolled it. "Here," she said, holding it out to Cruella, writing plainly visible. "Read."

"I told you," Cruella snarled, "Middle Elvish gives me a…" Her voice trailed off. She blinked once, and then rubbed her eyes, as though she was just waking up. A near-predatory smile appeared on her face. "Well, well," she purred. "Perhaps this isn't the wild goose chase I thought it was. Fasten your seatbelts, children." She laughed. "I mean, if you prefer that sort of thing."

She turned the key in the ignition before Ursula could comply, and the car sped away, leaving behind a trail of heavy exhaust.

"You're not upset about having to drive all the way out here, right?" Henry asked, as he got into his mother's yellow bug.

"Nope," Emma said easily. "I'd be a lot more upset if you hadn't called. Or if you'd tried walking back. Storybrooke isn't really a big place, but it's big enough for me to not want you coming home from its outskirts in the dark at this hour."

"I'm sorry you had to wait," he apologized. "But—"

Emma shook her head smiling. "I saw. Actually, I think it's great that you were helping her little brother with his homework."

"It was just spelling," Henry said. "He needed someone to quiz him and Cecily had to give the twins their bath."

Well, that explained why the girl had been dripping when she'd come out to say goodbye. "You like her?" she asked her son with a faint smirk.

"Cecily? Yeah, she's okay."

"Just okay?"

Henry groaned. "Mom! I'm thirteen. I'm not ready to start dating or anything! Sheesh!"

"Okay, okay," Emma said, starting the car and trying to remember that line from Shakespeare about protesting too much. "She seems like a nice kid, though," she added.

"She is," Henry said emphatically. "And she's smart and funny and…"

And you may be closer to dating than you think you are. But I think I'll let you find that out for yourself, Emma thought.

"Mom!" Henry groaned. "We're just friends, okay?"

"Huh?" Emma blinked. "I didn't say anything."
"You smiled!"

"Seriously? I'm your mother. I'm happy to see you."

"I'm happy to see you too, but that's not the way you usually smile."

Emma fought not to laugh. "I guess I'm just… realizing you're growing up is all. And I'm kind of looking forward to it." She watched her son's expression out the corner of her eye, as he turned her words over, looking for some hidden meaning. Finally he shook his head and leaned back in his seat with an annoyed expression.

**Yep**, she thought to herself. **I've definitely got a teenager.** Her smile grew broader. Her son pointedly turned to the window.

"Stop the car," Ursula urged. "Now."

Cruella tilted her head in her seatmate's direction. "Should I slide the scroll over to you?" she asked.

"No," Ursula said impatiently. "It's not that. I just… need to get out and stretch my legs."

"Dahling, we're still in the middle of nowhere," Cruella said. "Can't this wait?"

"I don't think so."

Cruella sighed. "You shouldn't have had that large drink at the Mr. Cluck's two hours back, then," she retorted, but she did stop the car. "Make it fast."

Ursula nodded. "This won't take long." She got out and started walking toward the ocean.

"Dahling?" Cruella called. "Wouldn't the trees give you some privacy? Or spare us from certain ghastly si…" Her voice trailed off and her eyes grew wide. Ursula had shed her winter coat, discarding it on the snow-covered beach without a backward glance. From beneath her long wrap cardigan, something appeared to be bulging. The bulges began to move, working their way to the sweater's hemline and then, something emerged below it.

"Whoa," Lily breathed. "Are those…?"

"Tentacles," Cruella said, with an unaccustomed note of wonder in her voice. "Those, Lilith dear, are tentacles." She hesitated only a moment before getting out of the car herself. Lily trailed behind.

As Cruella approached Ursula, she broke into broad smile. "Some looks never go out of fashion, dahling," she said, in the friendliest tone that Lily had heard from her yet. Ursula said nothing, but in the moonlight, something that might have been a tear was glistening in her eye. "I wonder…" Cruella said hesitantly. She took a deep breath. Then she lifted one hand and thrust it toward the icy Atlantic, beckoning.

A row of medium-sized flat fish surfaced between the ice caps. They bowed once toward the three women, then submerged once more.

Cruella laughed in sheer delight. "It's back!" she exclaimed. "My control over animals!"

"Including winter flounder, apparently," Ursula said, but with far less sarcasm than usual. She turned to Lily with a grin.
"I'd say we've just arrived in Storybrooke. And it looks as though they've got magic."

Lily nodded, as Cruella added, "And now, dahlings, so do we!"
"Well," Ursula said, sobering quickly, "now what? We don't really want to announce ourselves until we know what kind of reception to expect."

"If Regina's still running things," Cruella said, "we might do rather well for ourselves. But if it's the Charmings or some of the other," her lip curled in a sneer, "heroes, we may not be so lucky. They came a tad too close to executing Regina when they captured her. Twenty-eight years under her curse might have taught them not to be quite so merciful. And once one begins dealing with one's enemies permanently… it can become something of a habit." She shook her head. "They know who we are, dahling. They know what we can do. And even though they may still believe in second chances and rehabilitation, and other pipe dreams, I'm not betting my life on it."

Lily nodded her understanding. "Heroes or not," she said tersely, "they kidnapped me, and it's because of them I grew up in a different world without my parents. If that was what they could do when they were merciful…" Her voice trailed off, but there was no mistaking her intent.

The other two women nodded back, their expressions grim. "We need to find someplace to stay," Ursula said. "It's too cold to camp out on the beach."

"Your magic can't…?" Lily started to ask.

"All magic comes with a price. Even if I could create heat, I'd be doing it with the winter temperatures fighting me. It wouldn't last long."

Cruella sighed. "It may be too cold to camp on the beach, but that also means nobody's likely to come by. I have a few furs in the trunk. I suppose we might as well wrap ourselves in them and sleep as best we can in the car. Meanwhile," she smiled, "I'll see if there are any non-hibernating nocturnal creatures in those woods and have them scout the area for a better place to hole up."

"Make sure they don't take that phrase literally," Ursula cautioned. "Moles and squirrels are likely to have plenty of options that are suitable for them, but not for us. And I am not going to hide away in some hollow tree or burrow."

Cruella laughed. "Do you imagine for one moment that I'd even consider such an arrangement, dahling? No, forest creatures know where humans reside, if only to steer clear of such places. And they also have a very good sense of when a place has been abandoned. Some isolated house or cabin away from prying eyes would be just the thing."

"If there is such a place here," Lily said.

"Well, let's be optimistic for the time being," Cruella said. "Unless you have a better suggestion."

Lily thought about that for a moment. "So, about those furs in the trunk… Got any wolverine? I heard it keeps your breath from frosting up," she said, as she turned on her heel and started walking back to the car.

Cruella laughed and, for once, it wasn't a malicious laugh. "That's very true, dahling. Unfortunately, the ones I had were seized before I could abscond with them. I do have silver fox, and I'll rent it to you for a paltry five dollars an hour or thirty till sunrise."
"Cruella!" Ursula snapped a warning.

"We're all down on our luck now," Cruella retorted. "A girl's got to earn her gin money somehow."

"Forget it," Lily sighed. "My winter coat'll be warm enough."

"Suit yourself," Cruella shrugged. "Ursula?"

Ursula laughed. "No need. I was born under the sea, and we have winters there, too." With an almost childish excitement, she pulled off her boots and unrolled her socks. Then, gleefully, she ran toward the ocean, seemingly oblivious to the snow on her bare feet. With an exclamation of pure joy, she dove into the water, which closed welcomingly over her. She didn't surface.

"Is she going to be okay?" Lily asked.

"She always has been before," Cruella replied, unconcerned. "But unless freezing is something you enjoy, I'd suggest getting back to the car, now." She started walking in that direction without a backwards glance, but her gaze was focused on the woods beyond the beach, and her face was locked in deep concentration as her lips moved silently.

Lily observed her curiously for a moment, straining her eyes to see if she could discern any animal movements in the trees. When she couldn't, she gave a mental shrug and hurried to catch up.

"So," Regina said with a slight eye-roll, "you've decided to ignore all sensible advice and continue with this idea. I wish I could say I was surprised, but I'm not. I was trying to borrow some of your optimism, though."

Snow and David winced, but there was no hint of doubt in either pair of eyes. "We made a mistake thirty years ago," Snow said resolutely. "We've tried ignoring it. We've tried hiding it. But enough is enough. Maleficent's daughter is coming and, to hear the Apprentice tell it, she's known about her history and this town for over fifteen years. It may be dangerous to bring Maleficent back, but Regina, it may be more dangerous to leave her dead. You heard what Rumpelstiltskin said about out-of-control dragons."

"We don't know that she's a dragon," Regina pointed out.

"No," David said, "but we do know that magic can be unlocked by intense emotion. When I think about how it's going to feel for that young woman, when she arrives here, hoping to be reunited with her mother, only to find out the truth about what happened to her... If that won't unlock her power, nothing will. And I don't think I'm ready to gamble on 'nothing'."

"Of course, once we resurrect Maleficent, the first thing she'll want from us is vengeance," Snow said. "But if there's some way to restrain her temporarily, just long enough to listen to us when we tell her that her daughter's on her way and that we didn't realize what we were doing and..."

Her voice trailed off and she looked away for a moment. Then she squared her shoulders and met Regina's eyes once more. "I know it's still dangerous. But this whole business is our fault to begin with and we have to, at least, try to make things right."

Regina shook her head, but her expression was pensive. "There must be something in the water," she said at last. "Or the air. It's the only way I can explain this spirit of atonement that seems to be sweeping the town. Keep in mind that not everyone is as forgiving as you might hope." In an undertone, she added, "Rumple and I have already discovered that, at least to a lesser degree." She sighed. "The spell to resurrect her is simple enough. Give me a little time, though, and I'll see whether I can't complicate it a bit. If we wake her slowly, we might be able to arrange matters so
that her mind will regain its alertness before her body does. So if, while she's still half-asleep, you start explaining yourselves, you might get the chance to finish. That still doesn't mean her first act upon coming fully awake won't be to roast the pair of you."

"I'll see if I can find my shield," David said seriously.

"Oh, don't bother," Regina said. "A magical force field will work better and I can craft one that will stand up to her, at least, short term. But the only reason I'm going along with this is that not waking her might be just as dangerous as what you're suggesting and I honestly don't know which way is better." Her eyebrows shot up at the twin sighs of relief that greeted her statement. "I suppose there's nothing I can say to talk you out of this."

"We've been up half the night debating," Snow admitted. "But this is still the right thing to do."

"Even if she kills you and destroys the town."

"You defeated her once to get the Dark Curse away from her," David said. "And you care about this town as much as we do, if not more. You won't let Storybrooke be destroyed."

Regina pressed her lips together and nodded once. "No," she agreed with a catch in her voice. "I won't." She took another breath. "Nor either of you, if I can help it."

Snow smiled gratefully. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet." She gave them a tight smile. "Well. It looks as though, once we've had time to meet our new arrivals, I'll be spending the next little while in my vault with my spell books. I'll contact you when I have something."

"We'll be waiting," David replied.

"So," Emma concluded, finishing up her grilled cheese, "any advice?"

Rumple shook his head with a self-deprecating smile. "I'm afraid I've nothing to add beyond a vote of confidence, dearie," he murmured. "Young love wasn't a topic I had much opportunity to discuss with Bae." He shook his head once more. "Though thinking back now, I suspect that there was a girl. And that he made several attempts to broach the subject. I fear I…" he sighed. "Well. There was a war going on. I suppose I must have been attempting to bury my head in the sand in the foolish belief that if I failed to note how my son was growing up, perhaps the duke's henchmen would as well." He closed his eyes. "It didn't work, of course. And, three days before Bae's fourteenth birthday, the girl was drafted to the front, and I knew they'd soon come back for my son, too."

"I'm sorry," Emma said. "I didn't mean to open up old wounds."

Rumple's lips twitched in the faintest of smiles. "Of course you didn't," he reassured her. A pause. Then he added, "Young Henry's much like his father was at that age, you know."

"I'm going to go out on a limb and assume that's a good thing."

His smile widened. "Oh, it is. So. You've met the object of his affections? And you've formed an impression?"

Emma laughed. "I guess you could say that. If they are affections. I mean, I could be reading too much into it. And even if I'm not, they're a couple of teenagers. Barely. I mean, it's not like we
need to book the church and start measuring him for a tux, or… or… making over one of yours."

Rumple chuckled at that. "True enough. I'll rephrase. You've met his classmate? And seen enough
of her to form an opinion?"

"I met her," Emma smiled. "As far as impressions go, she seems like a nice kid. Polite, a little on
the shy side... Her mother's lovely, just busy looking after eight kids. I get the impression Cicely
gets pushed into helping a lot. Which makes sense, but it can't be easy for her at thirteen."

Rumple shook his head. "No. I don't imagine it can be. Well. I think you're wise to step back and
wait to see how matters unfold. And Emma? While Henry is still quite young, there's no denying
he's growing up. I believe it wasn't that long ago when you expressed relief that he was still
comfortable confiding in you as he entered adolescence. Be prepared for him to become a bit more
secretive. Particularly when it comes to matters of the heart. And try not to take it too personally."

Emma shook her head, but she was still smiling, albeit more ruefully. "I know. You're right. I
guess I was just sort of hoping to skip that stage, even if I knew it was going to happen."

"It's part of growing up. It will pass." He paused for a beat. "After all, he isn't much like me."

Emma laughed. "Help yourself to some coffee, while I finish this," she said, holding up the last of
her grilled cheese. "And then," she sighed, "I guess we'd better head for the town line to wait for
those visitors to arrive."

When Emma pulled up to the town line, she found her parents and Regina already there, together
with the Apprentice.

"I see that the welcoming committee has assembled," Rumple said dryly from her passenger seat.

Emma grinned. "I've got a feeling that so long as visitors to Storybrooke are such an irregular thing,
this kind of reception is going to be... well, sort of... regular." She got out of the car and went
around to the other side to help Rumple out.

As they watched, a blue Honda Civic turned onto the main road and drove slowly toward the line.

"Is that them?" she heard her father ask, as Rumple grasped hold of her elbow and emerged from
the car, planting his cane on the ground as he did.

The Apprentice nodded silently, a small smile of anticipation gracing his features.

"I have the scroll," Regina murmured, reaching into her purse.


As the car drew nearer, Snow frowned at the haunting sound that emerged from a rolled-down
window. "Is that... a harmonica playing?"

Rumple's eyebrows shot upwards as the air about the town line seemed to shimmer and shift. For a
moment, the protection spell became a visible curtain of light. Pinprick holes appeared, giving the
spell the seeming of a mesh net. Then the holes grew wider, the strands of light thinner, until it
looked less like mesh than a wide-open gate.

"No way," Emma breathed, as the car rolled over the town line and halted. The music stopped. At
once, the gate thickened and broadened. The spaces shrunk. For the barest moment, they saw, once
again, the solid-seeming curtain. Then the air shimmered once more, and the curtain vanished.

"Is it…" Regina ventured, "still there? Or did they just dissipate it entirely?"

"Still there," the Apprentice remarked. "And functioning as it was originally intended to. Less the dire consequences to those intending to leave, of course."

"You mean, we can come and go freely, but outsiders won't stumble upon us?" David asked.

"Essentially correct. Outsiders who believe in this town's existence will be able to reach it. But those who trust in official road maps will see what they expect to see in this part of the world. And as for those who have no expectations, who merely follow a trail out of curiosity, with no idea where it might lead them, most will find themselves rapidly losing interest in continuing onward the closer they come to the spell's borders. There will always be the odd stubborn soul who will press onward, the disoriented driver in search of shelter from a storm who registers only that the road on which they travel must lead someplace and pray that such place includes food and lodging for the night… but then, no spell is completely infallible."

The car doors opened and a man and woman who appeared to be in their late thirties emerged. The man was clean-shaven, apart from a pencil-thin mustache that might almost have been stubble. His brown hair was beginning to gray a bit about the temples, but his eyes were youthful and betrayed a certain excitement as he looked about. The woman wore her dark blonde waves in a long bob, and while her expression was a bit more guarded, there was no mistaking the obvious joy in her smile when she hurried toward the Apprentice.

"Uncle Bené!" she exclaimed, happily throwing her arms about the older man.

"Tia," the Apprentice greeted her warmly. He returned the embrace, then lifted one arm and held it out to the man who hung back a trifle self-consciously, before joining in the hug. "And Tony." He frowned. "Which surname do the two of you use these days?"

"Castaway," Tony smiled.

"Malone," Tia said at the same time. Then she laughed. "It's just that with so many of us having found our way back over the years, it seems like everyone in Misty Valley is a Castaway is all. Besides, any time I introduce myself as 'Professor Castaway'," she smiled wryly, "someone makes a Gilligan's Island joke and I've heard them all already…"

"Ah," the Apprentice said delicately. "I believe you'll discover that in this place, having more than one name is scarcely unique. So," he turned to the others, "you'll pardon me for making the introduction one-sided and letting you all decide for yourselves how you'd prefer to be addressed. Allow me to present to you," he nodded to each in turn, "Tia Malone and her brother Tony Castaway. And now," he added, "I think it best we repair back to my master's house to discuss matters."

As the newcomers got back into the Honda and the Apprentice joined them, the others exchanged wry glances.

"I… guess that's that," David murmured, starting off toward the side of the road where he'd parked his truck.

In less than five minutes, the small procession got underway.

Had they waited even ten minutes more, they might have noticed another car moving along the main road from the opposite direction, one which was also not native to Storybrooke…
"You're positive nobody's living here," Ursula asked again, gesturing toward the farmhouse at the end of the gravel road. "Because now that we're closer, I have to tell you, I can practically feel the dark magic radiating out of this dwelling."

Cruella smiled. "There's a raccoon living under the front porch. She was supplementing her usual diet with the table scraps of the former occupant. At least, until early fall when the deposits to the rubbish bin ceased. Since then, nobody's stepped foot on these premises."

Ursula absorbed that. Then she nodded slowly. "It's fairly isolated," she said. "I can see a few other houses down the main road, but the closest must be about a quarter of a mile off. We've woodland at our back and the town proper is almost two miles away. I could do with something a bit closer to the ocean, but all in all?" she nodded again, this time with a slight smile of her own, "this is a decent place in which to hole up. Assuming your rodent informant is right."

"If she isn't, she'll make a divine hat."

"Can we park behind the house?" Lily spoke up. "Just in case someone does pass by, we wouldn't want them to see the car."

"Good idea," Ursula said. "Hang on." With a gesture, a path appeared in the pristine snow that surrounded the house. Seeing Cruella's start of surprise, she shrugged. "I'm a creature of the sea. My magic is strongest when it pertains to water. And snow? Is frozen water vapor. I'll cover over the path and any tracks we might make once we're inside."

Cruella's reply was a terse nod, as she turned the car onto the path that Ursula had just created. "Oh, lovely," she said, sounding pleased. "There's a barn. If you ask me, dahlings, that would be the perfect place to park."

"As long as nobody comes poking around," Ursula warned.

"Well, if they do, dahling, we're hardly defenseless here," Cruella reminded her. "And as far as keeping a low profile, there's a tarpaulin in the trunk we can use to conceal this baby a bit better. And I suppose you can do something about a protection spell?"


"Problem?" Lily asked.

Ursula gave a slight nod. "I'm not entirely sure. But there's already an inactive protection spell about this place. Sort of like a burglar alarm that wasn't set. I can use it; it'll make things a lot easier. But the power that went into this…" She turned to Cruella. "If I had to guess, your furry friend knows what he was talking about. The person who used to live here was extremely powerful, but he—or she—was neutralized before they could activate their defenses. Either they got taken by surprise, or they lost a major battle. Or both."

"Well," Lily said briskly, "their loss, our gain, right? I mean, they probably left all kinds of stuff lying around that we can make use of."

"Maybe," Ursula said. "But all the same, let's be on our guard until we know for sure that we're safe here. The protection spell may be dormant, but that doesn't mean that there can't be other spells—or booby traps—around. Whoever lived here wielded serious magic. We can't assume that they pinned all their security on one protection spell."
In her cell in the hospital's sub-basement, Zelena sat up with a start. "Well, well," she said softly. "I'd all but forgotten about that sentry spell. It would appear that I have visitors. Now, who might they be?"

She was getting tired of the security cameras. Or rather, she was getting tired of hiding under the blankets to conceal her activities from them. She knew they were watching. Already, the little do-gooder who seemed to have made her a charity project had been oh-so-sweetly-and-delicately asking whether she was experiencing any malaise that had her spending so many hours in bed.

Zelena had denied any problem. She'd already seen enough of the diffident head-doctor who'd come to assess her state of mind when she'd first been brought here. He hadn't pressed her then; he'd only mentioned that if she did feel the need to unburden herself, she had only to advise the staff and he would be at her service. As if she would ever willingly bare her heart or soul to him or any of his ilk. Despite his promises of confidentiality, she had no doubt that the cricket would be only too happy to chirp in the ears of her sister and the Charmings if he learned anything from her that would interest them. No, she had to tread cautiously and give nobody reason to think that she suffered from any sort of affliction of the mind. Instead, she'd shrugged and claimed to be sensitive to cold. The blue gnat had returned the next day with a hideous magenta sweater that had probably been out of fashion the day that this town had come into existence. She'd forced herself to smile and try it on.

She shook her head. Really, this ought to wait until evening, when nobody would think it suspicious to see her lying in bed beneath the covers. She knew how to be patient. She knew how to be circumspect. She knew that until she discovered who it was who had broken into her farmhouse, she would know no rest.

Footsteps approached her cell and paused before her door. She'd forgotten that it was time for breakfast. As she waited and watched the slot in the bottom of her door, an idea came to her. A moment later, a tray slid through the slot and into the room. She regarded the tray for a moment before approaching it with feigned reluctance and a resigned expression. Yogurt, pancakes with sealed packets of jam, syrup, honey, and butter, a wedge of melon, and two fried eggs. Oh, yes. Yes, this definitely had potential.

She picked up the tray and brought it to her table—really, just a slab of wood that was riveted to the wall roughly two and a half feet high. Then, seating herself on the wooden stool, she picked up the plastic knife and fork and attacked the eggs.

As she'd hoped, they were sunny-side up, the yellow yolks liquid and runny. As she lifted a forkful to her lips, she maneuvered her wrist so that the egg slid off to land directly on her bright magenta sweater. Careful, she reminded herself. They'll be suspicious if you look at the cameras. They'll know you want them to see. Trust that they have and don't overact this. Sullenly, she finished her breakfast and kicked the tray back through the slot. Then, with a disgusted expression, she all but tore off the sweater and dove back into bed. Using the blankets to block the camera's relentless prying, she smiled.

"Now," she whispered, "it's time to find out who my trespassers are…"

Rumple had ample opportunity to observe the newcomers as they made their way to the Sorcerer's library. While both looked about with interest, Tony's eyes were wide with wonder and excitement. Tia seemed more reserved, but something told Rumple that she was paying even closer attention.
He waited until they were seated at the long table before he steepled his fingers, frowned, and began, "So, as I understand it, despite this being a land without magic… you possess it?"

Tia smiled. "It's sort of complicated. I guess… Okay, you've heard the expression, 'if the only tool you have is a hammer, then you'll treat everything as though it was a nail?' Tony and I have power. Back home, we called it magic. Here… maybe it's ESP, or psionic ability… or maybe it is a sort of magic, but not the kind that Uncle Bené wields."

The Apprentice inclined his head slightly, and while his lips only twitched, there was no mistaking the warmth of his eyes.

"It's never had anything to do with spell-casting," Tony chimed in. "No scrolls or special ingredients. It's mostly a mental process. For Tia, it's almost entirely so. For me," he ducked his head a bit self-consciously and set a silver-colored harmonica down on the table, "I need a little help. Music helps me channel."

"You said 'home'," David repeated. "Where's home?"

"In this land," Tia said, "It's a little place called Stony Creek in Misty Valley. That's just about straddling the Idaho-Montana boundary at the edge of Bitterroot National Forest."

"I take it from the way you're talking that's not where you're from originally," Regina remarked.

Tony shook his head. "No. We were just kids when we arrived, but we were born in the Pebble Islands. In Camelot."

Thirty minutes later, Zelena had answered one question and been left with several more. She didn't know any of the three women currently occupying her farmhouse, but she did know that they were bent on stirring things up in Storybrooke. And there were a few ways in which that might turn out to her advantage.

First, if they were looking for an ally against her sister and her sister's Charming allies, Zelena would be more than happy to assist. If they were truly as formidable as they seemed to think, then they would be worthy friends. And if they proved to be mere sound and fury, then at the right moment, they could be either subdued or dispatched as her mood took her.

She would have to find a way to make contact with them, undetected by both the cameras in her cell, and the prying eyes of the staff that came to look in on her, seemingly without a set schedule. At least the Blue Pest had thus far restricted her visits to the daylight hours. In any event, teleporting away was too risky. There were spells that would allow her to communicate with the outside world, but they would also leave her less aware of her current surroundings. Should anyone enter her cell and attempt to engage her in conversation, they would realize that something was amiss. She wasn't ready to reveal that she had access to her magic again, at least, not yet. Not until she was absolutely certain that she could defeat anyone attempting to neutralize her power another time.

But even if she couldn't reach out to them, even if she did and they rebuffed her, if they were powerful enough to pose a genuine threat, there was always the possibility that the heroes would turn to her in their most desperate hour. It wasn't that farfetched. After all, look at how often they appealed to Rumple, even though they knew that he always had his own agenda. If they did plead for her help, Zelena knew that, if she played her cards right, she'd be able to demand all manner of payment in exchange for it. And once the battle was over, she'd be in a far better position than the one in which she currently found herself.
And Robin? Robin might even be grateful enough to intercede on her behalf, and wouldn't that be a kick in the teeth to her dear sister? Zelena smiled. If Robin were to choose her openly and willingly? Oh, yes! Zelena might not be the only green-skinned member of the family once the dust cleared.

She closed her eyes with a satisfied smirk, as she began to plan the best way to turn the situation to her advantage.

As Tony and Tia finished their story, Rumple leaned forward with a puzzled frown. "You're telling us," he said slowly, "that some thirty years ago, which would be… oh, just about the time that this town came into existence, a traveler from this realm reached Camelot and returned with several thousand refugees, whom he resettled in another remote location on the other side of this continent."

The two newcomers shared a resigned look with the Apprentice, but it wasn't until the older man nodded approval that Tony sighed. "Not exactly..." he said.

"Don't tell me," Emma remarked, rolling her eyes slightly. "It gets even more complicated."

"I'm afraid so," Tia replied, a pink flush staining her cheeks. "Although it took Mr. Trimble some time before he realized it. You see, when he first came to us, he had no idea that he'd crossed realms. Since, in this world, Camelot—at least, some version of it—was thought to be a kingdom in the British Isles some seventeen hundred years ago, of course he made the natural assumption that he'd travelled back in time."

"Like you made the natural assumption that you came from another planet," Rumple nodded.

Tony shrugged. "The crest of the Pebble Islands was a double star. The message we absorbed from everyone around us was that magic was definitely imaginary and science fiction was possibly real. When we realized we had powers, we 'knew' they couldn't be magical. When our memories started coming back, well, we knew we were 'castaways', we knew we didn't come from here, my sister had a carry-case with a double star that had always been with her… What else were we supposed to think?"

"Indeed," Rumple remarked with a faint smile. "Given the conventional wisdom that surrounded you, you drew the most logical conclusion possible. I'm scarcely about to mock you for it."

"Yes, well," Tia continued, "as I was saying, Mr. Trimble thought that his ship had malfunctioned, carrying him backwards through time, instead of forward through space. And since he knew that we'd need some help learning about how things worked in this land, he asked Uncle Bené to send him back to the summer before he'd left."

"It would have worked out," Tony broke in. "He knew about Stony Creek, because he'd been camping there when he got the call to report to NASA. That was in late July. So, he figured if we landed at the beginning of May, he could make his way to the campsite and wait for his other self to get the call at the campground office—this was before cell phones—and then, somehow, figure out how to sort out the time stream."

"He's always been optimistic," Tia said fondly. "Her smile dimmed somewhat. "Unfortunately, when he got to the campground, his other self wasn't there. And at the proper time on the right date, there was no phone call."

"Wait," Emma said. "Science fiction isn't exactly my thing, but I think I remember reading some
story about time travel where the writer explained that two versions of one person couldn't exist at the same time?" She made a face. "Sorry, I don't remember much more than that. It wasn't that interesting a story."

"Well," Tia said slowly, "that theory might or might not be true. In any case, it wouldn't be relevant here, seeing as Mr. Trimble hadn't actually traveled through time."

"Wait," David said, with a puzzled frown. "I know he jumped realms to get to Camelot, but you just said that the Appren—" He broke off. "Sorry, that Bené sent him back to an earlier point in time from when he'd left."

"That was what I was attempting," the Apprentice nodded. "However, between being forced to work with a technology I didn't understand as thoroughly as I believed, and attempting to use it to reverse a process that had never actually transpired in the first place, combined with my belief that magic could not be used to travel through time..." his expression grew pained. "With the technology onboard his vessel, Tom Trimble did travel back to a date prior to the one on which he departed." He paused for a beat. "But not to the same realm he'd left."
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ursula and Cruella are going by what they know of Cora. And they weren't present during the events of S2E2: "We are Both" or S2E3: "The Lady of the Lake".

Chapter Seventeen

"Hang on," Emma blurted out. "Are you trying to tell me that there's more than one Earth out there? More than one Idaho? Another Montana?"

The Apprentice nodded, unperturbed by her outburst. "You might want to have a talk with your Mr. Booth about his story, and how it could possibly have been written down in this realm nearly a century before his father carved him. It's hardly uncommon for a tale or an individual to exist in multiple versions. Why should the same not hold true for a realm?"

Emma blinked. "I… I don't know," she said, still looking confused. "So, is there another me out there?"

The Apprentice smiled gently. "There are, almost certainly, other saviors. And some of them may look like you, or even bear your name. But not one of them would be you. You are," his smile grew warmer, "unique." He glanced around the table.

"The same holds true for the rest of you," he added. "There are other versions of your stories in other realms, and they are as real and true as those you've lived and those that shaped you. But the fact of their existence in no way alters the reality of yours." He frowned for a moment, thinking. "Fate does tend to arrange matters so that one seldom meets one's counterparts," he admitted. "Not that it can't happen, of course. Just that, statistically speaking, it happens far less frequently than one might think. At any rate, this realm's Tom Trimble followed a different career path, one that did not lead him to NASA. I met him once, in fact. He was teaching Optomechanical Engineering at some college in the Pacific Northwest. That was a number of years ago."

Rumple sniffed. "Well, I'm sure that's of relevance to someone," he muttered in a voice that was meant to be overheard. Regina looked away, though not before he detected the faintest of smirks on her face.

"At any rate," the Apprentice said, "Mr. Trimble decided that he'd prefer not to chance jumping realms once more. At first, he only meant to remain in Misty Valley long enough to help the refugees adjust to this land, but a month became two, and two became twelve, and he still lives there today. It does reduce the likelihood of his encountering anyone familiar with his counterpart."

Regina cleared her throat. "This has all been rather enlightening," she said. "But I'm not exactly sure what it is your companions are doing here. I mean," she smiled politely at Tony and Tia, "I hope you don't misunderstand; we'll take what help we can find. But why the two of you? Why here? Why now?"
The two newcomers looked uncertain. Tia's eyes found the Apprentice's. "Uncle Bené?" she asked.

The Apprentice smiled. "You each have your part to play. And when the time comes, it will be clear that it will be in a role that no other can fulfill. For now though," his gaze panned the table, starting with Regina and ending with Snow, "think of them as allies. You may trust them as fully as you do me." His smile broadened. "And yes, I'm aware that you're yet somewhat suspicious of my intentions. It can hardly be otherwise. But then, I wouldn't expect you to put more faith in two newcomers you've scarcely known a morning," he continued mildly.

Snow cleared her throat. "How long do we have?" she asked. "Until Maleficent's daughter arrives?"

"You'll meet her ere long," the Apprentice said, his voice turning serious. "But she won't be the threat you need most concern yourself with. The greatest strengths and the greatest dangers often come from within."

"What does that mean?" David asked, frowning.

The Apprentice's eyebrows shot upwards. "Precisely what it sounds like, of course," he replied. "For now, I'd suggest you go about your regular day. I'll see Tony and Tia settled in."

Almost as one, they surged up from the table, intent on demanding further clarification. But with neither warning nor flash of light nor puff of smoke, the Apprentice and the two new arrivals vanished from the room.

Regina shook his head with annoyance. "That was rather rude of him," she remarked.

"Indeed," Rumple nodded. "Although I can't say I wasn't expecting something of the sort." He adjusted his tie absently. "I suppose there's no help for it. I'd best head back into town and open the shop."

"I'll drive you," Emma nodded.

Snow, David, and Regina exchanged a look. "I guess that's just as well," the mayor nodded. "I've got something else to take care of…"

"Whoever lived here didn't really plan on settling in," Lily remarked decisively. "Either that or she left in a hurry."

"She?" Ursula echoed with a raised eyebrow.

The younger woman shrugged. "I found some dresses hanging in the closet in the master bedroom. I… guess that doesn't necessarily prove anything, but let's agree it makes it likelier." She gestured to their surroundings. "There's nothing… personal, here. Except for in the bedroom, and even there, it's just some clothes. The furniture looks like it was picked out of a catalog. No knickknacks or mementos or…" She frowned. "This wasn't a home. It was a place to hole up until she did what she meant to."

"Which was?" Cruella asked.

Lily shrugged. "Beats me. I'm usually pretty good at figuring out what makes people tick, but all I'm getting here is that the person who was staying here was here for a purpose, and it wasn't to settle in."

"Sounds like us," Ursula said with a gleam in her eye. "Well. We've been over the house and barn,
and it looks like Cruella's informant was right. Whoever this mystery woman was, she's moved on. Which means this place is available."

She turned to Cruella. "I suppose you're planning to sleep the morning away?"

Cruella sniffed. "Well, I certainly don't intend to move about much after sleeping in my car earlier."

"That's what I thought," Ursula said. "All right. The fridge and cupboards are pretty empty. Someone's going to have to do a supply run. And since right now, Cruella and I are the only two of us who'll stand a chance at recognizing the other faces here—"

"My book—" Lily started to say, but Ursula cut her off.

"Could've used a better illustrator. Some of those pictures are a little… Impressionistic. I recognize them because I've seen the real people in the flesh. You haven't got that advantage."

Lily was silent.

"So," Ursula said smiling a bit, "it looks like I'm the designated food shopper."

Lily frowned. "You don't think those tentacles are going to be a little obvious? And what about what we said before about you two being recognized?"

"Ah," Ursula said, still smiling, "but that was before we knew that there was magic here. With magic," she made a curious gesture and her features shifted into those of someone else entirely, "I can assure you that nobody will recognize me. Unless I want them to…"

Uncle Bené smiled benignly as he opened the bedroom door. "I believe this room will suit you, Tia," he remarked. "And," he opened the door across the hall, "this one is for you, Tony."

Tony frowned. "You knew we'd come here eventually, didn't you? I mean, why else would you have two spare bedrooms?"

Uncle Bené didn't reply, but there was no mistaking the approval in his eyes.

"The mayor had a point, though," Tia admitted. "I'm not sure why you need us here. Between you, Emma Swan, and Regina Mills, is our power really necessary?"

For a long moment, Uncle Bené stayed silent. Then, softly, he answered, "I hope so. I summoned the two of you as a precaution. There is one talent that the three of us share to varying degrees, and that is the ability to see what will one day occur."

Tony and Tia nodded. Tia's power allowed her to see only what would transpire in the immediate future, but while her brother's vision extended a good deal farther, it was also blurrier. Tia's insights were clearer, for all their limitations in scope.

"What did you see?" Tony asked, swallowing hard.

Uncle Bené shook his head. "Only that I expect to have need of you. There will be something you will be able to do that the others will not. I'm sorry I can't be more specific, but since I see farther ahead than either of you two, my ability to focus on specific details is commensurately weaker. Not so weak as it would be if I didn't take the necessary steps to hone it, though. As I trust you both have your talents? Of course, you've kept up with your meditating?"
Both siblings lowered their eyes guiltily and shuffled their feet.

"I haven't been using my talents much," Tony admitted in an undertone.

Tia's cheeks were beet-red. "I… guess I got so caught up in trying to forge ahead that I stopped reviewing the basics."

Uncle Bené sighed. "I won't pretend I'm not disappointed," he said. "But dwelling on what should have been is a pointless endeavor." He clapped his hands once. "Put your things away. Take an hour to settle in. We'll convene in the living room after that. And then, we shall see the extent to which negligence has impacted your abilities. And in the time we have," he added somewhat sternly, "we shall attempt to undo that damage."

Tia and Tony nodded, each one wincing a bit at the quiet scolding.

Ursula sat at a corner table in Granny's and studied the other customers. She hadn't made many connections during her time in the Enchanted Forest. She'd fallen in with Maleficent early on and, through her, become acquainted, first with Cruella and then with Regina. That had been more than enough for her.

She'd always been something of a loner. It wasn't that she'd been shy, or afraid to meet new people, but for the most part, she found herself ill at ease in social settings, preferring a small cadre of close friends to a wide net of acquaintances.

Except, of course, when singing had been involved. Give her a song and, perhaps, some musical accompaniment—though the latter wasn't really necessary—and she would perform for anyone and everyone who cared to listen. When she had the right tune and the right lyrics, it didn't matter if she was on stage before all her father's court, perched on a rock whose top just broke the ocean's surface, or in the solitude of her chambers. At least, it hadn't mattered. Back when she could still sing.

But the less she dwelled on that time, the better. Her singing voice was gone, and she had two people to thank for it. One was her father, and while she had a feeling that she still could still cross realms, even from a Land without Magic, she had no desire to return home and confront him. He'd made up his mind to keep her with him, even if it had meant destroying her fiercest love to do it. She would never go crawling back to him now, no matter how miserable her life had become in the years between then and now.

And as for the second…

Her eyes grew wide as the restaurant door swung open, and she tried to hide her face in the upturned collar of her coat, before she caught sight of her reflection in the shiny metal napkin dispenser on her table and remembered that she was using a glamor spell. Captain Hook, deep in conversation with a woman she'd never seen before—a woman who wore a sheriff star fastened to her belt—strode in. Going by the look on the pirate's face, the woman clearly meant something to him. Ursula made a mental note of that detail and tried not to watch too obviously as the two made their way to an empty table in a booth that could accommodate four more people easily.

The door opened again and now, Ursula was hard-put to conceal her shock. Short bobs hadn't been fashionable in the Enchanted Forest, but even without long hair, there was no mistaking Snow White. She was still with James—or had he gone back to using 'David' after defeating King George? But neither Snow White's pixie cut nor the fact that she was obviously still in love with her husband were the cause of Ursula's consternation. It was that the two weren't alone. A third
person accompanied them. *Regina*. And from the look of it, the three were positively friendly.

As she watched, they made their way to the booth that Hook had already claimed and joined the pair at the table. Since when did heroes and villains act so chummy? Just what the halibut was going on here?

"Dahling," Cruella drawled, "while we're waiting for Ursula to get back from her little gumshoe excursion, why don't you see if you can't scrounge up some food the former occupant might've left behind?"

Lily gave the older woman a hard look. "The kitchen's right through there," she said. "Check for yourself."

"Oh, I know the kitchen's a wash," Cruella retorted. "I'm beginning to wonder whether the former occupant of the premises wasn't Old Mother Hubbard. But don't farmhouses generally have barns or silos or other places where they store their crops? Maybe you'll find some smoked meats or pickles or preserves or something."

"Or gin?" Lily asked in a voice as cold and hard as the look turned on Cruella.

Cruella shrugged. "If you do, of course I'll want a nightcap later, dahling. But for right now, I'd say that hunger is more of a concern. I should have had those flounder beach themselves last night; some fried fish would really hit the spot."

Lily sighed. "Well, you'd need oil for that. Anyway, there's nothing to find in here. I think I saw a storm cellar in the back. Maybe there's something in there," she added dubiously. "But I have to tell you, anyone who had time enough to pack up before they left probably took everything."

"Well, you won't know until you look, dahling," Cruella told her sweetly.

Lily made a face, but she took her coat off of the sofa arm, stepped back into her boots, and headed for the low concrete structure, muttering under her breath.

A few minutes later, she was back and out of breath. "From the looks of you," Cruella remarked, "I can only think that you've encountered a grizzly bear or a bobcat out there." Her eyes lit up. "Unless… it wouldn't be a black racer, not at this time of year?"

Lily shook her head. Cruella sighed. "A pity. While I do love fur, I wouldn't say no to a chic little belt from the hide of an endangered serpent." Her eyes narrowed. "Wait. You are scared, aren't you dahling? You're… why, you're nigh petrified. Now, what turn of events could have shaken you out of your blasé, jaded, can't-let-anything-stronger-than-cold-disdain-show-on-your-face attitude, hmm?"

Lily took a deep breath. "I-I'm not sure if this is a safe place for us to be. Not if the person who used to live here is as powerful as I think she might have been and there's a chance she might be back."

"What do you mean?"

Lily hesitated. "How… how many people do you know of who can spin straw into gold?"

Cruella blinked. "Offhand, I can think of two. Both formidable opponents. Do you mean to say that you think one of them lived here?"
Lily shook her head. "Not… exactly…"

Ursula's agitation was obvious from the moment that she stepped back inside the farmhouse. "Nothing out there makes any sense!" she exclaimed. "Snow White and Prince Charming are BFFs with Regina and Captain Hook, dwarves are dating fairies, and-and I just saw Rumpelstiltskin buy some kind of candle from Tinker Bell and wish her a happy Miner's Day, whatever that is!" She set a paper shopping bag down on the table. It tipped and a loaf of sliced bread slid partway out.

"Any sign of Emma?" Lily asked.

Ursula frowned. "Snow and Charming's daughter? I don't know. There was a woman I didn't recognize sitting with the others, but she looked old enough to be a sister to them."

"The curse would have frozen everyone in this town for twenty-eight years, if the child's book is to be believed," Cruella reminded her. "If their daughter grew up outside of it, she'd probably be about the same age as her parents, now."

Ursula blinked. "Well, be that as it may," she snapped after a moment's reflection, "if that's the case, she seems mighty chummy with that pirate and if her parents are still as insufferably virtuous as they used to be, it doesn't make sense that they'd seem okay with it!"

"Wait," Lily broke in. "Emma's dating a pirate? No way. That doesn't sound a bit like the girl I used to know."

"Well, we've yet to establish that the woman I saw was this 'Emma'. For all I know, she used to be some woodland creature in Briar Rose's hut in the forest; apparently some of them made the crossing and leveled up."

"About my age? Blonde hair? She used to wear it long."

Ursula hesitated. "She did have long blonde hair," she allowed.

Cruella turned to Lily. "You know," she said slowly, "if Rumpelstiltskin has switched sides—"

"He's the Dark One," Ursula cut her off. "He's got about as much chance of switching sides as you do."

"Well, yes," Cruella conceded, "but don't forget, dahling, he's twisty. And he doesn't mind playing long games. I wouldn't put it past him to pretend to be a hero long enough to win the town's trust and then stab it in its heart at the proper time."

Ursula considered that. After a moment, she gave the other woman a careful, grudging nod.

Cruella smiled victoriously. "As I was saying," she went on, "if he's switched sides, or if that's what he has everyone believing, then, Lily dear, that makes our discovery in the storm cellar make so much more sense."

"What are you talking about?" Ursula demanded.

Cruella smirked. "It would appear that the former occupant of this dwelling put the Dark One in a somewhat uncomfortable position. Well," she added thoughtfully, "I suppose there's a slight chance that it might have been Cora experiencing said discomfort, but I believe we can all agree on which of the two is most notorious for spinning straw into gold, huh?" She waited for that to sink in before she went on. "The thing I can't be certain of is whether there's anything specific about the
location that would have bound him there, or whether she was truly that formidable a spell-caster. And since magic's much more your thing, dahling," she gave Ursula a bow that was only half-mocking, "perhaps you might care take a gander?"

From his seat at one of the library's study tables, August looked up from his book to steal a surreptitious glance at Belle. The librarian was at the circulation desk, her eyes downcast. August suspected that she, too, was reading.

With a sigh he went back to his book—literally his book. He'd never really gotten through Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* before and, so long as he was here in the library, he'd thought he might as well give it a shot. The last time he'd tried, he'd been about Henry's age and, after flipping through the pages and blinking at the cringingly inaccurate illustrations, it had only taken the first page of actual reading to get him to thrust away the book in disgust.

...I do not know how this really happened, yet the fact remains that one fine day this piece of wood found itself in the shop of an old carpenter. His real name was Mastro Antonio, but everyone called him Mastro Cherry—

—had been enough to sour him on the slanderous thing. Libelous, he reminded himself. *It's slander if it's spoken, libel if it's legible. Use the alliteration to keep it straight.* Now, though, he needed something that would hold his attention, but not keep him so engrossed that he might miss any of the warning signs that Rumpelstiltskin's worries were well founded.

For Rumple's sake, he hoped that they weren't. But if there was anybody about likely to recognize the first faint stirrings of Darkness in another's heart, August had to admit that Rumple was at the top of the list. He remembered that Rumple had mentioned that it had been Regina who'd brought the matter to his attention. Well, he allowed, she was probably the second name down on that list.

He tried to read on and discovered that the author of this version of his story did not, in fact, cast this 'Mastro Cherry' as his creator. Gepetto appeared a scant two pages later. But while this character might share a name with his papa, he certainly didn't share a personality. The very notion of his papa wearing a blond wig and being tauntingly called 'Polendina' was insulting and he pushed his chair back several inches as though out of revulsion, and tried to focus on the real reason he was here.

He'd wanted to tell Rumple not to be silly when the older man had broached his concern. Belle was finally taking a hard honest look at how she truly felt, not how she told herself she ought to feel, and part of that honesty meant recognizing that she had a bit of a dark side, however small. That didn't mean she was on the verge of giving into it. But then, Belle had been through a lot lately, August reflected. And not only lately. He leaned once more into the book with a frown as he thought about it. She'd sacrificed herself to win peace for her duchy, resolved to make the best of a bad situation and, little by little, fallen in love with her captor. He'd cast her out and, shortly thereafter, Regina had captured and imprisoned her for just about thirty years—twenty-eight of them with no less sense of self than virtually anybody else in town had enjoyed under the curse. And then, she'd been freed and reunited with Rumple, only to learn that he was still far from the good man she'd been certain she'd seen lurking beneath the monster's façade. Still she'd stayed with him, out of love or hope, August imagined. But even at that time, her father had hired a ruffian to kidnap her. He'd nearly sent her over the town line when doing so would have robbed her of all memory. A few days later, Hook had succeeded where her father had failed. And...

And Belle had gone from stress to stress, crisis to crisis, disillusionment to disillusionment...

August shook his head. He might not know as much about Darkness as those who had given
themselves over to it, but one thing he did know was that it sought out people who believed themselves to be weak and desperate. *Powerless. Raging against circumstances they could do nothing to change. Hopel—*

August frowned, thinking about Regina, who had never despaired of vengeance on Snow White, despite setback after setback. Or Rumple, who had spent nearly two centuries creating and refining the curse that would lead him to his son, and, when his attempts to apologize for the past were rebuffed, had still refused to give up on the possibility of reconciliation. No, Darkness wasn't about hopelessness. Not precisely.

Doubt, then, maybe. Doubt that one's past actions or current aptitudes could bring about the desired results, unless one gave in more fully to the Darkness and hoped that doing so wouldn't push the goal even farther out of reach.

August massaged his forehead. He thought he liked it better when he'd thought that Darkness was about lack of hope. Because right now, he was thinking more along the lines of Darkness being that force that could take something pure and positive—*like* hope—and twist it about until it became an instrument of torment for its bearer.

"August?"

He blinked. Belle was standing across the table from him, bending over him with a concerned smile. "Are you feeling okay?"

She looked normal. Her expression bespoke worry and friendliness without a hint of malevolence. He smiled easily. "Yeah," he said. "Sorry. I was just…uh…" He shook his head and pushed the book across to her. "I thought I was ready to see just how badly lost in translation my biography was." He made a face. "I wasn't."

Curiously, Belle turned the book toward her and flipped back to the first page. "Polendina?" she read dubiously a moment or two later. "Oh, dear."

August relaxed. He still struggled with honesty at times, but every now and again, a small fib was still warranted. And the best kind of lie was usually one that incorporated a decent amount of truth…

"There's no enchantment on the cage," Ursula pronounced. "Which means that our spell-caster either had some other means of neutralizing their power and the cage was just for humiliation purposes, or it suited their captive to let them think that they were neutralized."

"Well, which one is it, do you think?" Cruella asked.

Ursula frowned. "As much as I'm trying to allow for the possibility of it being Cora, I just don't see it. That one," she sniffed, "was too happy to leave her old life of deprivation behind; she'd never allow anyone to think they could contain her under those conditions. She'd sooner rip out the heart of anyone who tried it."

"For all we know," Lily pointed out, "that's what she did."

Cruella shook her head. "If that were the case, Lilith dahling," she said, "we'd have found the body by now. Cora never worried about hiding her handiwork. For that matter, she wouldn't have cleared away the victim's personal effects. And while restraining the hands of a spell-caster will prevent them from using magic, that begs the question of why the spinning wheel was there." She sniffed. "Not that I know much about such domestic crafts, but wouldn't one need one's hands free in order
to use the device?" She smiled. "Besides, there's always been one sure way to control the Dark One, and if I had to gamble, I'd take the odds that she'd found it."

Ursula nodded. "Yes. If our spell-caster got her hands on his dagger, that would make a good deal of sense." She sighed. "Unless Rumple was just toying with her, and good luck getting a straight answer out of him about which it was."

"Well, how do we find out for sure?" Lily asked, frowning a bit in irritation at the babble of youthful voices that she could hear from the farmhouse window. Her irritation grew when she realized that it was open. "No wonder it's chilly in here," she grumped.

"Oh, come now, dahling I had to air the place out," Cruella said loftily, as Lily went to shut it. "I don't think anyone's cleaned it in weeks."

"You could've grabbed a feather duster," Lily shot back. "It's a good thing it's warmed up a bit; I think the temperature's actually above freezing now."

"It has," Ursula confirmed. "And I don't mind mentioning that's an improvement over this morning," she added. "To answer your question, I guess we'll have to risk another foray into town and hope nobody asks too many questions. This isn't a very big place and, contrary to what Cruella was saying earlier, I don't know how long any of us can try to blend in before someone realizes that they have no idea who we are."

Lily peered through the now-closed window at the gaggle of tow-headed girls and boys who were laughing and bounding along the road. While the littlest of them still wore their winter coats, the older children had either unfastened them or removed them entirely, and now carried them slung over shoulders and arms. She smiled and turned back to face the other two women. "I think I have an idea..."
Chapter Eighteen

"You're well today?" the Blue Fairy inquired with a warmth in her voice that didn't reach her eyes.

Zelena returned the fairy's beatific smile with one nearly as condescending. "Oh, yes," she replied feigning gratitude. "And so happy to have company. Life is so dull down here that even scrubbing the floors fills my poor heart with joy." She tamped down her sarcasm slightly, just enough that it might pass for sincerity—if the listener had the IQ of a rosebush. Something Zelena thought might be the case where the fairy was concerned.

"I'm happy to help," the fairy said primly. "Might I ask whether there's anything that you're lacking that might be provided?"

Zelena hesitated. While she had no plans to leave the hospital yet, it never hurt to have an escape route mapped. "I wonder," she began. Then she shook her head, feigning despondency. "Never mind."

The Blue Fairy took an unconscious step toward her. "What is it?" she asked.

Zelena opened her mouth to speak once more, but then, in a calculated move, she turned away. "It doesn't matter. You'd never allow it, so there's no point in getting my hopes up."

"Hope shouldn't be discarded so easily," the fairy said in a far gentler voice than any she'd used with the witch thus far. "Tell me."

Zelena sighed. "We both know that so long as I wear this cuff," she said, brandishing her arm, "I'm quite powerless. So keeping me here is really more to satisfy a whim of my sister's than out of any concern that I'll pose a threat to the town."

The Blue Fairy sniffed. "I'm not sure that your presence here is solely due to a whim," she said, while her voice stayed mild, there was a chill to it that hadn't been there a moment ago. "Your actions certainly—"

She'd spoken too soon, she realized. The fairy might pity her, but she was still suspicious and distrustful. Not as stupid as I thought, Zelena admitted to herself. "Yes, of course," Zelena said hastily. "But I can't harm her now. And really, one does get bored with bare walls and sparse furnishings. Would... do you think it might be possible to have... an occasional change of scenery?" Though it galled her, she forced a beseeching note into her voice. "Please?"

For a long moment, the fairy was silent. Zelena turned back to face her, trying to maintain an earnest expression without dissolving into laughter. Finally, a sympathetic smile spread the fairy's lips. "Of course," she said, and the warmth in her voice was positively gooey. "You're quite right. There's absolutely no reason for you to have to stare at these empty walls for another day."

Zelena started to smile back, but the smile froze as the fairy continued speaking.

"I'll bring a selection of posters and scenic prints with me when I return tomorrow and if you'd like, I'll be delighted to help you put them up. In fact," she added, "I believe we've a good deal of artwork gathering dust in the convent's attic. I'll look through it this evening." She beamed. "Problem solved."
"Indeed it is," Zelena murmured, as the fairy continued to natter on before finally taking her leave.

As the cell door shut behind her, Zelena's smile turned to a scowl and she choked back a shriek of frustration. No, the Blue Fairy definitely wasn't as stupid as she'd thought…

"You're getting warmer," Cruella nodded. "You got the white stripes at the elbow the correct width, but the buttons are too small and those skirts are still an inch or so too long, if those girls who skipped past the house are anything to base judgment upon."

Ursula sighed. "I really think this is close enough. I mean, it's not as though we're actually going to be attending classes. Who cares if the uniforms aren't quite right?"

"Look dahling," Cruella snapped, "if we're going out disguised as a trio of school girls—and by the way, I do think," she smiled in Lily's direction, "it's an inspired idea—then we need to look the part. And since, for all we know, there's only one school in this town, should anyone notice something amiss, I doubt that claiming to attend a different place of education is going to wash. Not to mention if there is another such institution, their uniforms probably won't look anything like those."

Ursula shook her head with a disgusted look. "I have no idea how much more magic I can use before I need rest and restoration," she muttered. "And recasting a glamor spell multiple times to raise or lower a hemline is just wasteful."

"Can you sew?" Lily asked.

Ursula shook her head again.

"Then it's not wa—"

Ursula cut her off with a toothy smile. "But Cruella can."

Cruella's face fell. "I haven't touched a machine in years."

"I bet it's like riding a bike."

"Well, I never did that either," Cruella shot back. "And anyway, where would I find such a dev—"

She stopped abruptly, as a wooden table with a Vickers Modele De Luxe hand-crank sewing machine, easily nearly a century old, appeared before her.

"I think you must've stitched that Dalmatian-hide coat you used to wear on something similar," Ursula noted.

Cruella gave a little laugh. "Well, that was a long time ago, dahling. And a world away from this one."

"But that world had sewing machines, and you used one."

Cruella glanced from Ursula to Lily, as though she expected one of them to burst into laughter and admit that they were joking. When neither so much as cracked a smile, she sighed helplessly. "Oh, very well," she relented. "At least they'll be done properly. You'll at least furnish me the raw materials, Ursula dahling?"

A bolt of gray plaid appeared beside the sewing machine. "Be grateful I'm not asking you to knit the sweaters," Ursula smirked. "I'll keep trying to magic those up properly. You're certain I've got
Cruella sighed. "No, it was too small to see properly from the window, but surely you'll be able to make a few small tweaks on your own when you need to?"

Ursula sighed. "I suppose I'll have to."

"Right then." Cruella nodded, suddenly business-like. "I suppose I'd better take a few measurements. Unless you're also going to magically alter the fit?"

Ursula shook her head. "There's a tape measure in the table drawer, along with some sewing notions. Let's get started."

The shop had been quiet all day and business didn't pick up any when Henry arrived some thirty minutes after school ended. After greeting Rumple, the boy headed for the small bathroom off of the shop's back office to exchange his school uniform for the suit Rumple required him to wear while working.

Rumple went back to his polishing, nodding approvingly when his grandson reappeared, now properly attired, and immediately picked up the broom from the corner where it resided. After a few moments, though, he noted that the boy was going through the motions of the task without his usual alacrity or attention. In fact, Henry seemed to be pushing the same pile of dust back and forth aimlessly. "Something's on your mind," he murmured, keeping his tone mild.

Henry blinked. "Sorry," he said quickly and began to sweep a bit more conscientiously.

"You're apologizing for thinking," Rumple remarked with a half-smile. "I'd think the alternative would be a far better reason to request pardon."

After a moment, Henry acknowledged his grandfather's statement with a half-smile of his own. "Uh... sorry?" he ventured, straight-faced.

Rumple chuckled. "Not long ago," he said slowly, "August Booth informed me that I was 'easy to talk to'. While I found his statement difficult to believe, I'm not opposed to testing it out, should you be amenable?" He ended on an interrogative note, not really expecting the boy to take him up on his offer. There was a fine line between probing and prying and he had no intention of badgering his grandson into divulging matters he might prefer to keep secret.

But after a moment, Henry sighed. "It's nothing really. I mean... on a scale of one to ten, one being Archie's dog eating my study notes and ten being something bad enough to smash the clock tower face and vaporize Happy's newest Miata," he grinned when Rumple snorted, "I guess it's probably a two? One and a half, even?"

Rumple thought for a moment. "You know, Henry, there are different scales for measuring crises. Something that registers barely a flicker on a collective level might be far more significant to an individual."

"Well," Henry ducked his head, "I don't know if it's exactly a crisis." He took a breath. "There's this girl at school."

"A girl?" Rumple repeated.

Henry sighed with an exasperation that was only half-feigned. "Mom told you."
Rumple hesitated. "She did mention something about meeting one of your school friends, but not much beyond that."

Henry was silent for a moment. Then he nodded. "Well, good. Because she's just a friend."

"Of course."

"I mean, we aren't dating or anything. She's not my girlfriend. She's just a… a girl who's a friend."

"Well," Rumple said tartly, "I'm glad we've established that much."

Henry exhaled. "Sorry. I guess… well… she's got a part in that play we're doing at school and she's really good."

"I see."

"No, I mean, seriously, she's great. When she reads her lines, it's like…" He thought for a moment. "It's like she stepped out of Yonkers a century ago, instead of Sherwood Forest this past year."

"Ah," Rumple smiled. "I take it Yonkers is the setting for this theater piece."

"Yeah, sorry." Henry ducked his head. "No, I mean, seriously, she blows me away; she's that good."

"I see. And the trouble?"

Henry sighed. "She thinks she may have to drop out."

Rumple raised an eyebrow. "I see," he repeated once more, feeling somewhat out of his depth. Had Henry been seeking wealth or fame, he would have had a far better idea of how to render assistance—or at least, he would have if he'd had magic at his disposal. But this? This was... This was his grandson opening up to him after Rumple had practically pleaded with him to do so. The least he could do was listen. And perhaps that was what Henry was seeking from him anyway. Not a solution, but an understanding ear. Henry was, after all, Emma's son. Rumple gave him an encouraging nod.

Apparently, that was all the invitation the boy needed. "It's just not fair!" Henry blurted. "See, she's got a whole bunch of little brothers and sisters and, if her mother doesn't need her home right after school, then most rehearsals, her little brother is hanging around and interrupting the read-throughs. But she's already had to miss two rehearsals and she's trying to keep up with regular classes and if something has to give, I know it's going to be the play, but she doesn't want it to be and I don't think she should have to quit if she doesn't want to!"

Rumple nodded soberly. "I begin to understand the situation. And," he nodded, "you're quite right. As you describe it, it's not fair. Nor is it necessarily solvable."

Henry blinked. "You know I wasn't asking you to—"

"I know," Rumple replied, not at all put out. "I did ask, after all. Although…"

"Grandpa?"

Rumple hesitated. "Is it the rehearsal times that are problematic? What I mean is, if you and she…" He considered. While it was clear to him that his grandson's feelings for the girl in question did appear to run somewhat deeper than casual friendship, he suspected that it was still early days for
that relationship. Best to take Henry's statement about their being mere friends at face value for the time being, "...and other cast members were able to find a more convenient time to convene, perhaps the young lady would be able to keep up. Or, if not to rehearse, then to study? Just a thought."

Henry frowned. "Maybe," he said slowly. "Maybe if we got a study group together at her house. I mean, it's a little nuts over there with all those little kids around, but maybe if we got them settled in first or," his eyes widened, "or if we were to set it up so while most of us were studying, one of us would take a half-hour break to keep an eye on the little kids, and then after that half-hour, they went back to the group and someone else…!" A broad grin split the boy's face. "That might actually work! Thanks, Grandpa!"

Rumple smiled. "If I were asked about the matter, I'd be forced to acknowledge that the solution was already staring you in the face. I merely pointed you toward it. But while we're on the subject of breaks, I do believe that you might have taken yours a trifle early. If you're ready to resume," he continued, "I think you know where the dustpan is kept?"

Henry ducked his head, but didn't bother hiding his smile. "Oh, right. Sorry. I'll get back to it. And Grandpa?" He smiled. "You can tell August he's right."

"I think I spot a flaw in your plan," Ursula said. She, Cruella, and Lily were sitting in Granny's in a corner booth. It was suppertime and the place was packed. Thanks to another glamor spell, all three women bore the semblance of teenaged girls.

Lily lifted a forkful of salad to her mouth and set down the utensil. Once she'd finished chewing and swallowing, she asked, "Oh? What's that?"

"We're the only ones here in school uniforms! I mean, I agree with you about adults not paying much attention to a trio of well-behaved teenagers who aren't sporting tattoos, visible piercings, or clothes that look like they were borrowed from a Tim Burton movie, but every other kid in this town puts on normal clothes once they get home!"

Lily grinned. "I know."

"You know?" Ursula repeated.

"Yeah. Nobody worth knowing would dream of wearing their school uniform in public outside school hours. I mean, okay, if you've got a dentist appointment right after class, that's one thing, but you'd still change before you went out for supper. Unless you were some kind of misfit or social outcast. Now, do up your top button." She frowned. "You, too, Cruella. And maybe we should've left our skirts longer, after all."

As Ursula complied dubiously with Lily's instruction, the restaurant door opened and a group of teens strode in. They looked around, confidently. As their eyes fell on the trio, one of them snickered and elbowed his friends. Another rolled her eyes. With condescending smirks, the youths stalked past the women's table, clearly going out of their way to do so. "Guess the latest curse brought in a couple from the land of misfit toys," one of the boys stage-whispered.

Someone giggled inanely as they moved on.

Lily's grin grew wider. "And that," she said decisively, "pretty much ensures we won't have to fend off a bunch of hormonal adolescents trying to hit on us. Or did you want to spend the evening flirting and giggling?"
Ursula had just taken a sip of her soda and came very close to choking on it. "Nooo," she managed when she was mostly recovered. "No, I may resort to Dark Magic on occasion. I might mutilate, maim, or destroy, if the mood suits. But I don't think I've ever quite stooped to cradle-robbing." She feigned a virtuous expression that wouldn't have taken in a toddler. "I do have some standards, when you get down to it."

"I don't know, dahling," Cruella said thoughtfully. "The husky one had potential. And if his watch was any indicator, he's not wanting for money."

"He's young enough to be your grandson," Ursula snapped.

"Son, thank you," Cruella shot back. She sighed. "And I suppose you're right. Pity, that."

"Any other complaints?" Lily questioned.

Ursula shook her head. "I believe you might know what you're doing after all. So… what are we doing?"

"For now?" Lily said, "We're having dinner and keeping our eyes and ears open. The more we find out about what's going on in this town, the better it'll go if and when we actually need to talk to people without sounding like the newcomers we are. And if you recognize anyone you know, point them out to me."

"As long as you're not planning to approach them for autographs," Ursula smiled.

Lily took another forkful of salad.

Moe French scowled at his phone. It wasn't the device's fault; he'd stopped by the shop earlier and been assured that it was working fine. But his daughter hadn't taken his calls or answered his texts in several days. Alarm ed, he'd knocked on her door a half hour after the library closed, expecting to catch her before she either started supper or headed out to buy some.

Instead, a strange woman, one clearly dressed for an evening out, had opened the door with an expectant smile that had quickly dimmed when she'd realized that the man standing on her doorstep wasn't the person she'd been expecting. Moe had been startled at first. Then he'd realized that his daughter had a friend over. Maybe they were about to head off on some sort of girls' night out. And anyone who might be able to get his daughter spending less time with the beast she'd married was a good person for her to have in her life.

So, when this woman, this Astrid had politely informed him that Belle had moved back into Rumpelstiltskin's house and that she—Astrid—was currently subletting the apartment, he'd been horrified. He hadn't had the gumption to storm over to the former Dark One's abode to rescue his daughter; Rumpelstiltskin might no longer be able to wield magic power, but that didn't mean he was without magical objects. Not to mention the very unmagical—but no less deadly for it—Walther PPK that Moe had already seen the business end of once. He hadn't yet tried to confront his daughter at the library, though it was coming. Instead, he'd left messages, pleading with her to get in touch with him. Thus far, there had been no response.

Moe paced back and forth in his living room. It wasn't the first time that Belle had tried cutting him out of her life, and while he didn't want to push things, he also didn't trust that leaving her where she was, with the monster she'd married, was wise or safe. He'd bewitched her… somehow. Maybe gotten the Queen to do it; they were certainly chummy these days. He half-wished that the two of them would be having an affair; it might be the one thing that would tear the blinders from his
daughter's eyes at this point. Not that he wanted Belle to be hurt in that way; he just wanted her to come to her senses!

This was all the Dark One's fault. And if the Dark One was truly gone—and Moe wasn't certain he actually believed it—well, Rumpelstiltskin was still here. And his daughter, heiress to the duchy of Avonlea, could certainly do better than a crippled peasant deserter who looked old enough to be her father and was probably old enough to be her great-grandfather!

And if he could only manage to talk with her, he knew he could make her see it.

Ursula's breath caught as the three people made their way to a table. At Lily's questioning look, she picked up her napkin and hastily scrawled: *short hair=Snow White; man=Charming; longer hair=Regina.* Lily glanced at it, nodded, and shoved the missive into her pocket. "Can we listen in?" she asked in an undertone.

Ursula frowned. "Not really. I can cast a spell that will project what they're saying, but without the right components, it won't be focused. It'd broadcast the conversation across the entire room. They'd know it in an instant."

Lily nodded glumly. "Okay. Let's trade seats."

"Pardon?"

"I can read lips," Lily said. "Sort of. I mean, I'll only be able to pick up what someone actually facing me is saying. And only if they're looking up and nobody's blocking. But picking up a quarter of the conversation is better than picking up none of it, and the more we can figure out about what's going on, the less likely we'll be to ask questions about stuff everyone living here ought to know."

"Actually, dahling," Cruella said, "there's a better way." She looked out the window and frowned. "Interesting," she murmured. "Eastern whip-poor-wills usually aren't around at this time of year. But this one's found a steady food source and opted not to migrate."

"Sorry?" Lily said, just as Cruella opened the window. Almost at once, a bird with mottled plumage, some ten inches long soared into the restaurant to perch on a hanging lamp.

"Ursula," Cruella said, "be a dear and camouflage the sweet little spy, will you?"

Ursula sighed. "Just make sure the sweet little spy doesn't move around so much," she said. "I've been spending power like it was water today and I haven't got enough juice left for a proper invisibility spell. Best I can do is sort of use a glamor to camouflage it so it blends in with its surroundings."

"You can't disguise it so it'll look like a sparrow?" Lily asked.

Before Lily could answer, Cruella cut in, "Sparrows are diurnal, dahling. Normally, I wouldn't expect anyone here to notice or care. But that's Snow White we're looking at. Much as it pains me to admit it, she just might know bird habits better than I do."

Meanwhile, Ursula was already focusing the majority of her attention on the whip-poor-will. "All right," she said. "Spell's cast. Give it a minute to catch and it should hold. But if Tweety Pie moves…"

"Then I'll stuff him and mount him on my newest chapeau," Cruella said. "But he won't." She
smiled at the light fixture as the bird slowly faded from view. "Will you, dahling?"

"How does this work?" Lily asked.

Cruella smiled. "The bird will relay to me everything it overhears. It won't understand, mind you, but it will pass everything on. At which point, I'll transcribe it and we can all pore over it together. From past experience, some things will be a bit garbled and the spelling might get interesting, but if we read it aloud, we ought to be able to make sense out of it."

"Back at the farmhouse," Ursula said firmly. "We're not having a recitation of eavesdroppings here. And try to impress upon your potential millinery accessory the need to ensure that it doesn't release any other droppings if it isn't to blow its cover."

Cruella's smile broadened.

Regina had spent several hours in her vault earlier. And while she'd been checking her spell books for a solution to the Charmings' problem as she'd promised, she'd also been carefully considering other factors. Now, her tone, though apologetic, was firm.

"It's just not worth the risk," she said. "I know you want to set things right, and under most circumstances, I'd be willing to help. But the risk to the town is just too great. I went up against Maleficent once, and that time? She was holding back."

"Sorry?" David asked.

Regina sighed heavily. "I'd traded away Rumple's curse to her for the sleeping spell. And," she nodded to Snow, "once that was broken, and you arranged for Rumple to protect you from any harm I could cause in our realm, well, I decided I had to get you into a different realm. Which meant I needed to get the curse back from her. Unfortunately for me, she refused to part with it. As I recall, she thought it was too dangerous a thing to ever actually use. We fought, I won, and, some months later, we all ended up here. But all the while she and I were at each other's throats, she was trying to talk me out of my plans. Her heart just... wasn't in the battle."

Her voice took on a faint edge. "I don't think we'll be able to say the same thing this time. Even if she believes you when you try to tell her that you had no idea that the Apprentice was going to banish her child to another realm, that won't excuse your having kidnapped the egg in the first place. And as far as why you did it..." She shook her head. "I know you've already been beating yourselves up over it and I'm not about to pick up a cudgel and join in. But do you really expect her to be forgiving of your infusing her unborn child with Darkness?"

"Wait," David said. "I don't understand. I mean... Maleficent was, well... Dark. Why would her daughter's added Darkness be a problem?"

Regina gave him a hard look. "It's one thing to choose Darkness. It's another to have it thrust upon you. The two of you virtually ensured that Maleficent's daughter would never have the chance to be anything else and I wouldn't think she'd thank you for it. But even if you hadn't taken her child," Regina continued, "that still doesn't alter the fact that you," the look she now turned on David was penetrating, "force-fed her Rumple's magic restoring potion. I imprisoned her under the library for twenty-eight years and kept her around to guard the failsafe device after your daughter killed her. Expecting her to be in any mood to listen stretches credulity. Expecting her to hear any of us out and then smile and agree to let bygones be bygones elongates it past all recognition. I know we discussed this earlier, but after careful consideration, we can't take the risk. At least, I can't. I won't. For this town and everyone in it to have its best chance," she intoned, "I'm sorry. You're going to
Back at the farmhouse, Cruella read out what she'd transcribed in a voice devoid of empathy or inflection, taking no notice of the reactions it elicited in the others. When she was done, she looked up and smiled brightly. "And that's the whole of it," she proclaimed. Her smile dimmed slightly. "Why, dahlings! Whatever is the matter?"

Ursula blinked. "You don't know?" she demanded.

Cruella shook her head. "I had enough trouble deciphering what the spy overheard without paying attention to the meaning. Why. What did I miss?"

"My mother," Lily said hollowly, "is dead."

"Lily…" Ursula reached out to her but the younger woman shook her head.

"Not now," she snapped.

Cruella sighed. "Well, that's a blow. We could have used her help. Ah, well. I suppose we're on our own, then."

"Cruella!" Ursula said sharply.

"What? It's not as though she'll miss her; she never even met her."

"You really are a—"

"No," Lily said, her voice still hollow. "She's right. I never met her. And now, thanks to Emma and the Evil Queen," her eyes went flat, "I never will. From what you've just said, there's a way to resurrect her that they've just ruled out because they aren't prepared to face her wrath. Well," she said slowly, "I hope they're ready for mine."
Chapter Nineteen

August stopped by the shop the next morning, bright and early, soon after Rumple had opened for the day. "I'm sorry I can't be of more help," he said. "But, I mean, even when you and I first met, if I hadn't known who you were, I wouldn't necessarily have clued into it. It's… not like you were much for maniacal laughter with a backdrop of thunder and lightning." His grin was teasing, but devoid of malice and Rumple smiled back in acknowledgment. Even back in the Enchanted Forest, his humor had manifested itself more in high-pitched giggles than the aforementioned 'maniacal laughter', but his path and Pinocchio's had never crossed in those days.

"Well," he said, "I suppose it's to be expected."

"I could go back again today," August offered.

Rumple shook his head. "To be fair, I'm not sure what it was I expected you to discover."

August raised an eyebrow. "Did you really want me to discover anything?"

Rumple blinked. A moment later, he shook his head. "I suppose that I was hoping you'd tell me that there was nothing to worry about," he admitted.

"Yeah, that's what I figured," August nodded. "But I just don't know. Not yet. I'm going to need more time. Unless… you don't want to know if something's wrong."

He did and he didn't. He wanted to believe that everything was fine and that this was simply one more example of his inability to accept happiness when it came to him. He'd always been one for picking and chipping away at everything positive in his life until he destroyed it and there was no reason to believe that losing his Darkness had cured him of that particular shortcoming. But hiding away from the truth didn't mean it wouldn't seek him out at the most inopportune moment. In fact, if past experience was anything to go by, it almost certainly would.

"I need to know," he admitted. "If it is what I fear, then perhaps I can help her surmount that particular hurdle. And if I'm wrong, then the sooner we can confirm it, the sooner I'll be able to put that fear to rest."

"Okay," August said, placing his hand gently on Rumple's shoulder. "I'll keep at it, then. And, hey, if you need to talk, you know you can call me, right?"

Rumple nodded, glad of the offer, even if he still had no intention of availing himself of it.

Cruella went to bed early, while Ursula watched a late-night talk show on the television. When she finally turned off the set and passed by the kitchen, she realized that she wasn't the only person still awake. "Lily?"

Lily stared at the cup of coffee on the table before her. It wasn't until Ursula took two steps into the room that she said dully, "Not a great time."

"I understand."

Lily sighed heavily. "Do you? I-I know you lost your mother when you were a kid, but at least you
knew her! I've been dreaming of meeting mine ever since I found out that she wanted me, that she'd never have given me up, that…" She sucked in her breath.

"And thanks to Emma and her perfect family, that's not going to happen," she went on. "I'm never going to see her or talk to her or…"

Ursula started to place a hand on her shoulder, but then she remembered that Lily didn't like to be touched. Instead, she sat down in the chair that faced Lily across the table. "There might be a way," she said softly. "I mean," she added hastily when Lily looked up, "I mean, I don't know how to go about doing it, but that conversation she and the Charmings were having in the diner… I know finding out about Mal knocked you for a loop, but I think we've been overlooking one point."

"Yeah?"

Ursula smiled. "Regina was telling them that she wouldn't resurrect Mal. Not that she couldn't do it, but that she wouldn't. That means it's possible."

Lily's eyes widened and, for the first time since they'd gotten back from the diner, Ursula heard a note of excitement in her voice. "How?"

"Well, that's the thing," Ursula admitted. "I don't know. Magic isn't supposed to be able to bring back the dead. But if there's a way to do it, there are only a few people around who'd be capable of pulling it off."

"Think any of them would help?"

Ursula smiled. "Well, not knowingly, but I have a few ideas for getting around that part…"

"Uh, Grandpa?" Henry spoke up with uncharacteristic nervousness. "Is there… any way that I could have Saturday afternoon off? I'll come in early on Sunday and help out before we open or I'll make up the time after school."

Rumple raised an eyebrow. "As I recall," he remarked, "you requested this position in the first place. Rather strenuously. Not finding your duties as exciting as you'd hoped?"

"It's not that!" Henry protested. "It's the play. Or Cecily. Cecily and the play. A few of us are going to meet on our own and rehearse some of her scenes, because she can't always make the rehearsals. She spoke to Mr. Quince—he's the director—and he told her that as long as she can still learn her lines and the blocking, she can be in the show, but if she can't keep up, he'll have to get someone else to take over her part."

"So, you want to help her to… keep up," Rumple stated.

Henry hesitated. "You know, in the play, she's… kind of… my love interest."

Rumple's eyebrows shot up. "No, I didn't," he said. "But not outside the play?"

"We're friends," Henry said automatically. "But… okay, fine. When I realized that we do have to kiss on stage at the end, I kind of… I guess, you could say I've been getting myself used to the idea. And I think I'm all right with it. I mean, I do like her and all. And it's just for the play. But I don't know how I'll feel about anyone else in the part. And plus, Cicely's so good. And whoever Mr. Quince picks won't be as good, because if they were, they'd already have the part. And…" He stopped. "Anyway, some of us want to meet up outside school and go over the scenes. It's not like we can't all use more rehearsal time. And I'm the only one who has something on for Saturday
afternoon." He looked up and met his grandfather's eyes. "It's not that I don't like spending time here with you. I do! But I don't want to be the reason Cicely can't stay on top of her part and has to drop out, either."

Rumple considered. "How long would you need to rehearse?" he asked finally. "One hour? Two?"

Henry thought about that. "I don't know," he admitted. "I guess it depends on how long it takes us to get it right."

"Well," Rumple said slowly, "I'll not pretend I can't manage without you. I've done so for a number of years, after all. However, I must admit I'll miss your presence. And, this isn't the first time that you've brought up both the play and your classmate in conversation."

"I'm sorry," Henry said quickly. "I guess I should be focused more on my work when I'm here."

"Not at all," Rumple said, smiling now. "Actually," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "I confess I'm more than a little curious about this piece that's so captured your interest. Thus far, I've refrained from seeking out a copy; reading something meant to be performed generally pales in comparison to a live recital. Suppose," he suggested, "you come here in the morning to perform your usual duties. After lunch, you may go off with your fellow thespians and practice as you suggest. And then," he continued, with a peculiar mix of apprehension and hope, "assuming you're satisfied with the results of your rehearsal, perhaps you might want to share them with me?"

"Y-you mean… you want to see the scenes we're going to practice?" Henry asked.

"Well," Rumple hedged, "if you're amenable, of course. It's a request, not a requirement." He shook his head, still smiling but somewhat more sadly. "I'm not laying out the terms for a deal."

Henry's eyes widened slightly. Then he grinned. "Yeah, okay. Sure! I'll have to ask the others, but… yeah. If you want us to."

Rumple's answering smile was still somewhat tentative. "You might get a more favorable response if you assure them I'd not turn anyone into a toad should a line be missed here or there."

Henry laughed. "I'll tell them," he said, reaching for a polishing cloth. "Uh, Grandpa?" He held up the bottle of furniture polish. "You wouldn't have any more of this renewing potion, would you? I'm getting low."

A glint of amusement shone in Rumple's eyes. "Let me check the back room," he said, chuckling a bit himself as he reached for his cane.

It was with a trepidation that wasn't entirely feigned that Lily stepped into the library the following morning. She had Ursula's warning about the glamor spell still ringing in her ears. It wouldn't last longer than eight hours maximum and would likely begin to fray in about half that time. She wouldn't feel any different when it did, and there was no way to be certain whether the first signs of unraveling would affect her face, her voice, or her outfit. She checked her sweater once more and lifted her arm upwards in an approximation of a wave, taking care that her sleeve didn't slide downward to expose her wrist. The glamor spell was concealing her birthmark; she'd asked Ursula to make sure of that. There might be only one person in this town likely to understand its significance, but it was the sort of thing people tended to remember, and she couldn't risk Emma finding out about her presence until the right moment arrived.

No, for now, she was here on a fact-finding mission. If there was one thing she'd gleaned from the conversations last night—not the one Cruella had been monitoring, but the ones taking place at the
other tables that she'd been following out of boredom—it was that they'd picked a good time to come to Storybrooke. While she, Ursula, and Cruella were the town's latest newcomers, they weren't the only ones who hadn't spent the last thirty years here. Roughly three months ago, a large number of denizens of the Enchanted Forest had arrived and, while they were assimilating well, they were still learning the lay of the land, adjusting to technologies the others took for granted, and, on the whole, asking the sorts of questions that Lily and the others needed answers to.

And while Lily wasn't about to go stopping people on the street to question them, it occurred to her that if one needed to do research, the library was probably the most logical place to start. Surely there would be some books of local history on the shelves.

As she made her way to the catalog—one of those old-fashioned banks of drawers that had been on their way out when she'd been in high school—a friendly voice called from the desk, "Good morning."

She spun to find herself looking into a pair of equally-friendly blue eyes. "Hi," she mumbled. "Uh… I'm just looking."

The librarian nodded encouragingly. "Well, you're in the right place. Let me know if you need any help."

Overly-friendly people always got her hackles up. As did people who smiled too much. Still, she forced herself to smile back. "Thanks," she said, turning back to the catalog. She pulled out the drawer labeled STI–STR and rifled through it. A moment later, she frowned, perplexed. How could there be nothing on Storybrooke? She flipped back through the cards. Storyboarding… Storybooks… Storying… Nothing.

"Having trouble?" The librarian was suddenly behind her and Lily tried not to jump. "I'm sorry," she went on hastily. "I don't mean to pry. But if you're looking for something specific, perhaps I can help."

Lily sighed. "Just information on the town."

The librarian smiled. "I guess you're one of the Sherwood Forest refugees," she said.

Lily nodded.

"I'm Belle."

"Starla." Maybe she should have given a different name. Maybe that wasn't a common name in the Enchanted Forest or Sherwood Forest or wherever it was she was supposed to be from. But the librarian—Belle—kept smiling.

"I know this town can be a bit overwhelming at first," she said warmly, "but you'll get used to it. I don't know that we've any books specifically about it, but I can point you toward some on the local geography. Or if there's anything specific you want to know about the town, perhaps I can give you some answers."

Lily gave a short, incredulous laugh. "Everything!" she exclaimed. "I feel so out of place here it's like I'll never fit in!"

Belle laughed back, but there was nothing cruel about it. "Well, let's see if we can't make a start, at least. At least," she added, "before you need to head back to class."

Lily remembered that she was wearing a school uniform. "Do I have to?" she wheedled. "I mean, I
think I'll learn more here than I will in math or civics this afternoon!"

Belle sighed. "Well," she allowed, "I suppose it's not really my business. But I shouldn't think you'd want to make a habit of it."

Lily beamed.

Rumple looked up as the bell over the shop door jangled. "Well," he murmured. "I can't say I've seen you come in here before. What can I do for you?"

Robin Hood approached the counter somewhat nervously, but his voice was steady when he spoke. "I need your help."

Rumple sighed. "Now why doesn't that surprise me, I wonder," he murmured. "Well, then. What is it you want?"

Now, Robin did hesitate. "It's not for me, actually. I need your help for Roland."

"Your boy?" Rumple asked, surprise sharpening his voice. But his eyes softened as he took in the other man's demeanor. "Why?" he asked a bit more gently. "What's happened?"

Robin sighed. "Do you truly need me to go into detail? Much has befallen him in the last two years. And, while he seems to handle things well enough during the day, his nights are another matter. On Regina's recommendation, he's been seeing Dr. Hopper, but I was wondering whether there was any solution you might suggest."

Rumple winced. "I suppose I ought to thank you for alluding so delicately to my role in the affair," he murmured. "Truly, if I hadn't been compelled by the dagger…"

"That's only part of it," Robin said, when he realized that Rumple wasn't about to finish his sentence. "By my reckoning, the trouble began back in our land. Your son needed a way to reach Emma and Henry in Neverland. Against my better judgment, we used Roland to summon the shadow, which Baelfire then used to travel to that realm. Roland was only four at the time. And while his encounter with the shadow was brief, it was frightening."

"I can well believe that," Rumple nodded.

The smile that graced the outlaw's face was faint and fleeting. "Not long afterwards," Robin continued, "he was attacked by a flying monkey. It was another brief encounter, one Regina resolved handily, but still rather unnerving. But then, came the shock of being uprooted and transported to this new land. And yes, I'll not deny that his encounter with you, or rather, the shock of finding himself the target of one of my arrows…" His expression grew pained. "Was there no other way?"

Rumple closed his eyes. "The dagger compelled me to obey any order issued by its wielder as swiftly and expeditiously as possible. Zelena ordered me to get her sister's heart. Had it been somewhere in plain view, or even had I known where you were keeping it, I could have retrieved it through magical means. Sadly, neither was the case. I knew you'd never hand it over if I asked for it. I didn't want to threaten your boy, but I also knew that to save his life, you'd give me what I needed. Had I threatened you, you'd surely have ordered your men to stand firm. Had I threatened one of your men, there was a chance they'd do the same. There… might have been another way," he allowed, "but I was compelled to select the one that would achieve the desired result in the quickest amount of time." He shook his head. "Still not an excuse, I know."
But Robin was nodding, and when he spoke, there was no recrimination in his voice. "I thought it might have had something to do with… old business. In Oz," he added with a sigh. "I'm relieved it didn't."

"What?" Rumple's eyes widened. "That business was between you and me. Your boy wasn't part of it; he wasn't even born then. No, I'd not have visited that debt on him. And even if you hadn't paid it in full by helping my son on that earlier occasion, you did in New York when you had me admitted to the hospital following my attack. Our slate is clean."

Robin absorbed that silently. Then he nodded again, smiling a bit for the first time. "I did wonder," he admitted. "In any event," he went on, sober once more, "being uprooted again after he'd settled into Storybrooke when we left for New York, and then your… well. I suppose, you didn't quite 'burst' into our new home, but your appearance there was unexpected, to say nothing of your collapse… and then well. Finding out that the woman he thought to be his mother was the witch, seeing his nanny turn into a monster…"

Emma and August had shared the details of that encounter with him. Rumple nodded. "He has been having a time of it, hasn't he?"

"Night terrors," Robin nodded. "I don't know if they're getting worse, or merely more frequent, but I was hoping that there might be something that could help. It needn't be magical," he added. "But I'd hope it might be stronger than chamomile tea."

"Dr. Hopper had no suggestions?"

Robin frowned. "He did mention medications that might help. But he cautioned me that each would have other effects, some of which sound worrisome. He's hoping it won't come to that. As am I," he added.

Rumple pressed his lips together and nodded. "I can't cast magic," he admitted. "Not now. But a magical solution might yet be possible. Charms and potions are, well, rather like recipes. Blend the proper ingredients in the proper proportions and one gets the proper results." He took a breath. "Come back in three days," he said. "I'll hope to have something by then."

Robin nodded. "Thank you. As far as price…?"

Rumple shook his head. "There isn't one. But if you could bring your boy with you when you come, there is one thing I do owe him." He frowned. "Or rather, two."

"Two?" Robin echoed, eyebrows flying up in surprise.

Rumple nodded. And while his lips curved in a slight smile, his eyes were serious. "An apology and an explanation. I can't say either will help. But they won't hurt, either."

Robin regarded him for a moment, nonplussed. Then, almost of its own accord, his hand shot out to clasp Rumple's shoulder. He squeezed it once, then turned and hurried out of the shop.

Rumple watched him go, waiting for the door to shut before he touched his shoulder wonderingly where Robin's hand had been.

Lily left the library smiling triumphantly. Sometimes, all it took was a smile and a few indications of interest to get another person to open up. She got the feeling that Belle didn't have many people to talk to. Well, the town's loss was her gain; in just over two hours, Lily had gotten more information than she could have if she'd sat in the diner eavesdropping on the clientele for two
solid weeks.

As she walked back to the farmhouse, she was mentally reviewing everything Belle had told her.

*Emma broke the curse. She had a boy she gave up for adoption.* (She was still trying to wrap her head around that one. If Emma had hated her time in the system so much, how could she have risked her own child ending up in it?) *Regina adopted him, which means that he's also Snow White and Prince Charming's grandson. Which might explain why Regina's friendly with them now. And his father was Rumpelstiltskin's son, and Belle's his wife, and...*

Oh, she should have taken notes. She thought she had the main details straight—at least, about the people who mattered most to her plans. But Ursula and Cruella would want to know about everyone.

Lily was glad she had more than three miles to walk. Hopefully, it would give her the time she needed. And if she forgot anything, well, she could always go back to the library tomorrow and chat up Belle again.

In fact, if Belle was Rumpelstiltskin's wife, chatting her up was probably one of the smartest things she could do.

Lily wasn't often the center of attention. In fact, she'd generally made a career out of sitting on the sidelines, unobtrusive and inconspicuous, observing those around her, and learning all she could about what made them tick and what she needed to do to keep them from interfering with her life. It wasn't that she necessarily had some scheme or plot fermenting at the back of her mind. Most of the time, she really didn't. But when you were on your own, living from hand to mouth, scraping by without friends, family, or any other safety net, and knowing full well that if anything were to happen to you, nobody would even notice that you were gone, well, you did your best to make sure you could tell which way the wind was blowing and make sure that it was generally at your back.

She knew she wasn't particularly likeable. Her adoptive parents had rejected her. Emma had turned from her twice. And in her mind's eye, she saw a long parade of abusers, manipulators, and indifferent observers, uncaring throngs who didn't care how she suffered, so long as it didn't involve them... No, Lily had learned early that she was safest in the background, so long as she stayed alert to the people and events moving on about her, evading what might harm her and taking advantage of what could benefit her.

Still, she had to admit that it felt good to have Ursula and Cruella hanging on her every word.

"You mean," Cruella snorted, "the Dark One actually went and *married* the little mouse? I never thought he'd actually take up with the help."

"Didn't Joey Feinberg find you checking hats in a nightclub?" Ursula murmured.

"That was temporary, dahling," Cruella smirked. "Just until I found someone in this land who could make me more established. Once *Joseph* started courting me, of course, I gave it all up."

"Still," Ursula said, "from what you're telling us, it doesn't sound as if Regina's playing a part. It seems she really has cozied up to the Charmings."

Cruella nodded. "I might have thought she was acting," she drawled. "I mean, it's not like old Leopold ever guessed what was going on in her head. Or little Snow."

"Not the sharpest swordfish in the sea, either of them," Ursula pointed out.
"No," Cruella went on, "and when it comes to Darkness, the more you let it out to play, the less it wants to come inside when the game's over. I don't think she could pretend for long. Strange as it seems, walking back to the light would be marginally easier for her than staying in the darkness while trying to pull the wool over everyone's eyes, I think." Her pensive mood passed and she shrugged. "Not that I've ever bothered experimenting on that front, of course, dahling. Once I found out how delicious things were on the shady side of the street, well, I never looked back."

Ursula sighed. "You make a good point, though." She looked at Lily.

"What we overheard last night didn't necessarily prove Regina had switched sides. Light or Dark, most rulers would think twice about resurrecting someone who could lay waste to their dominion in a heartbeat. But couple that with what you found out this afternoon, and I think it's obvious that revealing our presence to her and trying to enlist her help would be a waste of time."

Lily nodded glumly at that.

"Mind you," Ursula went on, "I'm still not convinced about Rumple."

"Belle said he's not the Dark One anymore," Lily pointed out.

"Yes, and she might believe it. But," Ursula glanced at Cruella, "he can be twisty. And he's a good deal more patient than Regina ever was. You ask me, I'd say it's to his advantage to have everyone thinking he's turned over a new leaf. And while Regina might have somehow been able to change her ways, I'm finding it much harder to believe that the Darkness would just… let its human host go."

"I don't know," Lily said dubiously. "Belle seemed pretty sure."

"Well, she would," Cruella snorted. "That little bookworm was so besotted with him back in the Enchanted Forest. I shudder to think what she must be like now. Still," she allowed, "it would be helpful to know the truth for certain."

Ursula and Lily nodded. And then, Ursula smiled. "You know," she said slowly, "there's Darkness… and then there's hatred. And while the two can often go hand in hand, they don't have to. And if you ask me, the latter can sometimes prove to be an even stronger force."

"Sorry, what?" Lily asked, with some irritation.

"It's just occurred to me," Ursula said, "that there might be someone in this town that I can talk to. Someone who owes me a favor. Among other things."

"Wait," Cruella said, eyes growing wide. "Him? What makes you think you can trust him?"

Ursula's smile turned predatory. "I don't have to trust him," she replied with a slight chortle. "I just have to use him…"

"You're going downstairs?" Belle asked, as Rumple headed for the basement door.

Rumple couldn't quite miss the dismay in her voice, as much as she tried her best to conceal it. He closed his eyes, thinking for a moment. She was trying to trust him. He knew she was. And while it would have been so much better if she didn't have her doubts, he could scarcely blame her for them.

Of course, it still hurt. Even if there was sound basis for her mistrust, even if she really should give
him the benefit of the doubt, he knew full well that he'd taken advantage of her faith in him in the past. And… And she wasn't the only one with trust issues. He was still afraid to open up, still afraid of saying or doing or wanting the wrong things, still afraid to believe those around him when they said that they wanted to be there for him if he needed support, afraid that if he ever took them up on it, they'd let him down as they—and so many others—had in the past.

It wasn't paranoia if they really were out to get you.

It wasn't cowardice to refuse to stick one's hand in a furnace.

But this was Belle, who had loved and trusted him when nobody else had. And even if she'd subsequently banished him, it had scarcely been without cause.

But if she hadn't banished him, hadn't shown how far she might go when she was angry or upset, he might not be so nervous about opening up to her now.

If she hadn't banished him, he would have still sought about until he found some excuse to shut her out. Because letting someone in was allowing oneself to become vulnerable. Opening oneself to the possibility of love and friendship meant opening oneself to the possibility of pain and betrayal. But without his Darker nature whispering at him, stoking his fears, soothing his anxieties, telling him that with its power coursing through him, he needed nothing else, well, his fears and anxieties hadn't gone away, but it was getting easier to fight through them. And if he wanted Belle in his life…

...Then he couldn't lock this part of it away from her. The others were still going to be asking for his help and, depending on circumstance, he would likely provide it. Magic, however limited, was still going to be a part of his life. And if Belle was to be, as well, then...

He took a deep breath. "I am," he said, trying to sound calm. He opened his eyes and turned back to face her. "Perhaps… you'll accompany me?"

Belle's eyes widened. "You… you want me. Downstairs. Where you do…"

"Well," Rumple brazened, "it's not as though you've never seen me work magic before." He took another breath. "And I could use another set of eyes, I think," he added softly.

Belle took a step toward him. "Why?" she asked, but without the accusatory edge he'd been half-dreading. "What is it you need to do?"

"With any luck," he replied, feeling some of his apprehension slide away, "ease a child's slumber. And perhaps make amends for my part in disturbing it." Briefly, he shared with her the details of Robin Hood's earlier visit. When he was done, Belle shook her head sorrowfully.

"The poor thing," she murmured. "And this has been going on for how long?"

"Robin didn't say precisely. Only that things seem to be getting worse. So. Somewhere in my collection of spell books is the recipe for the charm he needs. It's been a long time since I required the written word to refresh my memory. One advantage of being the Dark One was the ability to retain any spell I encountered. The same held true for my mastery of charms and potions. Once learned, the recipe stuck. Unfortunately, that talent's gone now. Perhaps, in time, it will return, or I'll develop it anew. But Robin's son shouldn't have to wait that long. So."

"So," Belle said slowly, "you need to find the recipe for that charm."

Rumple nodded. "I confess I've long been in awe of your talent for research," he said, smiling a bit
now. "And I think I have to consider that there's a greater likelihood of my erring with either the ingredients or their proportions this time out. Perhaps, if I could ask you to double-check my puttering before I pass on the charm to its recipient…?"

Belle nodded. "Of course," she said warmly, falling into step behind him. On the threshold of the stairs, she suddenly, impulsively, clasped his hand in hers and, when his disbelieving brown eyes locked on her blue ones, she gave him a small smile. "Thank you," she said, almost in a whisper, "for letting me in."

His answering smile was equally small, but no less relieved.

Leroy's eyes widened when he saw the open chest. "It's all…?" he breathed.

Killian's smile was guarded. "Real? Of course. I know better than to cheat a dwarf, mate. Particularly one on good terms with a fairy." He lifted his eyebrows. "So. Do we have a deal?"

The dwarf was still gazing, almost mesmerized, at the coins in the chest. "For that much…" he began dreamily. Then, he seemed to snap back to normal. "For that much, I'll get your ship built, Captain. I'll need to bring in a few other people." He ducked his head. "I've made fishing boats, but nothing on the scale you're asking. With the price you're offering for the job, though," he smiled, "I don't see that as a problem."

"Excellent news, Mr…"

Leroy shook his head. "The name's Leroy, Captain. Just Leroy. At least," he said with a gruff smile, "until I pick up my axe and see what the handle says."

"Sorry?"

Leroy waved his hands in his direction as a dismissal. "For now, it's just Leroy," he repeated. "Hope you won't lose this one like you did the last."

Killian shook his head. "It was traded fairly, mate. And I do think I got the better end of that deal. So. How long?"

The dwarf's brow furrowed as he seemed to run through several calculations in his head. "I want to tell you a year," he said finally, "but it might stretch to two. Maybe a month or so past that."

Killian sighed. "I can't say I don't wish it could be sooner, mate," he admitted. "But I know how long it generally takes to build a good ship and the time you're quoting me is more or less what I expected. I can commission you to build it now, or I can spend the next few weeks trying to find someone who can build it faster and in the end, I suspect I'll be coming back to you, forced to admit I can't do better, and it'll still be roughly two years before she's sea-ready. Only I'll have wasted several weeks casting a net in vain for someone who can do the job faster."

"Faster?" Leroy shrugged. "You might find someone. I don't know. But better? You won't."

"I believe you," Killian said. "So. A deal, then?"

Leroy extended his hand. Killian clasped it with his good one. "Deal," he said. "You need a lift back to town?"

Killian shook his head. "I think I'll just walk about on the docks for a bit," he said, "and try to picture my new vessel moored at one of them."

With the dwarf's departure, Killian had the marina to himself. He'd brought Leroy here to show him design elements that he fancied from among the ships in harbor. This prow, that mast… and soon, not tomorrow or the next day, but soon, one would be his. No ship would ever replace the *Jolly Roger* in his heart, but he'd traded that ship fairly for the bean that had carried him to Emma in New York and he didn't regret having done so. Still, a captain without a ship was—

Something cold, slimy, and reeking of seaweed slapped his face and wrapped about his mouth, gagging him and jerking him out of his reverie, while another band, strong as steel pinned his arms to his sides. And an equally-cold and somewhat-hoarse voice hissed in his ear, "Hello, Hook..."
Chapter Twenty

One of the occupational hazards of being a pirate was coming face to face with one's previous victims. (Or, if one was ruthless enough to dispatch them to the Underworld before moving on, with their families.) Killian Jones had faced a number of such victims over the years. One such recent encounter had even been with a mermaid, or at least, he'd thought so at the time. All the same, his blood ran even colder than the clammy tentacle that was now wrapped about the lower half of his face.

"I need answers from you, Captain," Ursula gritted, "so I guess I'll have to free your mouth. But know this," she continued as a third tentacle coiled about his throat, joining the two already securing him. "A reticulated python can exert around six pound of pressure when it constricts around its prey. One of these?" The tentacle about his throat tightened just enough to be uncomfortable, "I'm thinking, oh... eight or nine. So, I'm about to ungag you. If you shout, scream, or in any way try to alert someone regarding your predicament..." She smiled as Killian wheezed, struggling for breath. "Do we have an understanding?"

Eyes bulging, Killian tried to nod. Still smiling, Ursula retracted the tentacle about his face and loosened the one about his throat, still keeping it close enough that he could feel its presence. She waited a moment for the pirate to finish wheezing and gasping in fresh air. As soon as he had breath enough to start cursing her, though, she tightened her hold on his throat.

"That's a warning, Hook," she said. "You'll answer me truthfully and civilly, or..."

"All right, all right," the pirate acquiesced between wheezes. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, first," Ursula said, "you can tell me why Captain Hook, scourge of the sea, is suddenly cozying up with the Dark One."

The pirate turned his head away from her and Ursula let him for almost a full twenty seconds, before wrenching it back to face her.

"Well?"

Hook exhaled through his teeth. "One learns, in my line of work, when to fight the current and when to ride with it. Currently, the Dark One has powerful supporters and I can't afford to have them all turning against me at the moment." He met Ursula's eyes squarely. "Let's just say, I'm
forgoing a few battles in order to win the war."

"Some might say you're being downright friendly toward him."

"I've been chasing him down for a long time," the pirate snapped, irritation almost palpable in his voice. "To be so close to vengeance and yet so far gnaws at me. But if he suspects my motives, before I've the opportunity to settle the score, then that vengeance will be farther off still. I grant I might have been more of a hothead when first we met, but long years and worthy foes have taught me something of patience. I'm playing a part while I await my best chance."

Ursula considered that. Then she nodded slowly. "You and I," she said, "have something to settle as well. But, like you, I can forgo my vengeance for a time. And if you help me, perhaps I can stave it off indefinitely."

Hook regarded her warily. "What sort of 'help' did you have in mind?"

The sea witch smiled.

"I… uh… think I may have it," Belle said hesitantly, looking up from the heavy volume with the cracked red leather binding.

Rumple was at her side at once. "Let me see," he murmured. A moment later, he shook his head. "That would work," he said, smiling a bit to blunt his disappointment, "if Roland were a bit older. I used this one to make a charm for August a few weeks ago. But adder's ear moss can be dangerous to pre-adolescents. However…” He flipped the page and his smile brightened. "I believe that this will suit admirably." He tried not to smile at her excited intake of breath as his eyes panned the list of ingredients. "Lavender, valerian root, magnolia bark…” He frowned at the next one and turned to one of his units of shelves. No small vials and philters here; the smallest earthenware jar in this area would probably hold half a liter, while the largest would hold three times that. He checked the labels carefully. When he found squat, opaque vessel he needed, he uncorked it and sniffed with dismay.

"What is it?" Belle asked. "What's wrong?"

Rumple sighed. "Tomte thistle," he replied, holding out the jar to her. "Fresh, or at least, it should be. Unfortunately, the preservation spell must have run its course. See for yourself; it's dried out. Completely useless." He'd have to look in the others too, though he'd lay odds that the spell had failed in the moment when he'd driven his dagger through Pan's heart and into his own. When a spell-caster died, so too did their spells. There was no literature on the subject of whether a return to life would renew them. Understandably. So far as Rumple knew, he was the first spell-caster to have died and come back. He should have thought to check these jars while he still could have done something about them.

Belle gave the brown husks in the vessel an unhappy glance. "Can we get more?"

Rumple shook his head. "It's not native to this realm." He frowned. "I wonder…”

"Rumple?"

He hesitated. Just how much faith did he have in his magic now? Then, sighing, he reached under the counter and pulled out the small volume that Tink had given him.

"I haven't seen that one," Belle said.
Rumple shook his head. "It's a loan. It may prove to be of some use."

"A… a loan. One of Regina's?" she tried not to let her distaste show.

"Tinker Bell," Rumple replied. "I… well. I was hoping to be able to acquire some basic grounding in light magic. Thus far, it's proving to be an uphill battle. But while I'm still struggling to master the first spell," he turned to the page on removing excess salt from soup for emphasis, "I think that there may be something of use a bit further in." He began turning the pages slowly. "She did say that there was a spell in here to keep ground spices from going stale. If there's a way to…" He stopped. "Here. Well. It doesn't look especially complicated." He studied the words on the page carefully and tried to draw them into his mind. He was glad that Belle wasn't asking him what he was doing. In fact, she was looking carefully at the table before her, probably realizing that if he knew she was watching him, it would interfere with his focus. He didn't need any such interference now. Magic was, above all, an emotional endeavor. He had to concentrate on what he meant to do, on the boy he was trying to help. In his mind's eye, he pictured Roland as he'd seen him most vividly: a child in the woods surrounding the town, his eyes wide with fear and confusion. Rumple did have something of a soft spot for children, particularly dark-haired boys with no mothers in their lives. If he could get this spell to catch, he could help the boy and perhaps others. He could…

He sucked in his breath and waved his hand over the jar. Nothing. The leaves inside remained withered and brown.

"Rumple?"

He shook his head. "I really hoped that would work."

"Could… could you try again?"

Rumple took another breath and let it out. "Not now. Magic requires belief. And each failure makes that belief harder." His face crumpled as he lifted Tink's book for emphasis. "These spells," he continued miserably, "are ranked in order of difficulty. If I can't even master the first one, what hope have I of mastering the… the…" He closed the book with a sharp snap. "Well, I suppose it doesn't matter which number it is. Right now, at this moment, it's beyond me. They all are."

Belle's hand was on his shoulder. "It's all right," she said. "We'll find some other way. Perhaps Tinker Bell could…"

If he could get to her when Blue wasn't present. And if Blue didn't return unexpectedly. As grateful as he was for Tinker Bell's assistance, he knew that her willingness to help him had not been without repercussions. And while he didn't know the price the Blue had demanded of her, it was safe to assume that if Tinker Bell continued to help him, the consequences would be more severe each time. It was enough that she'd extended herself once. He couldn't ask her to keep doing so.

He pressed his lips together firmly, trying to keep his frustration from erupting in tears. He needed to calm down. When he was calmer, he might be able to come up with a better solution. He reached up and squeezed Belle's hand, gently removing it with a sad smile. Then he walked over to a corner table and picked up his drop spindle and the basket of combed wool rolags, ready to be spun to thread. As Belle watched, he attached the leader thread and reached into the basket.

"I don't think I've ever seen you spin something that wasn't straw before," Belle murmured.

"This time," Rumple murmured, "it's not about magic. It's about relaxation." He gave the drop spindle a twirl and began feeding the wool to it, sinking into the soothing rhythm.
Belle watched him for a moment. Then she went back to the spell books. "Maybe there's another recipe," she said. "I'll keep looking."

He nodded and began a simple breathing exercise, closing his eyes, while he continued feeding the wool to the spindle. He wasn't sure how long he kept at it, before Belle exclaimed…

"Rumple!"

Jerked back to reality, he started and released the drop spindle. It whirled in reverse, the thread he'd been spinning reverting back to wool fiber, which flew about the basement workroom, covering every surface with a thin layer of short fine hairs. He wasn't sure whether to curse or to cry, but he knew he oughtn't to do either. It was just thread that he could spin again. No true harm had been done. No…

"I'm sorry," Belle breathed, almost immediately. "I didn't mean to startle you. But the thread… it-it turned golden!"

Rumple's eyes widened. Then they darted about the room. Search though he did, he could spy neither glint nor glimmer. "Are you quite certain?" he asked, fighting to keep his voice calm. "I thought I saw something like that the other day, but I couldn't be sure. I…" He stopped as Belle, looked down at the ingredients he'd been assembling on the worktable. Then, with a wondering expression on her face, she thrust the open tomte thistle jar toward him.

"I think some of the thread bits might have floated inside," she whispered.

As he took the jar, the fragrance—a combination of cinnamon, vanilla, and nutmeg, mingled with an earthy aroma he couldn't compare to any other—hit him almost at once. Incredulous, he looked down into it. Green twigs bristling with short spikey thorns and cuplike, indigo-blue flower-heads greeted him.

"I…" His mouth opened and closed several times. "I… Well." He felt exhausted, as though he'd just run a marathon, but it was a good kind of exhaustion. "It would appear I have magic," he said, setting the jar down carefully.

"Light magic," Belle whispered, reaching across the table to seize his hand.

Killian Jones returned to Granny's Bed and Breakfast with his head spinning. He'd had no idea that Ursula was in this town; he'd been under the impression that the Dark Curse had only ripped away those who had been dwelling in the Enchanted Forest, not Neverland. Then again, he'd scarcely bothered keeping tabs on the sea witch once he'd destroyed her dreams. She'd been a mermaid once, and mermaids could cross realms. Who knew where she might have traveled after they'd parted ways?

And now, she wanted to use him against Rumpelstiltskin. Well. It wouldn't be the first time that one villain had tried to manipulate him into attacking another. Pan. Greg and Tamara. Regina. Zelena. Rumpelstiltskin. Hell, he might as well add Ursula's father to that list. And now, the daughter was following suit.

The wise play, of course, would be to tell Emma what was in the wind. Except that it was one thing for a lass to know that she was being courted by a pirate—particularly one trying to leave his past behind—when she didn't know everything that past entailed. Tell her that he'd been disillusioned by the king he'd served who'd sent his ship in search of a deadly poison that would decimate an opposing force in a way too heinous for any dispute? Aye, she could understand why he'd turn to
piracy, particularly when she learned that the mission had cost him the life of his brother. Tell her that he'd been seeking revenge on the Dark One for murdering the woman he loved? She hadn't condemned him. And certainly, she understood that he had sunk vessels that had fired on him, robbed, pillaged, and killed when necessary. But to her, those deeds were in the abstract. He'd given her bare facts—he'd sunk ships and people had died. He hadn't shared the details of a battle fought at sunset, when they'd put so many foes to the sword that it was impossible to know how much of the red in the water could be attributed to their blood and how much to the sinking sun's reflection on the waves. He hadn't described the lengths he'd ordered his men to go in questioning captives as to the locations of their valuables. And if he hadn't dared to share those parts with her, how could he tell her what he'd done to Ursula?

_Because the Sea Witch as good as threatened to tell Emma herself. Happiness for happiness. I stole her joy and she thinks to take mine in return. And where have I heard that tale spun before?_

Should Emma learn that he'd had a hand in _creating_ the sea witch—who clearly seemed bent of some mischief in Storybrooke, well! No matter that the deed had been perpetrated so long in the past. The seed he'd sown on that long ago day was coming to fruition and though the fruit might be rotten… He shook his head. Emma loathed it when he hid things from her, but he might have no better choice.

Because something Ursula had asked him before sending him on his way still perturbed him.

"Are you so sure that the Dark One has forgiven you? Maybe he's just biding his time, lulling you into letting your guard down, the better to surprise you later. After all, that's what he did to Cruella, Mal, and me. So why should you be any different?"

Maybe Rumpelstiltskin had been a little _too_ amenable to reinstating their truce. Maybe Killian _was_ deluding himself, thinking that the crocodile wasn't waiting to snap his jaws shut about him. Why, hadn't Rumpelstiltskin even admitted as much when Killian had broached the subject?

_Oh, come now, captain. As much as I agree that it's time we put the past behind us, do you really imagine we can shake hands and end an enmity that's persisted for going on two centuries so easily?_

Maybe, when he'd gone on to say that it would take time and effort on both their parts, he'd only wanted Killian to _believe_ that he was willing to meet those requirements but, come to think of it, Rumpelstiltskin might just have been stating the prerequisites for peace, not agreeing to work toward it. So, Suppose, Killian thought, that he continued working with the assumption that Rumpelstiltskin was willing to move on from the past and, so believing, talked to Emma and the others about Ursula… And then, once Ursula was soundly defeated, while everyone was celebrating the victory, Rumpelstiltskin were to _then_ waylay him and exact the vengeance he'd meant to all along?

Killian's eyes narrowed. Ursula had promised to help him defeat the Dark One. (He'd seen no reason to disabuse her of the idea that Rumpelstiltskin was still he.) But Ursula had no reason to help him! She hated him and for good reason. _Unless, she was trying to pit him against Rumpelstiltskin to keep both of them from interfering with whatever she was planning! And if that were the case…_ If that were the case, then she might _also_ be accosting Rumpelstiltskin, perhaps at this very moment, trying to get _him_ to reassume their old feud. Something, Killian allowed, Rumpelstiltskin might be all too delighted to do. Particularly if the former Dark One had accepted a truce, not because he wanted to let bygones be bygones, but because he'd been fighting for his life and knowing that there would be one less person out there bent on taking it had been worth it to the old croc—
He slapped his forehead with a groan of frustration. If he could only be sure! He had no desire to betray Rumpelstiltskin, not unless the man was even now planning to stab him in the back. In which case, all bets were off and it was best to strike now, and not allow him the opportunity. But if Rumpelstiltskin truly had no designs on his life, if Ursula hadn't approached him as well, or if she had and he'd turned her down…

Killian sat awake for a long time, thinking things over and weighing his options. And when, at last, he decided that he might as well try to get some sleep and hope that an answer would suggest itself in the morning, the first pale fingers of dawn were stealing through the window curtains before fitful slumber finally claimed him.

"You seem unusually perturbed," Rumple greeted him as he pushed open the door to the shop. As was his wont, the former Dark One was polishing some knickknack or other behind the counter.

Killian nodded. "I need to talk to you," he said, stepping inside.

"Well, I'm hardly preventing you," Rumple said with a faint sneer.

Killian took a breath. "I… well. I suppose I've come to warn you."

Rumple didn't pause from his polishing. "Yeah?" he replied, sounding unperturbed. "What about?"

"The sea witch," Killian said, lowering his voice. "She's in town to settle old scores. And she's offered to forgive me an offense I once committed against her if I betray you to her."

Now, he did set the knickknack aside. "Go on."

Killian hesitated. "While, in the past, I might have jumped at the opportunity, I think it might be wiser if we were to join forces against her instead. She," he winced, "has no reason to think kindly of me at all. And if she's willing to ignore the history I have with her in exchange for my getting you out of the way, methinks it means you might be the only person who can stop her."

A peculiar expression stole over Rumple's face. "Indeed," he said thoughtfully, beckoning Killian closer. "Indeed. I do believe you're learning, Captain." Smiling, he extended his hand across the counter. Killian took it. And then, Rumple reached across with his other hand and tore Killian's heart from his chest.

As Killian doubled over, groaning and clutching at his chest, Rumple continued, "Unfortunately, I can't take the chance that you aren't trying some subterfuge of your own."

"What?" Killian managed to gasp. And then he saw Ursula step out of the back room to join Rumple—no, to join the Dark One, now with skin as scaly and golden as it had been at their second meeting.

The Dark One giggled. "Did you truly think I could bury the old hatchet someplace other than in your neck? The sea witch and I have an understanding, you see. One I suspect you'd already discovered when you came in here hoping to drive a wedge between us."

"She'll stab you in the back, just as you're doing to me!" Killian groaned.

For answer, Rumple took the sea witch's hand in his. "I rather doubt that," he said cheerfully. "For one thing, I'm doing this to your face. For another, my history with the sea witch isn't nearly as complicated as mine with you. But if time and fate should prove you right, at least I know this. You'll never have the satisfaction of knowing it." And the Dark One's hand contracted around
Killian's heart as the pirate screamed—

—And flung back his bedclothes. He was in his rented room in Granny's bed and breakfast. And, from the look of things, it was something like four bells into the forenoon watch. It had been a dream and he'd overslept.

The burning question now, though, was whether his nightmare had been a prophecy…

…Or merely the product of the fears he'd gone to bed with.

Those fears weren't ungrounded. Perhaps it was the fate of a villain to be doubted even when trying to do the right thing, but really, when had doing the right thing ever gotten him what he wanted? He'd offered his services to Emma in the Enchanted Forest, willing to forego Cora's scheming and ally with her and her companions. His honesty had gotten him chained to the wall of a giant's keep. Greg and Tamara had used tactics similar to those Ursula was using now, pitting him against Regina. He'd gone to the Evil Queen in good faith, much as he was contemplating doing with Rumpelstiltskin. And Regina had flung him into a chasm, using him as bait to distract an undead dragon. He must be mad to think that he would fare any better trusting the Crocodile.

But was trusting Ursula any saner?

Killian reached for his leather jacket, hanging on the chair by his bed, and dug his hand into the pocket. Under normal circumstances, it was a bit early for what he was about to do, but after the nightmare that had awakened him, perhaps some fortification was in order.

Fortification on the order of fermented molasses.

Lily walked down the road toward town. She was starting to know her way around now, at least in the business district. She supposed that she might as well check out the school that she was supposed to be attending before the library opened.

The same gaggle of little kids that she'd seen out the farmhouse window the other day overtook her, chattering and laughing, just as they had before. The tallest, a girl of about thirteen or so with the kind of fine straight hair that never stayed tied up or pinned back, gave her a shy smile as she passed. Lily smiled back automatically, tensing up a bit until the crowd had moved a ways down the road. Then she relaxed.

She didn't want to get tied up in a conversation with the local kids, even if they seemed friendly enough. Certainly not when she had no intention of attending class. She knew how it would go.

*Hi! How come I haven't seen you around before? Who do you have for English? Are you in any clubs? Do you live nearby?*

Too many questions that she wouldn't have answers for. She could brazen past the first one easily enough. But in a town this small, there probably weren't more than two teachers for each subject and Lily didn't know any of the names. She didn't want to talk about extra-curricular activities. If she claimed to be in a club, it would either be one that didn't exist here or, with her luck, it would be one to which thin-hair belonged, and Lily would be hard-put to explain why thin-hair hadn't seen her at any of the meetings. And if she claimed not to be in any, then she'd be opening herself up to either being pestered to join one or being asked what she did with her time instead. And as to living close by…

No, Lily didn't want to get caught up in pointless conversations or anything else that would distract her. She was going to see the school, maybe hang around long enough to learn a few teachers'
names, just in case… And then she was going to go pump that helpful librarian for more information.

And if she could plant a few doubts and stir up a little trouble while she was at it, then so much the better.

She was almost a block away from the red brick building when she spotted three people walking through a nearby park. They were deep in conversation and didn't notice her, but Lily wasn't taking any chances. She ducked into a recessed shop doorway—a restaurant, as it turned out—and pretended to be engrossed in reading the menu tacked up in a glass case in the entry. Maybe she was being silly. After all, it had been nearly twenty years since she'd seen him, and surely he would look older now than he had then…

But she was positive that the eldest member of the group had been the same old man—the same uncannily-perceptive old man—who had sought her out on a bus en route to Pittsburgh from Mankato and given her the book that had been guiding her steps ever since.

And Lily wasn't about to reveal her presence to him until she was sure whose side he was on.

Belle smiled a greeting when Lily entered the library shortly after noon. "Back again, I see," she greeted her.

Lily nodded. "You gave me a lot to think about," she said honestly. "I mean, back home, they still shuddered when they talk about Regina." She pretended that she didn't notice the librarian's slight sniff. No love lost, there. And possibly not all doubts, either. "And here…"

"Here, she's doing her best to turn over a new leaf," Belle said firmly. "She's far from the only one."

Lily nodded again. "But you're sure it's not a trick. I mean…"

Belle shook her head. "I know what you mean," she said, and her smile seemed to be frozen on her face. "But from all I've seen, I do believe she's trying to make up for her past."

But you're not sure she can. Aloud, Lily asked, "Did you know her… before? I mean, back in our land?"

"She really was different then," Belle said firmly. "People do change."

"Like your husband," Lily nodded.

Belle's smile widened. "Just like him, yes."

Lily knew better than to push things farther now. It was obvious to her that while the librarian was spouting some insipid 'party line' about heel-face-turns and second chances, she didn't actually believe everything she was saying. Belle definitely hadn't forgiven Regina for the past—something that suited Lily just fine; she wasn't about to forgive Regina for her decision about leaving her mother dead. But even so, the librarian clearly drew a line between sharing recent history and spreading gossip. And if she wasn't going to dish any dirt on Regina or agree with Lily's suggestions that the Evil Queen's reformation might be a sham, then there was no way she'd consider any insinuations about the man she'd married.

At least, not yet.
Well. There was still time for that. Right now, while stirring up trouble was a nice distraction—which might pay off handsomely down the road—Lily was more interested in learning whether Rumpelstiltskin still had magic. If he did, that was going to be a problem.

Ursula had laid it out for her. With or without magic, Rumpelstiltskin's knowledge was a powerful weapon. They needed to ensure that he would either help them, or be kept from helping the heroes. But in order to take him off the board, they needed to know whether he still possessed power. Lily still wasn't sure how they were supposed to figure that out, or how Ursula meant to use her old friend to find out. But if Belle had been any more garrulous, Lily would have done a bit of sleuthing along those lines today.

Instead, she moved the conversation back onto safer ground. "So, how much of home made the trip over?" she asked. "I mean, if I went foraging in the woods around here, could I expect to find the same sorts of plants I knew back in Sherwood?"

Belle relaxed at once. "Let's go look that up, shall we?" she said briskly, motioning to Lily to follow her. "I shouldn't think there'll be much to find until spring, but a little research now won't hurt…"

Lily trailed behind her, smiling a bit to herself. She didn't really care what sort of vegetation abounded here, but people often disclosed details they didn't mean to when they let their guard down. Maybe she'd yet get something useful about Regina or Rumpelstiltskin out of Belle. And if not? Maybe she'd at least learn a thing or two about which plant life in these parts was safe……And which was deadly.

"I simply don't understand, dahling," Cruella groused. "What possible reason could you have in cozying up to the pirate now? I mean, it's not as though we don't have other means of keeping tabs on those hero types."

Ursula didn't answer at once. Instead, she stood gazing out the window, watching the snow flurries outside. Finally, after Cruella cleared her throat several times, she replied, "Yes, I know."

"Then?"

Ursula turned to face her with a sly expression. "It's not about using him to spy," she said. "It's about finding out where his loyalties lie."

"Come again?"

Ursula smiled. "Do you imagine I've told him everything we've learned since we arrived? Right now, I want to know two things. First, whether the Dark One is still the Dark One—and until we do know, I think it prudent we avoid using his name in casual conversation. Just as a precaution."

"Noted," Cruella nodded. "Why invite his scrutiny if we can avoid it?"

"Exactly. Second," Ursula continued, "I want to find out whether he and the pirate have truly made their peace, and whether it's still unmakeable. Because if he's still the Dark One, then what Hook told me earlier makes sense. Pretending to be his friend while waiting for the chance to strike is exactly the kind of thing I'd expect. But that only makes sense if he still possesses his magic. If he doesn't, then I can't think why Hook hasn't already attacked. Unless…"

Cruella's eyes narrowed. "Unless it's no game and they really have set aside their feud."
Ursula nodded. "The rest of the town seems convinced that the Dark One has turned over a new leaf. So either Hook knows better, or—"

"Or he wants you to believe otherwise," Cruella said slowly. "Which seems unlikely. I mean, how would misleading you on that score benefit him?"

"I don't know," Ursula admitted. "But until we find out which it is, I don't think we can proceed with our plans. We need to know the extent to which the Dark One can hinder us."

"Then why approach the pirate at all?" Cruella demanded. "Wouldn't going to the source be a better idea?"

"Well, it would be, if we could be certain of getting a straight answer out of him," Ursula admitted. "But we can't. If he's truly lost his power, you don't expect him to admit it to us, do you? And if he's truly turned over a new leaf, then there's no guarantee that once we reveal our presence to him, he won't go running to the heroes."

"And you're so sure that the pirate won't be a similar concern, dahling? How?"

Ursula smiled. "Oh, let's just say that, after my little talk with him yesterday, I think I have a bit of leverage…"

Hoist on his own petard, Killian thought furiously, as he paced the pier in the twilight. He didn't know who to trust anymore. Either Ursula or Rumpelstiltskin might cheerfully stab him in the back or slit his throat. But Emma could shatter his heart. If he told her what was happening, he was practically inviting her to do so. If he didn't and she found out, it would likely happen anyway. The wise move was to be above board with her and tell her what was going on. He knew he should. But a confession of such magnitude could only be made at the proper time and that time, regrettably, wasn't now. It would have to wait until he could be certain that he could explain himself in a way that wouldn't have her spurning him in outrage. But as to when that time might be…

He had to stall. He had to keep Ursula from talking to Emma until he could find the right moment and the best words. For the first time in over two centuries, his life was finally sailing on a smooth course. He couldn't risk scuttling things now.

"Well?" a strident voice rasped behind him and he turned to see Ursula standing before him. It rankled him that he hadn't had warning of her approach. No splash to announce she'd emerged from the sea, no vibrations to herald her steps on the wooden pier. "What have you decided?"

Killian pursed his lips together, sucked in his breath, and exhaled. "We have an agreement," he growled, hoping that he was making the right decision.

The sea witch smiled, showing her teeth for the first time. "Splendid," she said, extending her hand.

As Killian shook it, he noted that it was almost as cold and clammy as her tentacles.
Astrid could sense Leroy's tension when he met her at Ashley Herman's daycare after work. "Let's get a coffee," he said, and though he was smiling, there was no disguising the strain behind it.

"Uh… sure, Leroy," Astrid said, falling into step beside him. She tried not to feel nervous, but one of her guilty pleasures at the convent had been watching romantic comedies on late-night TV. (She'd had a TV, but had been expected to restrict her viewing to the news and public television offerings, hence the guilt factor.) Leroy had something to tell her and it wasn't good. She swallowed hard and wondered whether, after they'd finally found one another again, she was about to lose him.

He was going to break up with her. Oh, he'd be gentle and apologetic about it, tell her that she wasn't the problem, but that it just couldn't work. That Bossy and Blue had actually been right and that dwarves couldn't love. That…

"Astrid? This okay, here?"

She blinked. He'd stopped in front of the same diner she'd been in the morning Belle had found her. Her heart plummeted. She liked this place. She didn't want to get dumped in it! Well, she didn't want to get dumped at all, of course. But… But she found herself nodding. If he was going to do it, then no point putting it off. Granny's strawberry milkshakes were nearly as good. She could always go back there. "It's fine," she nodded.

Leroy led her, not to the counter, but to a booth and waited for a server to bring them each a menu, before he leaned across the table and took her hands in his.

"I-I went to see Dr. Hopper today," he said in a voice that carried no further than her ears.

Astrid pressed her lips together. "You did?" she managed.

"Yeah. About what we talked about the other night."

His hands were tight around hers and starting to sweat, but she squeezed back as best she could. "And?"

"And," Leroy sighed. "And it turns out, I'm not an alcoholic. But," he continued, even as Astrid's lips began curving upwards, "but that doesn't mean everything's okay."

"It-it doesn't?" Astrid echoed, wondering now where this was going.

Leroy shook his head. "He asked me a bunch of questions. Stuff about how often I drink and how I feel when I'm not drinking and whether it's been hurting my work and…" He took another breath. "Well, after I got done answering them, he told me I probably have got a problem with alcohol. Now, he did say it was mild," he added quickly, "but that it's still a bit of an issue. So, he wants me to keep seeing him."

He watched her carefully for a moment, trying to gauge her reaction. Then he blinked. "Sister? I-I know it's not terrible news, but why are you smiling that much?"
At least he hadn't yet noticed that her eyes were watering. She blinked rapidly. "I-I thought you brought me here to break up with me!" she managed with a ragged laugh. "You seemed so serious that… that…"

Leroy blinked again. And then, he got up from the table and came around to her side of the booth, slid next to her, and wrapped his right arm around her shoulders. "How could you think that?" he asked incredulously. "These last eleven days have been better than any I can remember since I hatched. And now that the curse is broken and I've got my memories back, that's saying a lot. No, I don't want to break up with you. But I don't know if I'm going to be everything you want me to be for the next little while."

"I just want you to be the best person you can be!" Astrid exclaimed.

"That's what I want, too," Leroy nodded fervently. "But until I get there, while I work on this, I think things might get a little intense. Could be some storms ahead."

"We'll weather them," Astrid said. "Together."

Leroy clasped her left hand in his and squeezed. "Together," he repeated.

"He's with them," Ursula snapped, entering the farmhouse with a sour expression on her face.

Lily and Cruella looked up from the TV. Lily muted the volume, as Cruella asked, "Are you quite sure, dahling?"

Ursula hesitated. "Mostly. It's just barely possible that he's got his own game and he's happy enough to sit back and watch us and the Dark One have a go at each other. But I don't think so. The captain may play his cards close to his chest, but he usually likes flashing a trump or two. So either he's gotten very cagey—"

"You met him over a century ago," Cruella pointed out. "He couldn't have lasted this long without becoming a little more devious over time."

"True," Ursula acknowledged. She sighed. "That's the trouble with trying to be sneaky. You start assuming everyone else is, too. Maybe you're right. Well."

"Isn't there some spell you could use to know if he's lying?" Lily asked.

Ursula gave her a look that was midway between annoyance and approval. "There's one," she admitted. "It's a potion that works much like truth serum; it makes its drinker talkative and less able to hold things back. It doesn't make lying impossible, mind you; just a good deal harder."

"Can you make it?" Lily asked. "I mean, it sounds like something useful."

Ursula considered. "I suppose I could," she said reluctantly. "I know the recipe. A couple of the ingredients are only found in Neverland, but I can cross realms easily enough."

"So…?"

"So, all magic comes with a price and concocting that potion is going to take a lot out of me, especially the way I've been tossing glamor spells and concealment spells about like they were cheap as sand and clamshells. It's not just a question of stirring a few ingredients in a pot; that's simple enough. But I'll have to infuse it with a bit of my own power in order to get it to work. As low as my reserves are, I don't think I'll be able to brew up more than a single dose, and even that
will drain me for a few days. So, as much as I'm enjoying wrapping the pirate about my suction cup—"

"Uh… Bad mental image," Lily muttered with a disgusted look.

Ursula smirked. "Pinned and wriggling on a rack any better?"

"Not really."

"Tough tilapia." Her lips twitched when Cruella giggled. "As I was saying, watching Hook squirm may give me a warm fuzzy feeling. It looks to me as though he's been trying to escape his past and I was kind of enjoying the idea of helping it catch up with him. All the same, when push comes to shovelnose? Hook's not worth what that potion would cost me."

Lily hesitated. "I think I might know somebody who is," she ventured. "If we can figure out how to get him to drink it…"

"You're pretty quiet," Emma said, as she watched Killian attacking his fish and chips at lunch the next day. "Everything okay?"

Killian finished what was in his mouth, chewing slowly and carefully as he tried to find the right words. "I suppose," he said with a pained smile, "I've been thinking on my past. For all I've tried to put the man I was behind me, at times, he does seem to loom ahead, blocking my path."

Emma sighed. "I guess I know what that's like," she admitted. "I think I've gotten a little better about letting my walls down, but opening up is still… hard sometimes." She smiled. "You make it easier."

His answering smile was warmer than it had been and the breath he exhaled sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. "Perhaps, that's part of the reason we're so compatible, love. We've each been shaped by our pasts and we're both trying to break free of those molds."

"Yeah. So, is this the kind of thing that might be easier to talk about? I can be a pretty good listener."

Killian nodded. "Aye, that you can, love. But I fear it might take more time to discuss than either of us has at present." He looked away diffidently. "Later, perhaps?"

Emma nodded. "Sure. Just name the time."

Once I've managed to ensure that the threat posed by the sea witch has been neutralized, Emma, I promise you I'll tell all. But until then, I dare not risk it. And should her insinuations prove true, if Rumpelstiltskin is yet bent on settling our old score, then regrettably, telling you anything at this juncture would be unwise. You trust him far too much now. Perhaps enough to warn him of my suspicions. No, for now, I'll play my hand close and hope for a time when I can freely reveal its cards."

Aloud, he said only, "I promise you, love, I shall when I'm able."

Evidently, keeping secrets wasn't enough to set off Emma's superpower, for she only smiled, clasped his hand, and leaned in for a kiss.

As he brought his lips to hers, he wished he could trust her enough to tell her all he wanted to right now, at this very moment. But prudence—a much more positive term than cowardice, he reflected
Belle was reading in the living room when she heard Rumple's footsteps on the cellar's wooden steps. She set aside her book as the door opened and he emerged, a cork-stoppered glass phial clutched tightly in the hand not gripping his cane.

"Is that…?" she breathed, her eyes hopeful.

"The potion," Rumple nodded.

"And… and it'll work? I mean," she added hastily, "is it something you can test?"

Rumple smiled approvingly. "Well, it wouldn't be as effective on you or me; it's meant for young children, after all. But the fragrance is right; the color is right; and you and I both double-checked the measures earlier. At any rate, none of the ingredients are toxic. At worst, I've brewed up a placebo that tastes marginally better than most such draughts."

"Marginally?" Belle repeated.

"It's medicine, Belle," Rumple pointed out. "As much as it's meant to be palatable enough for a recipient who, perhaps, might not be old enough to understand the necessity of ingesting such a tonic, no amount of flavoring can eradicate the bitterness of some of the components." He shook his head. "It can't be helped. I even consulted Tinker Bell's volume to see whether it had any suggestions."

"And?"

Rumple sighed. "It advised adding a spoonful of sugar. To a brew that's already more than one quarter treacle." He shook his head. "I suppose it's to be expected when consulting a book of spells penned by a race that considers blackberry nectar a basic dietary staple."

Belle laughed. "Astrid prefers strawberry milkshakes, actually."

Rumple considered. "I suppose there's some small saving grace in that. Perhaps."

Belle smiled at that. "I guess I'd best head upstairs. I need to be up early for kickboxing." She took a breath. "Rumple… would you like to come with me?"

He blinked. "To the gym?"

Belle sighed. "You've seen me practice here. And-and I know I'm not very good yet, but I thought you might want to watch me, well, try to keep step with the rest of the class. The lesson's at nine, but I know that the shop opens later on Saturday."

"An hour later," Rumple nodded. "But if I were to accompany you, I still wouldn't be back in time to…" He paused, seeing disappointment flit across Belle's face to be replaced a moment later by an understanding nod. This wasn't right. Clearly, these lessons were important to Belle and she was trying to share them with him. As he'd been willing to share such magic as remained to him with her. When he looked at matters in that light, how could he not accompany her? And yet, he had certain responsibilities.

But he also had an assistant who had promised to come in early tomorrow.

He frowned for a moment as he considered his options. Then he smiled. "Well. I suppose I can
have Henry open the shop in my stead. I meant to work him a bit harder than usual, seeing as he's to have the afternoon off…"

"Is he?" Belle asked.

Rumple shrugged. "Some school play he wants to rehearse with his friends," he explained, trying to sound casual about it. "I asked if I might see the scenes after they'd polished them, though I suppose I'll only have the opportunity if his friends are bold enough to step foot in the shop."

Belle smiled sympathetically. "If they don't, it's their loss."

"And if they do," he smiled as inspiration struck, "perhaps they'll be less intimidated if you're present as well?"

Belle's answering smile made his heart leap, and he quickly pulled out his phone to text Henry about the change of plans. Once he had, he murmured, "I suppose I ought to ask Emma to supervise as well. As remarkable a young man as our grandson is, the shop tends to draw in all manner of people and I'm not certain it's safe for him to hold down the fort on his own.

Belle felt her smile freeze on her face, but she merely nodded. "Of course."

*He's opened up to me more in these last weeks than he ever has before,* Belle told herself furiously, when she was alone in her room. *He's being honest with me, even when he's not sure if it's what I want to hear. But I didn't want to hear that!*

What was the matter with her anyway? Emma was a friend, both to her and to Rumple. And asking her to be at the shop in case Henry ran into something—or someone—he couldn't handle was far less problematic than the breakfasts they often shared at Granny's, right where anyone could see them.

And yes, Belle knew that was the whole point—that they were meeting publicly to make it plain that they weren't doing anything sordid behind her back. They'd even invited her along. They'd even offered to meet someplace other than Granny's, but Belle knew that as open and above-board as Rumple was trying to be, there were some things that simply felt he couldn't discuss with her, but could with Emma. She had a feeling that if she'd accepted the invitation, it would have been more of an intrusion.

And why shouldn't she intrude? Rumple was her husband, after all! He should be able to discuss anything and everything with her. He…

Her hands formed fists and she ground her knuckles into her temples. She was doing it again! She was making it about her. She wanted to be all Rumple needed. She wanted to be chosen. She didn't want to feel as though there was some rival for his attentions, not his dagger, not his power, and not Emma Swan!

But whether she liked it or not, Rumple needed more than her support. He needed someone who could relate to the loneliness and isolation that had shaped his early years and Belle, for all she'd often felt different from the other noble girls with her love of reading and her yearning for adventure, didn't have the same frame of reference. Rumple hadn't grown up with the love and encouragement of doting parents. He needed someone who had lived on the outskirts, their presence at times resented, at times barely tolerated. It wasn't something Belle would have suspected of the Emma Swan she knew now, but during their time in New York and afterwards, the sheriff had been quite candid about her early life. And those experiences had helped Emma to
connect with Rumple in a way that Belle couldn't. Belle might deny and resent it all she liked, but it was the truth.

But it wasn't fair!

And she was being silly. She knew that whatever was between Emma and Rumple was no threat to her marriage. It might even be the opposite. She knew that Rumple probably would have called Emma to accompany Henry tomorrow, even if the two hadn't been meeting regularly. And he'd been completely up front with her about who he was calling and why. And he was coming to the gym to watch her practice tomorrow, not meeting Emma for coffee before opening the shop.

She was being silly and she knew it.

But no matter how clearly she recognized it and how firmly she told herself so, she couldn't completely banish her hurt and resentment.

"It appears to be standing yet," Rumple murmured as he and Belle approached the shop the next day.

"Did you doubt it?" Belle asked with a laugh.

Rumple shook his head. "Of course not. But I've been wrong before. And Henry has gone poking about in the past."

"What, in the shop?"

Rumple shook his head. "Regina's vault. I've heard he almost released an Agraban viper once."

Belle frowned. "Why on earth would Regina keep an—"

"I imagine for the same reason she keeps an undead dragon under the library," Rumple remarked tartly. "Can you think of a safer place?"

"Well, Pandora's box for one," Belle replied.

Rumple's eyebrows shot up. "I don't believe she knew I had it at the time. I could suggest it to her, I suppose. Well. Care to come inside?"

Belle shook her head. "I think I'd best open the library. Later?"

Rumple nodded. "I'm not entirely certain what time Henry and his friends will be finished with their practice. Let's say three o'clock for now and I can call you if it's sooner." He smiled at her. "I did enjoy watching what you've been up to," he said warmly.

Belle flushed. "I get so out-of-step with the rest of the class."

"With the three or four individuals who seem to be the most talented," Rumple corrected. "The others seemed to be closer to your level of proficiency, perhaps even slightly beneath it."

Belle shook her head. "I'm trying not to get discouraged, but it's frustrating."

Rumple reached into his coat pocket and removed the stoppered phial he meant to give to Robin Hood when the thief returned. "I quite understand the sentiment," he murmured, giving the bottle a slight shake for emphasis.
Now, Belle did smile. "Thank you," she said. Then she leaned forward and bent her face toward his for a kiss. "Three o'clock or thereabouts, then," she repeated.

As she walked toward the library, she was still beaming.

Once inside the shop, Rumple greeted Emma and Henry and went into the back office to hang up his coat. When he returned to the floor, Emma was already in the process of shrugging into her jacket.

"Guess I'll head over to the sheriff station and see what's doing," she said. "The Apprentice still hasn't given us an update."

Rumple nodded. "The town line is quiet, I take it?"

"Yeah, my folks have the dwarfs watching it. And every day, they're drawing straws to see who gets to take a step over. So far everyone's come back safe and sound."

"Well, that's a relief," Rumple said with a good deal more sincerity than sarcasm.

"Yeah. Of course," Emma rolled her eyes slightly, "my mentioning it probably jinxed something somewhere, and any minute now, Leroy's going to come barreling down Main Street yelling about terrible news."

Rumple made a scoffing sound. "If you should ever choose to make that a field of study, I think you'll learn that jinxes aren't nearly so capricious. Fate on the other hand…"

"Terrific," Emma's groan was mostly exaggerated. "I'll catch you both later."

Once she was gone, Rumple busied himself with arranging a tray of better quality fashion jewelry, while Henry continued cleaning the glass display cases. A few minutes later, the boy gave a small start and reached into his pocket for his cell phone. As he read the message, he exhaled resignedly.

"Trouble?"

Henry shook his head. "I guess we knew it was going to be rough anyway, rehearsing at Cicely's with all those little kids, but she just texted me. One of her sisters has an ear infection."

"Not serious, I hope," Rumple murmured.

Henry shook his head again. "Cis doesn't think so, but her mother says it's the wrong time to have a bunch of other kids coming over." He frowned. "At least, she's still okay to rehearse. If we can find a place, I mean. Nicholas is looking, but he's not allowed to have friends over when his dad's not home and Mr. Tillman's working today. I think Marie's also trying to find a place. If we can find a place, we could go to a park or the woods—"

"I think you'll find that the acoustics would leave something to be desired in the great outdoors," Rumple murmured. He hesitated. "How brave are your friends?"

"Brave?" Henry repeated. "What do you mean?"

Rumple smiled sadly. "Let's not pretend to be unaware of my past reputation. I'm well aware that my name has been used in the Enchanted Forest for many years to frighten young children into model behavior. Rather effectively, I might add," he continued, "though I've always failed to understand why the Dark One would want leave well-behaved, good children alone." He shrugged.
"This shop has a basement. It's rather dusty, but you've both the time and the equipment to rectify that problem, if your friends are amenable to practicing there."

Henry blinked. "Well, everyone was okay about showing you the scenes when we got them right," he said. "Hang on; let me ask them," he said, typing quickly into his phone. Then he set it on the counter and picked up the spray bottle of glass cleaner again. A few minutes later, he picked it up to check his messages and broke into a smile.

"Good news?"

"Cicely, Amy, and Nicholas said 'Yes'. Paige is checking with her father. Marie," Henry hesitated. "Well, she says if everyone else is coming, she will too. Still haven't heard from Perry or—" He looked down at his phone again. "Paige can't make it, but she and Cicely don't have a lot of scenes together anyway. Perry's in… Okay!" He met his grandfather's eyes, still smiling. "We've got enough people. We can make this happen."

"Yes," Rumple said, adding a bit of tartness for form's sake. "Provided that the basement can be scoured of dust and cobwebs. You'll probably need to bring a lamp or two down, as well."

Henry nodded. "I'll get to it. Thanks, Grandpa."

"You are quite welcome."

Henry's schoolmates began to arrive slightly over an hour later. Rumple found himself glancing through the slats in the Venetian blinds on the shop windows every few minutes, watching them assemble, somewhat nervously, about the bench across the street.

He had half a mind to find some excuse to go into the back room before they started coming in, but something about Henry's demeanor stayed him. His grandson, he realized with no small measure of astonishment, didn't want or expect him to hide himself away. Still, something made him say, "Perhaps it would be best if you were to greet them yourself."

Henry turned to him then, with the same look on his face that Bae had borne all those centuries ago, when Hordor had accosted them on the road to Longbourne and pretended to guess at Rumple's name.

"I know you, don't I?" Hordor feigned puzzlement, but Rumple saw the gleam in his eye and knew what was coming. This was a cat-and-mouse game, and Rumple knew full well who the cat was this evening. "What was your name? Hm? Spindleshanks? Threadwhistle? Hobblefoot?" He forced himself to hold his tongue. He was no stranger to mockery or humiliation and he could endure both, so long as he and Bae could stay together even a little longer. He knew how to deal with the nobility. One cringed and groveled and let them enjoy their power, spoke as little as possible, and did nothing to provoke them. And if Bae followed his lead, then—

"His name's Rumpelstiltskin!"

Even as he tried to shush his boy, his heart swelled. He might be shunned and hated by the entire village, if not the district, but Bae still wasn't ashamed of him, still didn't see any reason why he ought to be. And though Rumple knew that the day was coming when that would all change, right now, he couldn't still the outpouring of love that suffused him, even as he hoped that Hordor would overlook his son's defiance.

"I want you to meet them," Henry said firmly.
"I don't…"

Henry came around to Rumple's side of the counter and gave him a smile that was slightly teasing, but bore no hint of mockery. "They're probably just about as nervous about meeting you, you know."

"I'm hardly nervous," Rumple lied. "But if your friends are, well then, I'd say that's all the more reason to spare them the ordeal."

"It's not an ordeal," Henry maintained. "It's your shop. You're my grandfather. My friends are here because you okayed it and I think you should—"

The bell over the door jangled then and Henry broke off from what he was saying, slid his hand into Rumple's and stood beside him, as a small knot of children stepped inside with varying degrees of bravado and trepidation. Rumple pressed his lips together, gave Henry's hand a squeeze and nodded.

Then he stood there, smiling in what he hoped was a friendly fashion as Henry made the introductions. So, this was the Zimmer boy, stooping at the back and trying to avoid holding eye contact for long. Rumple had seen him on the street from time to time, but never spoken with him. The plain girl with the mischievous glint her eyes, walking forthrightly toward the counter, one hand extended boldly toward him, that would be Amy—Amethyst, if he recalled correctly. The young man with the equally open face, only slightly more reticent must be Peregrine, who preferred to be addressed as Perry.

He'd been, it must be owned, more than a little curious about the girl of whom Henry had spoken most, all the while insisting that she was 'just a friend'. Physically, she appeared to be strong and sturdy for her age; like many young girls in the villages where he'd lived, no stranger to hard work and much of it physical. Unlike the boisterous Amy, her smile was demure. "And who's this?" he asked softly, his eye falling on the small girl who looked to be a year or so younger than Roland, who clung tightly to Cecily's hand. "Are you in the play, as well?"

The child giggled. "No!" she exclaimed. Then, she attempted to dart behind her Cecily's skirt, not quite managing to pull her hand free in the process.

Cecily sighed. "This is my younger sister, Aggie, sir."

"Tagalong!" a muffled voice protested from behind the skirt.

Cecily nodded. "Well, it's Agatha really, sir, but ever since she could walk, she's always wanted to go where we older kids—that is, me and my brothers and sisters—were. Tagging along, you know."

"Aggie-Taggie-Tagalong! Aggie-Taggie-Tagalong!" came the chant from behind the skirt amid more giggles, and Cecily's cheeks slowly flushed dark pink. "Yes," she mumbled. "We call her that sometimes. It's really Agatha, though. And well, when she found out that was going out today, she wanted to come and Mama said I should bring her, so…" She winced. "I'll keep an eye on her, really I will. She won't get into any trouble, I promise!"

Rumple nodded and smiled in what he hoped was a friendly fashion. "I don't doubt you," he assured her. "Well. Don't let me keep you from the task at hand. Henry will show you where you can rehearse." He frowned. "I'm afraid that the ceiling supports may be a bit rough; I can't vouch for their being free from splinters."
"We'll be careful, sir," Cecily said. She ducked her head slightly. "Our hut in Nottingham was much the same and we all learned young not to get stuck."

She ended her sentence with a slight curtsey, one that any well-brought-up child might have given to a respectable adult back in the land of their birth. In response, he inclined his head toward her with an approving smile "I don't doubt it. Well then. Off you go, the lot of you. I mean to order supper for six o'clock or thereabouts," he added. "So if you'll think on what you want from Granny's diner, I'll add your requests to mine when the time comes."

The girl that Henry had introduced as 'Marie' blinked. "For all of us, sir?" she asked. "I-if I'd known, I could have asked my papa for money. C-can I bring it tomorrow?"

Rumple shook his head. "This time," he assured her, "it's my treat." He hesitated. "If you should choose to make a habit of these get-togethers, I suppose we can assess the arrangement at a later date, hmm?"

The response was an excited babble of thanks, as they headed for the cellar steps.

"Your grandpa's nice," Rumple heard Amy say, as the door started to swing shut.

Before it finished its arc, he heard Henry respond, "Yeah, he is."

"It could work," Ursula said abruptly, startling Lily out of her book.

The irritation in the younger woman's eyes subsided almost at once. "The potion? You'll do it?"

When she'd outlined her idea earlier, Ursula had been noncommittal, claiming that the idea was too half-baked to be worth consideration. When Cruella had challenged her to come up with something better, Ursula had grumbled something about not having an alternative not automatically making Lily's idea a good one. Now, the Sea Witch seemed more conciliatory.

"It could," Ursula repeated. "How do you propose getting it to him?"

Lily gave her a small smile. "Well, going by what we overheard, he's told the others to expect us. Well. Me, anyway. I don't think he knows about you and Cruella."

Ursula nodded. "With you so far. Go on."

"Okay," Lily took a deep breath. "So. They're all sitting there waiting for me to show up. Suppose I seek him out? Knock on his door, tell him I followed his instructions, but that you weren't so keen on coming with me, so I'm alone." She shrugged. "It's not even a lie. You didn't leap at the chance to find Storybrooke, and I will be alone when I show up on his doorstep. At that point, I can probably find some way to slip him the potion. Does he absolutely have to drink it, or could it be some sort of contact thing? Like, I mean, could I shake his hand if I'm wearing a glove to do it and the potion's smeared on it?"

Ursula's eyebrows shot up, but she shook her head almost at once. "It's got to be ingested," she said. "You can slip it into his coffee, or stir it into his porridge, but it's got to be taken orally."

"What if I baked it into a cake?"

"Well," Ursula said slowly, "heating it won't destroy it, but how could you be sure that he'll eat it?"

"I was thinking." Lily said, "If I made a layer cake, I could put the potion into one of the layers. Then when I suggest we sit down and talk about where things go from here… maybe over some
refreshments, so long as I know which layer *not* to eat, I can even take the first bite. Sort of like the Grimm version of *Snow White* with all the poison in the red side of the apple."

"You know it didn't happen exactly that way in real life," Ursula warned.

"But it could have. Could have worked, I mean."

"Maybe," Ursula said. "So far, I'm with you. But have you given any thought to what we do with the old man, once we've learned all we can from him? I suppose we could kill him…"

"No," Lily shook her head. "I don't really have a beef with him. He's the guy who told me who I was and what was done to me. Even if he seems to be working with Snow White and company now, I don't really hate him enough to kill him. I just want him… out of the way."

"Well, there's the cage in the cellar," Ursula said. "But there doesn't seem to be any kind of magical lock on it. We can keep his hands tied, so he won't be able to cast a spell to escape, but if he should somehow work himself loose, he'll not only be able to break free; he'll lead the heroes right to us."

A throat cleared behind them and they turned to see Cruella, looking uncharacteristically nervous, standing in the kitchen doorway. She was holding a pair of diamond drop earrings in her hand as she took a breath. "You know," she said, with no hint of her usual blasé attitude, "I think I might have just the thing…"
Chapter Twenty-Two

The Enchanted Forest, over 30 years ago

"Cruella?" Maleficent's voice was calm, but there was no mistaking the undercurrent of anger. "A word?"

Cruella felt her heart sink. The jig was finally up and she knew it. Everything had been going so well at first. She'd been gadding about her hometown, amusing herself by setting rats and cockroaches upon an establishment that had banned her for—in their words—harassing paying customers. That wasn't how Cruella viewed matters, of course. She'd simply been suggesting to various patrons that they buy her a drink. Or a meal. Or an absolutely darling fur stole. Well, that last had been after she—and her escort—had each downed several drinks. At any rate, once she'd been forcefully removed from the premises and ordered not to return, she'd decided that vengeance was just as delicious served piping hot as cold and directed the local vermin there forthwith.

As she'd been gleefully observing the crowd of customers fleeing the restaurant, she'd heard laughter behind her and found a striking blonde woman with a dragon-headed cane standing behind her.

"That's quite the talent you've got," the stranger had remarked.

Cruella blinked. "Really, dahling," she'd remarked quickly, "I've no idea what you're talking about. I just saw everyone leaving and wondered what all the fuss was about."

The woman had shaken her head. "There's not much magic to speak of in this realm, but I must say you've got more than your fair share. My name's Maleficent. And if you'd like the opportunity to put your power to better use than shutting down restaurants as suspected health hazards, I think we ought to talk." As the woman spoke, the ball in the handle of her cane changed from opaque to clear and in it, Cruella saw a land where dragons soared and unicorns raced. The scenes shifted rapidly, here a castle, there a jousting tourney, and everywhere wildlife. Wildlife with sleek hides and glorious pelts.

"Where is this?" she'd gasped and Maleficent had smiled.

"My realm. I rather think you'd enjoy it."

"We-well," Cruella hedged, "I do appreciate the finer things in life, dahling."

Maleficent's smile had widened. "If you work for me," she replied, "I can pretty much guarantee you'll get them…"

She'd spent three glorious months in the Enchanted Forest as Maleficent's honored guest. She'd never had a friend before, but she sensed a kindred spirit in the other woman—and not just because she possessed a non-human form as well. For three glorious months, the two had been terrorizing the nearby countryside. And once Ursula crossed over from Neverland, they'd become a trio.

And now, it was all about to end. With a sinking heart, she followed Maleficent into her anteroom.
The dragon-woman was stern. "I'm waiting for an explanation."

Cruella affected an air of innocence which she knew wasn't fooling anybody. "Pardon?"

"Cruella, I herded Hubert and that simpering whey-faced chit he calls a wife toward you for a reason! All you had to do was set those cobras on them and there would have been an end to that whole line! And even if someone somewhere does succeed in disenchanting Philip at some point, he'll return to his kingdom to find himself the orphaned heir of a land now overrun by trolls and ogres! One command, Cruella! That's all you needed to issue! So, again. I'm waiting."

"Really, dahling," Cruella said loftily, "they were hardly worth killing. Better to leave them with their lives; they're terrified now. Why, you could probably demand any tribute and they'll be happy to pay it. Gold… jewels… furs…"

The tongue of flame would have singed the white half of her hair if she hadn't dodged. "I didn't want their tribute! I wanted them dead!" Maleficent shrieked. "I was being generous with you, allowing you the privilege of carrying out that task. And you… what? Froze? Panicked?"

"I'm sorry!" Cruella cried. She buried her face in her mink stole. "I wanted to! Believe me, Maleficent; nothing would have pleased me more! Nothing!"

Maleficent closed the distance between them with two angry strides and, with hands that sported fingernails nearly as long as the talons she possessed in her dragon form, seized hold of Cruella's wrists, and wrenched her hands down. "Look at me," she commanded.

Shaking, Cruella obeyed.

"Now," Maleficent ordered, "explain yourself. What happened today? On second thought, that's not important. Can you keep it from happening again?"

Cruella sucked in her breath and shook her head.

Maleficent's eyebrows shot up. "What aren't you telling me, dear?" she asked, a puzzled frown coming to her face. "I know you're not… soft. This wasn't just panic. Was it?"

Cruella shook her head again. "No," she admitted.

"Then, what?"

Cruella closed her eyes and turned her face away. "Well," she began hesitantly, "I guess I should begin by saying that I wasn't born with the talent to control animals. You see," she continued, "there was this man…"

As Cruella finished her story, she finally had the courage to meet Maleficent's eyes once more. She knew what was coming. She was about to be turned out of doors in disgrace. She didn't know what would be the worse of the two outcomes: to have to fend for herself in this strange new realm, or to be sent back to the dreary world she'd left, knowing all the while that she could have had so much more, been so much more, were it not for that accursed Author and his squeamishness.

To her surprise, she found the dragon woman looking at her, not with pity, but with sympathy. "All that potential," she murmured. "All that power. And he stifled it with the stroke of a pen."

Cruella nodded, startled.
Maleficent regarded her silently for a long moment. Then she heaved a sigh. "Well. We can't leave you like that, can we? Let's see how we can rectify the situation."

"You mean," Cruella began, feeling a tremulous hope, "you can break this curse?"

Maleficent shook her head. "Doubtful," she said pleasantly. "I create curses; I don't break them. I'd need to know a lot more about the specifics of yours before I could even begin to try." Her eyes narrowed. "There is one way, of course, but you aren't my type. And from what I've observed of you thus far, I'm not sure anyone would be."

"Pardon?" Cruella asked, not sure whether she was being insulted. Then Maleficent explained about True Love's Kiss and she understood. Her world was divided into people who could benefit her and people who could not. She tolerated the former and ignored the latter. And while she occasionally felt affection for some in that first group, that sentiment lasted only as long as its object was of use to her. No, she wasn't entirely certain that there had ever been anyone she'd even liked, much less loved. And since, as Maleficent explained, the kiss would only be effective if both parties to it truly loved one another, that option appeared to be barred to her.

"Then…?" Cruella prompted.

Maleficent smiled. "The thing about magic is that most spells—and other workings—are extremely precise and extremely specific."

"I don't know," Cruella ventured hesitantly. "Isaac wrote that I had the power to control all animals. He didn't have to list each species."

"Different sort of precision," Maleficent replied, unoffended. "Think of magic as a set of laws. Sacred, inviolate laws, which must be followed to the letter. But as to circumventing the spirit of those laws," she smiled and beckoned to Cruella to follow her through a doorway that had suddenly appeared in the antechamber wall. Curious, Cruella obeyed and found herself in a long stone passageway that ended in a winding staircase spiraling upwards. "As to circumventing the spirit," Maleficent repeated as they reached the top and she pulled open a wooden door with an arched top, "you'll find that there's a surprising amount of leeway."

"Is there?" Cruella gasped. She'd seldom engaged in physical exertion and they must have climbed over five stories. Her darling patent leather t-straps with the four-inch heels had been all the rage back home, but she never would have brought them had she realized how much walking she'd need to do in this land. All that magic at Maleficent's disposal, and she'd never thought to put a lift in her castle.

She looked around and blinked in surprise. The turret chamber was perfectly round and lined with shelves containing books, scrolls, and rows upon rows of jars and bottles that glittered with colorful powders and liquids. There were no windows, but tallow candles burned at intervals in wall sconces and their smoke mingled with the musky fragrance emanating from a copper brazier situated near the far wall and cast a diffuse haze over their surroundings.

If Maleficent noted how out of breath her companion was, she didn't comment on it. "Oh, yes," she smiled. "Now, mind you, all magic comes with a price, and I can't be dispensing it willy-nilly. Now that I know what the problem is, well, we'll find ways to work around it. We already know a few ways you can use your power that won't have you running up against that restriction; I'm really rather impressed by how long you've been able to keep your weakness hidden. But if you can't harm anyone, that also impedes your ability to defend yourself against any living creature trying to harm you. So, let's see if I can't give you a few things to help you on that score." As she was talking, she moved from shelf to shelf, taking a bottle of purple liquid from one, a jar of green
powder from another, a silken pouch with a strange angular script embroidered on it in silver thread from a third, and assembling everything on a round wooden table in the center of the room—a table that already held an assortment of tubes, beakers, and paraphernalia, the purpose of which Cruella couldn't begin to guess. "After all, we can't have you at the mercy of any fool with a penknife," she continued.

"I should say not," Cruella agreed with no small relief.

"Many years ago," Maleficent continued, "I created a sleeping curse. Now, sleep is generally a useful thing. It helps a body to relax. It refreshes the spirit. It's actually rather peaceful. Or it would be," Maleficent's smile became a smirk, "if this wasn't a curse. I've made some embellishments that keep its victims in that state indefinitely. Not pleasant for them. Devastating for those who care about them and find them in such a state. But underneath the bells and whistles, it's still sleep." She was beaming now. "Sleep is not harmful. And, even if it were," she went on, "if your victim takes the dose voluntarily, well, I don't see how that's going to run up against any check on your power."

"But why would they do that?" Cruella asked with a frown.

"Well, keep in mind that 'voluntary' has a few interpretations. For example, while marriages in most of the kingdoms in this realm are voluntary affairs, where either party can elect not to follow through from the betrothal to the ceremony, let us say that economic pressures can be brought to bear. So, in the case of the scion of a poor family beset by debts being affianced to the heir to a small fortune, well even if our pauper can technically back out of the agreement, the knowledge that they and their family will likely lose their lands and be begging in the streets or working in debt slavery for their creditors, depending on the law of the kingdom where they reside… No, the pauper isn't being coerced. They can legally refuse the match. They can legally end the betrothal. But considering the consequences of such an action… Well! Let's just say that the marriage invariably goes through." Maleficent smiled cruelly. "If you can contrive a situation where, to your victim, being placed under a sleeping curse is preferable to the alternative, it'll still count as voluntary."

"I see," Cruella breathed. "But still, the odds of my being able to concoct such a scenario are a bit slim, wouldn't you say? I mean, if someone's coming after me with a knife, I'm not sure that thrusting a vial of that draught at them and suggesting they have a little nip is going to work."

"It's just one example," Maleficent nodded. "I have other magic at my disposal that may serve. And I'm experimenting with implanting the sleeping curse into various foodstuffs. If I can get that to work, well, it'll take some testing to be certain, but it might happen that so long as your victim ingests the food voluntarily, the curse will take effect whether they knew about the special ingredient or not."

"I see," Cruella repeated. "It would seem," she continued slowly, "that I've been so blinkered by my weakness, it never occurred to me to consider my strengths."

"Don't feel too bad about it," Maleficent said approvingly. "That sort of malaise affects most of us from time to time. Now, I don't think you need to be carrying vials of this stuff about with you. They have a way of breaking in transit. And really, it only takes a drop or so. No," she said, her expression pensive, "I believe you'd best keep it in something rather mundane, but something that you can keep with you at all times that won't arouse comment." She held her hand flat before her facing upwards. There was a small flash of light and two earrings materialized in her palm. "These ought to be just the thing…"
Cruella had never shared her secret with another soul, not even Ursula. She had no intention of doing so now. But the earrings Mal had given her all those years ago were quite another matter. And an acceptable price to pay if their schemes were to succeed.

Lily looked blankly at the proffered jewelry. "Am I supposed to pawn those?" she asked. "I... guess it would give me an excuse to meet the, um, Dark One—"

"I wouldn't risk that," Ursula said sharply. "If there's anyone here capable of figuring out that you're not from these parts, it'd be him. He'll never tell you he's caught on, but he won't rest until he knows who you really are and what you want and how to either stop you from getting it or make sure you need his help to succeed. And that help always comes with a price."

"You're really scared of him, aren't you?" Lily asked with a mocking smile.

Ursula didn't rise to the bait. "Let's just say that my past encounters with him have taught me not to underestimate him," she said. Then she looked at Cruella.

"All right 'dahling'. Why are you flaunting those baubles?"

Cruella shrugged. "They were a gift from the child's mother. I thought she might like to have them."

Lily started to reach for them, but Ursula slapped her hand away. "The Dark One's not the only one who only gives things away if there's something in it for him. Why are you being so uncharacteristically generous, all of a sudden?"

"Because," Cruella said, seemingly unoffended, "I want my happy ending just as much as you do. And if I need to make a small sacrifice to achieve it, it's well worth the price." Her lips parted in a smile. "Your mother put something special in these, Lily," she said. "A little brew she concocted and served to both a queen and, years later, that queen's daughter."

Ursula's eyes grew wide. "Hang on. You don't mean..."

Cruella laughed. "Once the Apprentice eats your truth-serum cake, I'm sure he'd appreciate a dram or so of sleeping curse to wash it down... Just wait until you've learned all you can from him before you offer it." She shrugged. "It's not as messy as murder, and it's not as inconvenient locking him up in the storm cellar."

Lily reached for the earrings again and this time, Ursula didn't stop her. "Wait," Lily said, frowning a bit as her hands closed about them. "When the others find him down for the count, they'll want to investigate who did this to him, same as if they'd found his corpse. How does this put us in a better position?"

Cruella leaned forward, her expression almost too innocent. "Back at that hotel, you mentioned that when you met him all those years ago, he told you that he felt guilty over his role in shaping your destiny. Well, it's been a few years since then and—not that I've experienced it firsthand, mind you, but I'm told that—guilt can become quite the burden, weighing heavier and heavier as time passes. And now, from what we overheard, they believe you're on your way. So, what if he feels so guilty that he hasn't the heart to face you again and he finds a way in which he won't have to?"

"You mean, make it look like he dosed himself with the sleeping curse?" Lily said.

Cruella shrugged. "It's got to be ingested voluntarily in any case, dahling. And once he's, as you phrased it... 'down for the count'... I'm sure you could find pen and paper or some convenient laptop or something, the better to compose some missive worthy of appearing in True Confessions?
Lily slid the earrings into her pocket. "Back before I dropped out of school," she murmured wryly, "I might've sucked at a lot of things. English composition wasn't one of them." A small smile curved her lips. "And, since the previous owner of this place doesn't seem to have left any cookbooks behind," she added, pulling out her smartphone, "I guess I'd better see if I can find a cake recipe online."

Rumple went about his work, finding himself looking forward to the performance that was to come later. He'd noted that when he'd made his offer of dinner, not one of Henry's friends had intimated that they expected to finish much before then. Perhaps, he shouldn't have asked Belle to come at three, then. She hadn't protested, but it would mean closing the library early. He frowned. Did the library generally close earlier on the weekends? He couldn't recall. The building had been barred and shuttered during the first curse. And afterwards, he'd no sooner awarded Belle the key to the library when Killian Jones had arrived in town bent on vengeance. In short order, Belle had lost her memories and acquired new, false ones. Then the town had been on the verge of annihilation and, no sooner was that threat averted than they were off to Neverland to rescue Henry.

And then, he'd died.

When the second curse brought everyone back to Storybrooke, Belle had divided her time between running the library, running his shop, and running about town trying to help the others find ways to defeat Zelena.

Now that he thought about it, it didn't seem as though the library had any regular hours of operation. No wonder she didn't think twice about closing up to come to the shop at his request. He took out his phone to tell her that there was no need for her to arrive as early as he'd asked. Then he pocketed it again. Then he pulled it out once more and flipped it open to send a text:

_The rehearsal will probably go on longer than I'd anticipated. You don't need to come as early, unless you wish to._

Almost at once, a reply came back:

_But I DO wish to._

A second text followed a moment later, this one only two characters long: a colon, followed by a capital "D".

Smiling, Rumple texted back a 'big grin' of his own. Then he pocketed the phone and went back to his polishing.

"I know how to do that," a small voice piped up from behind him, and he whirled, startled, to find himself facing a small girl in a purple smock-like dress.

His eyebrows shot up, even as he greeted her once more. "Hello again, Agatha." He frowned. "Or do you prefer 'Aggie-Taggie-Tagalong'?"

The child didn't giggle this time, but she did smile. "Aggie," she corrected, shaking her head. "Just Aggie."

"Ah," Rumple nodded sagely. "And what can I do for you… Just Aggie?"

Solemnly, the child held up her index finger, its pad facing toward him. "I got stuck," she whispered.
"Stuck?" Rumple repeated. "A splinter, you mean?"

Aggie nodded.

"Well. Let's have a look then."


"I daresay it does," he agreed with her. "But that's not the way to get it out." From a drawer behind the counter, he removed a small pair of tweezers. "If you'll follow me," he invited her, "I'll just set about disinfecting this and then, I should be able to get that out for you." He raised an eyebrow. "I must say, you're being very stoic about this."

"Sto-ic?" Aggie repeated, cocking her head in puzzlement.

Still smiling gently, Rumple said, "I mean you aren't crying or carrying on."

Aggie shrugged. "It doesn't hurt a lot," she replied. "And Cis told me be careful."

"And you weren't?"

"I was!" Aggie retorted staunchly. A moment later she cast her eyes downward. "Till I forgot."

"Ah. So your sister sent you up here."

Aggie shook her head. "She didn't see. Too busy." This last was delivered in a matter-of-fact tone, as though the child was used to being overlooked and ignored. Or perhaps, Rumple allowed, he was reading too much of his own personal experiences into hers. Still, he spoke softly as he gestured toward the back office with the adjacent bathroom that contained a first aid kit in its medicine chest.

"After you," he started to say.

That was when a horrified voice shrieked from the cellar steps, "AGGIE!"

"I won't be of any use to you if I die of pneumonia," Killian gasped, once he'd finished coughing the water out of his lungs. His nose and throat were burning, and although exercise was known to warm a body, treading water below a pier in a Maine harbor in January wasn't having that effect.

"Oh, stop sniveling," Ursula snapped, as she looked down upon him from the aforementioned pier. "This can't be the first time you were knocked overboard." With a long-suffering look, she extended a tentacle to the water, looped it about Killian's waist, and hoisted him aloft. For a moment, she dangled him before her at eye-level, seemingly debating what to do, before dumping him unceremoniously to the pier.

"Sorry," she said unapologetically, when he hit with a soft thump. "I didn't realize the wood was rotting in that spot. Now that I do," she smirked, "I'll keep it in mind in future. In case I want to drop you from a greater height."

His teeth were starting to chatter and he was shivering uncontrollably as he looked up with a baleful eye.
Ursula sighed. "Well, if it's the only way to hold your attention," she muttered. With a wave of her hand, the water slid away from his skin, hair, and clothing, leaving each bone-dry, albeit covered with a fine sand-like layer of gleaming white salt. "Are you listening to me?" she asked lightly.

Killian sucked in his breath, even as he massaged his forearms, trying to coax more warmth back into them. "I am," he nearly snarled.

"Good. There's an item I need to acquire. I've no doubt that the Dark One keeps a supply of it."

Killian laughed out loud. "And you expect me to break into his shop for it? Seeing as, if I refuse, you'll likely kill me and if I agree, he'll likely kill me, you might as well just get it over with." He fixed her with a stare nearly as icy as the water he'd just been drawn out of. "And if you think threatening to tell Emma Swan of your past history with me is going to work now that I know what you want, suffice to say that it's more than a little inaccurate to claim that I'd rather die than have her find out."

"I don't expect you to break into his shop," Ursula retorted. "If he wants the town to believe he's lost his magic, then there's no way he'd keep the evidence of it on those premises; not when he has a wife and that boy assistant of his poking about. To say nothing of risking a customer seeing something they shouldn't." Some surprise must have shown on Killian's face, for the sea witch smirked. "As you can tell, I've been watching. No, he'll probably have it stashed away someplace more private. Perhaps, a vault like Regina likely still has. Perhaps a secret room in his home. I need you to put your pirate skills to use and find out where he's buried that treasure."

"And if I do?" Killian demanded.

"When you do," Ursula smiled, "you relay that information to me. I'll handle the rest."

"And the item?" Killian asked resignedly.

"You know," Ursula said, "I'm not sure I trust you to tell one elixir from another. You discover where he's hiding his magical accoutrements and, once you do, you can lead me to it."

"And then, we're done?"

Ursula shrugged. "Perhaps. I might need something more from you down the road, but I can't think of anything offhand at the moment." She smiled. "Why Captain! Did you know that when you get really angry, there's a vein in your temple that actually throbs purple? You might want to get it checked out. I'd hate for you to succumb to apoplexy before you've finished working off your debt to me."

The pirate started to rise to his feet, but collapsed almost at once.

"Hmm… might want to rub your ankles, too," Ursula mused. "Gets the blood moving again. After I've gone. I rather like seeing you on your knees." With a nasty chuckle, she dove off the pier, her legs lengthening and splitting into numerous tentacles as she broke the water's surface.

She didn't know whether the pirate would be successful, and she truly didn't care. But she'd be replaying this most recent conversation on her swim to Neverland to cheer herself up, and she knew full well that Hook wasn't going to be enjoying himself much in her absence. And if Rumpelstiltskin discovered him and still had the magic to end the pirate's miserable existence…

…Well, she certainly wouldn't shed any tears over that outcome.

Lily could play her little alphabet games to make road trips pass more quickly, Ursula mused. She
had her own methods.

Cecily seemed to fly across the room, interposing herself protectively between Rumpelstiltskin and her baby sister. "You can't have her!" she gasped. "Take me instead!"

Rumple felt his heart sink, as he regarded the girl. Five feet and half an inch of bristling rage and terror, a mix he knew far too well. And he'd thought that things might be different this time. He raised his hands slowly, palms facing outward. "It's not what you're thinking," he said, although he knew it would do no good. His legend loomed large and stood centuries old. He realized how it had to look: Rumpelstiltskin, renowned thief of children, coaxing a five-year-old into the back of his shop.

"Why do you even want her?" Cecily quavered. "She's too little to be of much use to you. I'm strong, I can work, I'm good with numbers, and-and I'm sure I could learn magic if you needed me to. Aggie's only four! It'd take you forever to teach her anything. I can be useful right now! Just please don't take my little sister!"

Rumple took a breath and lowered his hands, trying to decide how to play things out. "You do propose an attractive deal," he said quietly, after a moment's pause.

Cecily closed her eyes and clasped her hands together. "Thank you," she breathed.

"Oh, now, I didn't say I was accepting it," he went on.

"B-but—"

Anxious to stave off a new round of pleading, he waved one hand, cutting her off. "I'm not accepting it because I have no designs on your sister. Nor on you, for that matter."

"But I thought—"

"I know what you thought," Rumple said, noting that the girl seemed somewhat calmer now. "Your sister suffered a minor injury. Since I couldn't very well leave her unattended on the shop floor while I went to fetch the proper supplies, I'd thought to bring her to the supplies instead."

"Supplies?" Cecily repeated blankly. Then she turned to her sister. "Aggie! You were hurt?"

"Just a stick," Aggie replied, holding up her finger.

"After I told you to be careful?" she demanded, and Rumple was certain that the sob in the girl's voice was mainly due to relief.

"Forgot."

With a low cry, Cecily swept her younger sister into her arms. Then she turned back to Rumple. "I-I'm sorry. I saw her with you and I thought... I shouldn't have..."

Rumple shook his head sadly. "Earlier, I was wondering whether those old stories might not have faded from memory. I take it they haven't?"

Cecily looked down at Aggie's curly head. "I didn't think I believed them," she said. "I-I didn't mean to—"

"Come now," Rumple said, and if his voice was sharper, there was yet no anger in it. "I daresay that your mother gave you all sorts of sensible advice, like not picking up hot dishes without..."
potholders or keeping an eye on your younger siblings while swimming in the creek, correct?"

"W-well, yes, she did," Cecily confirmed, "but—"

"Nor to visit dangerously ill friends without the proper charms to ward off contagion?"

"We never could afford those," Cecily admitted. "So I couldn't visit them at all."

"But you trusted her wisdom and judgment."


"So when she told you that the Dark One would carry off bad little children, why would you doubt it?"

Cecily met his eyes then. "It was others in the village told those tales, sir," she said. "Mama's never liked us hearing them. And anyway, you're not the Dark One now, are you?"

Rumple blinked. "No, I'm not," he said with a small smile. "It's good of you to recollect it." He hesitated. "Meanwhile, there's still the matter of the splinter in your sister's finger. If you'll stay a moment, I can fetch the first aid kit and attend to it here."

"Cis?" Henry's voice called from the basement. A moment later, they heard his tread on the stairs and his head appeared in the open door. "You coming back?" He took in the scene in a moment. "Is everything okay?"

Rumple sighed and gestured toward Aggie. "The child made her way upstairs on her own and her sister only just noticed it. A minor matter."

"I won't be more than another five minutes," Cecily said. "Less than, even."

Henry nodded. "Okay. But we need to get back to it if we're going to get everything right."

"I know."

After Henry returned to the basement, Cecily heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks. For not mentioning…"

Rumple shook his head. "Whether you were meant to credit the old stories or not, you've been hearing them all your life. You've only met me this afternoon. The weight of history is against me."

He frowned. "Incidentally, did your mother ever tell you why she disbelieved the stories?"

Cecily nodded. "She said her grandmamma used to say that her grandmamma knew him—I mean you—and that everything he ever—th-that you ever did was for your son's sake a-and that you'd never want to set another father weeping over their lost son or daughter."

Rumple's jaw dropped and he staggered backwards, into a shelf of knickknacks that was bolted securely to the wall. Even so, he managed to knock several of them over.

"Are you all right?" Cecily asked with alarm.

Rumple nodded. "I am," he managed about the lump now forming in his throat. "Forgive me, dearie; I suppose I shouldn't have asked the question if I wasn't prepared to hear the answer."

"I'm tired of being sto-ic," a small voice piped up. "My finger's still stuck."
Rumple pressed his lips together in a tight smile and nodded. "Let's fix that then," he murmured and made his way to the bathroom. A moment later, he returned, kit in hand. "I'll need a moment to sterilize the tweezers," he murmured, as he opened the two clasps. He took out the bottle of rubbing alcohol and set it on the table beside the tweezers he'd brought forth previously. Those, he set in a shallow wooden bowl he meant to refinish before offering for sale. It wasn't until he'd uncapped the rubbing alcohol and begun to pour it over the tweezers that he succumbed to his curiosity and asked, "I don't suppose your great-grandmother ever disclosed the name of that ancestress?"

Cecily's forehead creased in concentration. "Mama called her Morraine," she said finally.

Rumple just barely tipped the bottle back upwards before the rubbing alcohol he was pouring overflowed the bowl.

Killian Jones did not enjoy feeling trapped in the least. He'd spent too long as a slave not to rage and chafe as he felt his options dwindle away. He didn't want Emma to discover his past. Even if she understood it, even if she accepted it, his history was a painful subject and not one he was in any hurry to revisit.

He didn't want pity or sympathy for the indentured debt-slave he'd been once his father had abandoned him. He didn't want to spill out the litany of pain, treachery, and betrayal that had cost him his brother and twisted an idealistic youth bent on glory and adventure into a hard and ruthless man who had inflicted pain instead of bearing it and nearly become consumed by a quest for revenge.

He still wasn't proud of the way he'd let that past rise up again after he and Emma had gone back to the past and returned bearing the queen of Arendelle. Oh, he'd tried convincing himself that he was only trying to help Elsa find her lost sister, and if Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't help willingly, then coercion was called for. For Elsa's sake, of course. Deep down, though, he'd known exactly the sort of bad form he was resorting to. Rumple might have tried to sink him in that watery abyss, but his own oar-strokes had carried him to the edge.

And now, it was happening all over again. Once again, a truce was in place—a truce he'd actually asked for this time. Once again, Rumpelstiltskin was demonstrating no inclination to break it. Once again, Killian was feeling compelled by circumstance to go back on his word. And this time, it truly was compulsion and not mere rationalization.

There had to be some way out. There had to be some manner by which he could keep his honor intact in the present and not disclose his dishonorable actions of the past. He needed to think this over carefully and soberly—which precluded reaching for the flask in his hip pocket. There had to be a way out of this trap.

He shook his head. Ironically, the person most likely to be able to uncover a loophole in the entire sordid affair was one of the people he least wanted to discuss the matter with. But perhaps…

Killian's eyebrows lifted and a smile flashed briefly across his face.

Perhaps there was someone else he might be able to talk to.

And if there was truly no way out for him but to give Ursula the information she was demanding?

Well, in the place he was heading, there might be someone else willing to risk his skin—and Rumpelstiltskin's wrath—to acquire it on Killian's behalf.
Chapter Twenty-Three

When Belle pushed open the shop door at five minutes to three, her eyebrows nearly climbed to her hairline, as a startled smile sprang to her face. Four yellow folding signs warned of a wet floor, though there was no evidence that a mop had passed over that which belonged to the shop recently. Instead, pastel chalk drawings adorned the worn wooden boards, and if they were crudely-made, there was no mistaking the raw passion with which they had been formed. Particularly since the young artist was currently attacking another patch of the aforementioned floor with fervor—and a thick periwinkle piece of chalk.

"Uh… Hello," Belle greeted the child.

The girl looked up for a moment. "H'lo," she echoed. Then she went back to her work.

"Now, Aggie," Rumple said from behind the counter, "surely you've better manners than that?"

At once, the girl laid down the chalk, clambered to her feet, and bent her knees slightly in what could only with great charity be called a curtsey. "Pleased-to-meet-you-I'm-Aggie," she rattled off in one breath.

"Belle," Belle returned, still smiling and trying hard not to laugh.

"Hi." She turned her head toward Rumple. "Okay?" she demanded.

Rumple cast an apologetic look in Belle's direction before nodding to Aggie. "You may continue."

Aggie breathed a noisy sigh of relief and immediately dropped back to her knees, retrieved the chalk, and resumed her drawing.

Trying to maintain a straight face, Belle made her way to the counter, taking care to detour about the yellow signage. "Rumple?" she questioned, when she could trust herself not to giggle.

Rumple shrugged. "It's only chalk, Belle. It will wash out."

"I can see that," Belle said. "But… who? How? Why?"

Rumple smiled. "She told you her name. I had a box of colored chalk in the back. And this keeps her occupied so that her sister and the others can practice undisturbed." He shrugged again. "Really, she hasn't been nearly as much trouble as I'd anticipated when I suggested the arrangement."
"It does make the shop a bit brighter than usual," Belle noted. "But… won't she be upset when she comes back to find it all gone? Or do you mean to keep it?"

Rumple shook his head. "A deal was struck," he said seriously. "I permit her to use this floor as her canvas until the others come upstairs. In return, she removes all evidence of her handiwork after the performance. If she fails to uphold the terms of our agreement, I'll not extend the privilege should her sister bring her back in future."

"That seems fair," Belle nodded, straight-faced. "So, this is going to be a… thing?"

"The children need a place to rehearse, Belle," Rumple said, almost too innocently. "And the little one seems well-behaved thus far." He frowned a bit worriedly. "I will admit, though, that between Henry's time off and the need to keep watch over Aggie, I've not made nearly as much progress in the polishing as I'd expected."

"I'll help," Belle said at once, moving behind the counter.

On her way into the back room to hang up her coat, she impulsively flung her arms about Rumple. Because there was a child in the room, though, she contented herself with kissing his cheek instead of his lips.

She was almost positive she only imagined hearing a giggle from the other side of the counter, as she passed through the curtained doorway.

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Will Scarlet was probably the last person that Killian had hoped to run into when he approached the camp in the woods. He had a grudging appreciation for anyone choosing to reside in a tent in the middle of winter; while these temperatures weren't precisely unheard of in Sherwood, they certainly hadn't been the norm.

He knew that Regina had invited them to spend the colder months in town; Granny Lucas would have been pleased to have the business, but too many of Robin's men had lived too long in the wilderness to be truly comfortable in town for long and, as leader of the band, Robin had felt it his duty to remain with them.

At least, Killian observed, they'd taken advantage of the local camping outfitters shop; the tents he saw now were really more like the pavilions he'd seen when making landfall during a county fair or jousting tournament. And if they were anything like those tents, then they almost certainly boasted some sort of heating stove inside—probably one a good deal safer than had been back in the Enchanted Forest.

"C'n I help you, mate?" Will asked, a cocky smile on his face and his right hand poised to grasp the hilt of the sword he wore on his left hip.

Killian took a breath. Well, if the thief wasn't about to bring up that embarrassing encounter, then neither was he. "I'm here to see Robin Hood," he said tersely.

"He ain't here," Will said, moving to block his way.

Will smirked. "He must've forgotten to file 'is itinerary wiv me. Last I saw, 'e was 'eadin' inter town."

Killian sighed. "Thanks, mate," he muttered. "It would appear I've come this way for nothing."
"Old on, now," Will said suddenly. "Maybe I can be of some service."

It was on the tip of Killian's tongue to refuse. Then he remembered exactly what line of work Will Scarlet was in. And that while he'd come to speak with a man who lived by a strict code of honor, hoping for advice on what to do when redressing past wrongs meant committing fresh ones, if he was to surrender to Ursula's extortion, maybe he wouldn't need to risk his own neck to do it. "Yes," he said slowly. "Perhaps you can…"

The floor was washed up with very little fuss. In fact, Aggie seemed to take as much pleasure in pushing the mop about (once Belle had wrung it out for her) as she had in creating her temporary masterpiece. After that, Rumple sent her downstairs to see whether the others were ready to either perform or order supper, so that she wouldn't see Belle redoing the chore.

"She actually did a pretty good job," Belle remarked, once the door to the basement swung shut. "A few soap streaks, but I think she might have made better work of it than I did when I first came with you."

"You didn't grow up performing household chores," Rumple pointed out. "Peasant children are frequently taught such skills young. Often as soon as they can be trusted to handle the tools without injuring themselves. I'll warrant that this isn't the first floor she's mopped."

Belle nodded, thinking about how her parents and tutors had often steered her away from the kitchen when, intrigued by the sights and smells, she'd clamored to try her hand at cooking or turning a spit or polishing the silver.

The 'thrill' had quickly worn off when she'd agreed to serve as Rumple's maid, but as a child it really had looked like fun. More. It had been something that she might have been able to do 'just like the grownups'. Aggie didn't seem to view such chores as drudgery either.

The door opened again and Aggie burst forward, not noticing when Belle almost guiltily stood the mop back in its bucket and began wheeling it toward the back room. "They're coming!" she crowed. "And you're gonna love it!"

A girl's laugh rang out behind her. "You weren't even watching!" Cecily exclaimed, emerging on her sister's heels. "How do you know?"

"Cuz you're in it," Aggie retorted loftily.

A moment later, the other youths clambered up the stairs. Henry looked around the shop floor critically. "I guess," he said, "if the audience is going to be behind the counter, then upstage would be toward the door and…"

"Yeah," Perry nodded. "So, Cis, you and Monica," he motioned to a tall dark-skinned girl standing behind Amy, "should stand… here and… here. And Marie, let's make this part off to the side the wings where you'll be waiting to come onstage, and," he stopped and looked at Rumple.

"Uh… sorry to keep you waiting longer. We just need a few minutes to get our bearings."

Rumple nodded with a bemused expression. "By all means. Proceed. Unless you'd rather we wait in the back until you're ready? I mean," he added, "when the time comes for the actual performance, you won't be tasked with assembling and getting into position while the audience sits expectantly, will you?"

Perry broke into a relieved smile. "I really hope not. Sir," he added. "I mean, I think you're just
supposed to see the result and think it's all natural, not the work we put in to make it look natural."

"I quite understand," Rumple nodded, thinking it sounded rather like the sleight of hand shows his father had been wont to put on in hopes of earning a few coppers. Those shows had, in fact, been about the only times that Rumple could recall his father actually working at something. From what he recalled of that brief interlude, Malcolm hadn't been without talent along those lines, but he'd soon given up the show in favor of running shady card games—a trade that proved more lucrative if riskier.

He pulled his mind back to the present. These young people had been rehearsing for most of the afternoon and they certainly appeared to be dedicated to the endeavor. He was looking forward to seeing what they'd been up to. And it was only fair to give them every opportunity to make their last minute preparations without additional scrutiny.

"Very well," he said. He turned to Cecily.

"Did you wish your sister to remain out here?"

Cecily hesitated. "I hope you didn't mind her staying upstairs. I know she can be a handful sometimes."

"Ah," Rumple returned. "Well, you'll be happy to know that today was not one of those times."

"That's good," Cecily said. "And in that case, if you wouldn't mind, I mean it'll be easier to get set up if I don't have to watch her." Then, quickly, "but if it's a problem, of course I'll—"

"It's not," Rumple assured her. "Though, perhaps your sister ought to be consulted as well."

Cecily blinked. But she stooped down to Aggie's level and murmured softly to her. Aggie whispered something back and Cecily smiled. "You'll have to ask him that," she said. "Politely."

Aggie nodded and faced Rumple once more. "Can... may I draw some more, please? On paper this time, so I can please take it home, please?"

Rumple's expression was solemn, but there was a gleam of amusement in his eye as he replied gravely, "I believe that can be arranged."

Aggie frowned. "Was that 'yes'?"

"It was."

The child nodded decisively. "Then I'll come with you. Thank you."

"Sir!" Cecily hissed in a stage whisper.

"Sir," Aggie added.

Belle actually clamped her hand over her mouth as she hurried into the back.

Will Scarlet listened intently while Killian explained his dilemma, saying nothing until he was certain that the pirate was finished. Then he laughed, not cruelly, but with a tinge of admiration. "Cor, mate," he whistled, "she's got you tied up in knots you ain't never learned in no royal navy, don't she?"

Killian glowered. "I don't know how to get out of this, mate," he snapped. "I destroyed her life and
now she seems bent on destroying mine. If I help her get her vengeance on Rumpelstiltskin, while it's no longer my first choice, if it clears out her claim against me, then maybe it's for the best."

Will shook his head. "Naw, 'tisn't."

"Well, it might at least put her vendetta against me to rest."

"And start up a new one twixt you and the former Dark One. Who's still dangerous e'en wivout magic." He shrugged. "And anyway, it won't. You'll just 'ave 'em both firin' arrows at that target you're paintin' on your back."

Hook frowned. "Come on, mate. This whole… matter… isn't exactly happening by my choice. If there's a target on my back, I think we can blame the sea witch for—"

"Handin' you the paint pot an' brush an' tellin' you what design she fancies on that black jerkin ye're so fond of? Aye. But it's still your 'and 'oldin' that brush." He smiled then, in an almost kindly fashion. "C'mon mate. Maybe you've spent too long at sea to've been taught the first rule of 'oles, but it's obvious enough I'm kind of surprised you ain't figured it out, yet."

"First rule of… owls?" Killian repeated. His crew hailed from a variety of ports and he was no stranger to different accents and phrasings. Still, Will's speech required a fair amount of concentration to puzzle out in spots.

Scarlet chuckled at his confusion. "I'd like to think you were finally learning proper talk, but somehow I can't 'elp thinkin' you thought I was referrin' to birds just now. Holes, mate," he repeated slowly, exaggerating the aspirant 'h'. Seeing that Killian still seemed puzzled, the thief leaned forward conspiratorially. "When yer in 'un," he grinned, "stop diggin'! Mate, you say she's threatening to wreck your life if you don't do as she says? Do as she says and you're doing that yourself! And now you come 'ere ter… what exzackly? Ope Robin 'as some words of advice for bein' a little less strict with a code of honor? Good luck wi' that, mate," he laughed. "Man's got an arrow wedged so far up 'is ar—" He broke off suddenly.

"Ah… 'Lo, there Roland."

The little boy ducked his head once and smiled shyly. "Have you seen Little John?" he asked.

Scarlet thought for a moment. "Bethink me, e might've mentioned seeing to some fletching. You know what verdigris smells like?"

Roland nodded at once.

"Good lad. If you 'ead toward the tents and follow yer nose, bethink me ye'll find 'im."

The boy thanked the thief and took off in the direction indicated. Once he was out of earshot, Will turned back to Killian. "Look, mate," he continued, and now, Killian had less trouble understanding his accent, "if I were you, I'd ask myself one question: Why does the sea witch want me help? Is it acos she needs me skills? Or is she jest lookin' to make me squirm? If it's the former," Will shrugged, "do or don't do as't pleases ye. A code's a hinteresting thing and oftimes open to interpretation. You might find a way to convince yourself you're doing right, and who knows? Maybe it'll be so. Ah, but if it's the latter, mate, then save yourself some stress an' 'eartache and come clean now. Acos as soon as she 'as what she wants and no further need o' your services," his smile now held a touch of commiseration, "well, I wouldn't put it past 'er to carry out 'er threat to tell the others an' jest set back an' watch them fireworks. You'll get every hand in this town raised against you, when it's her what's the real threat. But they're like to be too busy layin' into you
t'recollect that for a bit." He slapped Killian's shoulder gently. "Your choice, mate. I figure if everyone's at everyone else's throat, they might not spot me plyn' me own trade. You bein' stubborn?" He smiled. "Very good for business." His smile died. "Just very bad for this town. I tell you straight, friend… I'm torn."

Killian pressed his lips together tersely and nodded once.

"Still want me to 'ave Robin get in touch wiv you when 'e comes back?"

Killian shook his head. "No, mate," he said slowly. "I think I've got all the advice I need."

Will nodded. "Suit yourself then. I s'pose I'd best get back t'guard duty; Tuck gets tetchy if there's none to cover 'im when 'e betakes himself to the mess tent."

Killian nodded and Will turned on his heel. "Scarlet?" Killian called after him. "Thanks, mate."

Will grinned cockily. "For what, mate? You already knew what you 'ad t'do when you arrived 'ere. Now get out there an' do it."

"I will."

"Ey, mate?" Will called, as Killian turned in the direction of town. "Good luck."

The performance was far from polished. Henry had reminded Rumple and Belle apologetically that they were less than three weeks into rehearsals and still reading most of their lines from the script. In essence, today's show was more of a read-through with some moving about.

Even with those limitations, Rumple had to allow that the young cast was not without talent. Lines were delivered with expression and, at least in the case of Cecily and Nicholas, with a certain natural ease that couldn't quite be obscured by the script pages that too often got in the way of the performers' faces.

Right now, Rumple watched as Henry/Cornelius and Nicholas/Barnaby did their best to hide from their employer—who was completely unaware that the two had escaped from work, taken a day off without his consent, and had arrived in New York bent on adventure—though why they'd thought they'd find it in a millinery shop was beyond him.

"Some women were here a minute ago," Henry said. "I saw them." (The women—Cecily and Amy—were standing by the map carousel in the back room of the 'millinery shop'.) Meanwhile, the two boys approached the imaginary door of the shop, pretended to glance out, and immediately returned. "That's Wolf-trap all right," Henry said, with panic that was a bit too obviously over the top. He sighed. "Well, we've got to hide here until he passes by."

Nicholas sidled up to the "door," took another look, and turned back to Henry with a worried frown. "He's sitting down on that bench," he replied. "It may be quite a while."

Henry gulped. "When those women come in," he said, "we'll have to make conversation until he's gone away. We'll pretend we're buying a hat. How much money have you got now?"

Nicholas reached into his pocket, while Rumple found himself torn between curiosity at seeing the antics that the two characters might get up to, and a certain yearning for the employer to enter the shop, discover his unreliable employees, and give them a piece of his mind. Somehow, he doubted that such would transpire.
"When's Cis going to talk again?" Aggie demanded, and Rumple held an admonishing finger to his lips. "Watch and find out," he murmured.

"Don't wanna," Aggie protested sulkily. "Nothing's happening."

"Yet," Rumple said with a smile. "Be patient."

"You mean sto-ic," Aggie grumbled, clearly having acquired a new favorite word. But she did sit quietly, if resignedly.

After a moment, Belle stole to one of the cases and lifted out a large stuffed rabbit. Aggie's eyes lit up when Belle offered it to her and she grasped it at once and hugged it to her torso.

Rumple smiled approval and directed his attention back to the performance.

"Even if our adventure came along now," Nicholas was saying, "I'd be too tired to enjoy it. Cornelius, why isn't this an adventure?"

"Don't be asking that," Henry retorted. "When you're in an adventure, you'll know it all right."

Rumple nodded encouragement and smiled more broadly. His grandson hadn't sounded as though he'd been reading that line. Rather, it sounded as though it was coming from someone who'd been on enough adventures to know whereof he spoke.

Nicholas shook his head, seeming unconvinced. "Maybe I wouldn't," he replied. Then inspiration seemed to strike. "Cornelius, let's arrange a signal for you to give me when an adventure's really going on. For instance, Cornelius, you say . . . uh . . . uh . . . pudding; you say pudding to me if it's an adventure we're in."

Henry rolled his eyes and deliberately turned his back on his friend. "I wonder where the lady who runs this store is." He turned back to Nicholas. "What's her name again?"

"I'm hungry!" Aggie interrupted.

"Aggie..." Belle murmured.

"NO!" Aggie said. "They're talking about pudding and I want some!"

Rumple cleared his throat. "How long has it been since the child—or any of you, for that matter—have eaten?" he called.

The youths blinked and looked at each other.

"What time is it?" Perry asked.

"I guess we haven't really had anything since before we came here," Amy said.

Rumple sighed. "Well. As impressed as I am by what I've seen thus far, perhaps it would be better to adjourn until after dinner. I'll confess to feeling a bit peckish myself."

"W-we didn't realize we'd need this long to rehearse," Cecily admitted.

Rumple shook his head, smiling. "It's easy enough to lose track of time when one is engaged in a project," he pointed out. "But it does appear to be rather close to the supper hour. So, if you'll each be so good as to advise me as to what you'd like to order, I'll make the arrangements."
"Pudding!" Aggie exclaimed.

"Aggie!" Cicely admonished.

"I'm afraid that's not on Mrs. Lucas's menu," Rumple said smoothly. "Nor is it much of a supper. Would you perchance be partial to grilled cheese?"

Aggie cocked her head toward him. "Partial?" she repeated.

"Do you like grilled cheese?" Rumple rephrased, not at all put out.


Rumple consulted the takeout menu he'd already set upon the counter. "Well," he smiled. "That does appear to be an option." He looked up. "And the rest of you?"

One by one, orders were given and taken, until Rumple's eyes sought Belle's. "Belle?"

She hesitated. "I guess I'll have a burger and fries," she said.

Rumple wrote it down. "Will you pick up the order?" he asked, "or shall I?"

Belle winced. Rumple hadn't pushed her to go back to Granny's; not the way some of the others had. And it would be so easy to demur and let him go as he was offering. But somehow, she was embarrassed to request it in front of a group of middle-schoolers. Silly, really. They weren't likely to notice or care. They probably didn't even know why she was reluctant. Well. Henry did, but she doubted he'd told anyone. And anyway, who cared what they thought of her? She was being silly.

But not wanting to step foot in Granny's was another sort of silliness, wasn't it?

She took another breath, squared her shoulders, and met Rumple's eyes with a tight smile. "I'll go," she said, feeling a weight she hadn't even realized she was carrying slide off of her.

"I'll inform Mrs. Lucas to that effect," Rumple nodded, pulling out his phone, and there was no mistaking the approval in his eyes.

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Much as Killian hated to admit it, Will Scarlet had been right. He'd gone to Robin's camp looking for advice, when he already knew what he needed to do. Even if he wished he didn't. Even if this was going to hurt. Even if he knew that Emma and the others probably would understand, there was still the possibility that they wouldn't—or would understand all too well.

Even if he had to admit that there was still a part of him that would be delighted to see Rumpelstiltskin suffer.

He didn't have to do this. He could string Ursula along, just as he suspected she was now stringing him. Play both sides, pretend to assist her, all the while doing nothing to help or hinder her plots. It would be easy.

*I'm not a villain anymore,* he told himself. *I may not yet be a hero, for all my insistence to the contrary, but I'm trying to be. And heroes don't do what's easy.*

They did what was right.

But… right for whom?
He knew the answer.

He merely wished he didn't.

And that when the time came to prove himself, he'd be able to find the right words with which to do so.

"Here you go," Astrid said, handing over two large paper bags with a smile. At least, she tried to hand them over, but she released one before ascertaining that Belle had a good grip and it fell to the pavement. "Oh!" she gasped.

"It's all right," Belle reassured her. "I don't think there was any soup or sauce or anything..." Mrs. Lucas had probably included extra condiments, but those came in sealed foil packets; not the paper cups with plastic lids that the diner provided for its ketchup and mustard. Those might have popped off.

"I'm sorry!" Astrid said, as she bent down to retrieve the bag. She looked it over carefully. "I hope nothing broke," she murmured. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's not your fault," Belle smiled. She sighed. "I probably should have gone in for it myself. I meant to. But..." But she'd been standing several paces from the front door, telling herself she was being silly, and trying to will herself to go inside. Or will herself to have the magic to teleport the food outside and into her hands. Either way would have worked well. And then, Astrid had appeared and Belle had seen a way to avoid the whole complicated situation.

"Next time," Astrid said with a reassuring smile.

"Maybe," Belle said. "If there is one."

"Well, I hope so," Astrid said. "Because Mrs. Lucas said that Rumpelstiltskin called her to add something to the order and he told her you'd be coming to pick it up, so she was a little surprised to see me instead."

Belle was sure that she was feeling the color drain from her cheeks. "Was she?" she murmured. She'd forgotten that Rumple had said he'd call ahead, so relieved had she been to foist this duty off on another.

Astrid nodded, smiling. "And anyway, when she gave me the bags, she also asked me to pass on a message to you."

"Oh?" Belle asked, steeling herself for what she was about to hear.

"Yes," Astrid nodded again. "She said for me to tell you not to be such a stranger."

Dinner had, in fact survived intact, and was consumed with gusto. And if Henry and Belle were the only people present to engage Rumple in steady conversation, at least the others seemed to have gotten past their earlier nervousness.

Cecily, it must be owned, seemed to be making special effort to smile in his direction and express her thanks, likely doing her best to atone for the previous misunderstanding. As far as Rumple was concerned, she had nothing to atone for; the mistake had been one he might have expected anyone to make under the circumstances.
Still, when he offered the use of the shop for rehearsals the following Saturday under the same terms, he couldn't quite conceal his astonishment at the enthusiasm with which his suggestion was expected.

"Can I come back, too?" Aggie demanded, tugging on her sister's skirt.

Cecily hesitated. "If it's okay with Mr. Gold. And if Mama lets." She turned inquiring eyes toward Rumple.

"If you're too busy to keep an eye on her, I'll try to work something else out," she said. "I mean, I wouldn't want to impose…"

Rumple smiled. "Business tends to be rather slow on weekends," he allowed. "Today's arrangement worked rather well for all concerned. So long as the child has no objections, I'm willing to have it continue."

Cecily bobbed an instinctive curtsey, then blushed to the roots of her hair when Marie giggled.

Rumple gave the other girl a disapproving look. "Politeness takes many forms," he admonished quietly. "Laughing at another's customs isn't one of them, so far as I'm aware."

Marie winced. "Sorry," she murmured to Cecily.

"That's okay," Cecily replied, but not before flashing Rumple a guarded smile.

"Well then," Rumple said, "I'll see you all next week."

"Maybe Paige and Tobey will be able to make it then," Nicholas said.

"Yeah, that'd be good," Perry agreed.

"Henry," Rumple said, "The floor will want sweeping. Would you prefer to do it now or first thing in the morning?"

Henry sighed. "Now," he replied, unfastening the coat he'd already half-buttoned. "I'll just let my mom know I'll be a little longer."

"I'd help," Cecily said, "but I've really got to get Aggie home in time for her bath." She made a face. "If we wait too long, the others will have used up all the hot water."

"That's okay," Henry said. "It's my job, anyway."

"We'll let you get to it," Amy smiled. "C'mon guys. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we stop scuffing up the floor."

"I'll mop up after you," Belle offered. "So you'll be out a little sooner."

Henry grinned. "Thanks, Belle."

It didn't take long for the others to bundle up for the weather outside. As they were leaving, Cecily turned to her sister. "You had a good time?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah!" Aggie nodded emphatically. "I got to draw on the floor, and I got a bunny, and I got a picture to show Mama when we get home, and when I talk to Mr. Gold, he listens to me like I was big!"
Lily poured herself a cup of coffee and bit into a sweet bun. "How long until she gets back with the leg of toad or eye of newt?" she demanded.

Cruella scoffed. "She wouldn't need to go clear to Neverland for that, dahling."

"Fine. How long?" Lily asked.

Cruella shrugged. "It's impossible to tell," she said. "Time stands still in Neverland. She might be back in an hour. She might be back in a month. Or more."

"You mean," Lily started in horror, "I might be stuck in this godforsaken farmhouse with you for a month?"

"I'm not liking it any better than you are, dahling," Cruella retorted, "but we need to lay low. We've come too far now to let impatience get the better of us. Now, how about you toddle off to the kitchen and fix us something for supper?"

Lily took a deliberate bite of her sweet bun. "I'm good," she said when she'd swallowed it. "But if you want supper, don't let me stop you."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, dahling. I'm not about to do anything so menial. I'd burn the place down, like as not," she added.

"Well don't do that!" a new voice exclaimed in a crisp British accent. The two women turned as one in the direction of that voice. The newcomer was conservatively dressed, her blue eyes sparkling with mirth, and her masses of crinkly red hair struggling to escape the scarf holding it back in a tight ponytail. "I mean, I do intend to come back here one day."

"Who are you?" Lily demanded, half-rising from the table, one hand reaching into her jacket pocket and hovering indecisively between the screwdriver and the small can of mace, as she tried to determine what the better option would be.

"The owner of this abode," the woman replied affably. "But don't worry; I don't mind houseguests. I've been listening to you lot planning and plotting for the last little while, and I must say you've caught my interest."

"Yeah?" Lily snapped.

"Oh, yes. And you can leave those toys in your pocket alone, child; I'm not really here. This is just a projection. If you try to mace me, it'll simply pass through me."

"Let's try and find out," Lily said coldly, pulling out the canister, aiming it, and firing in one smooth motion. There was a hissing sound as the spray escaped and a white jet hit the wall behind the stranger.

"Yes," the woman beamed. "Let's. Actually..." She vanished for a moment, and then reappeared directly in front of Cruella, shielding the other woman from view. She smiled at Lily. "Did you want to try that again?"

Lily shrugged. "Looks like a win-win from where I'm standing."

"Hey!" Cruella snapped.

"Enough," the newcomer said, sounding bored. "A moment ago, you asked me who I was. My name is Zelena. And while I don't expect that to mean anything to either of you, newcomers that
you are, I suspect that you both might know me better as the Wicked Witch of the West..."
Chapter Twenty-Four

Ursula hadn't been back to Neverland in years. Not since her father and the pirate had conspired together to rob her of the thing that brought her the most joy. And now, to return, not only to the land that had brought her birth, but to her father's very palace… The Sea Witch steeled herself. She needed the powdered bone of a ghost whale's shoulder fin. The sea mammal was hard enough to find living. Dead, it might take an eternity. But Poseidon's treasure room held many riches and not all of them came from shipwreck booty. She knew that better than anyone; if she hadn't trusted the pirate enough to steal her father's squid ink, then... Well. Water under the surface now. She was no longer that same naïve girl. She knew better than to trust most humans under most circumstances. Fortunately, once she had the potion she'd brew with the bone powder, she would have at least one human whom she could trust. At least, until the serum wore off.

She slipped into the palace as easily as she'd once slipped out of it and made her way to the treasure chamber. The two guards didn't have time to sound the alarm before her tentacles were about their throats. As they each slumped to the ground, she glanced at them long enough to be certain that they were still breathing. She didn't really want to kill anyone here; not even her father. Her attack had merely choked them to unconsciousness.

The lock on the massive chamber door was shaped like a ship's wheel. Perhaps, she realized for the first time, it was. Wet wood rotted when it was exposed to the air, but submerged wood kept free of worms and other aquatic scavengers could last a very long time, especially if the water was cold.

The ocean depths were cold in Neverland.

She studied the lock for a moment. Then she reached out with both hands and grasped the upper handle—the 'king's spoke' with one hand, and the one that pointed due east with the other. "Three days hoping," she muttered, moving the wheel three turns left, "five days mourning," she continued, moving it five turns right, "and an eternity of vengeance," she finished, giving the wheel a final hard spin and releasing the handles. The door slowly creaked open of its own accord and Ursula smiled. "After all these years, Father, you still haven't changed the combination." Three days, Poseidon had waited for his wife to return. On the fourth, her body had been brought before him. Out of respect for their queen, the mer-folk who had found her had removed the harpoon that had destroyed her, but they had been unable to do more than bandage the wound. Poseidon and his children had grieved the five days that custom demanded. And then, her father had summoned her to him and told her how he meant to exact payment from the surface world.

"I should have listened to him," she muttered.

She glanced at the guards. She had no idea how long they'd be out and, after a moment's hesitation, she dragged them into the chamber with her. There were a number of large treasure chests inside, and it was only the work of a moment to empty two—fine linens and laces weren't nearly as heavy as metal coins, nor iron weapons—bind the hands of the two unconscious mer-folk with some of the laces, and seal them within. They wouldn't suffocate; the chests weren't water-tight. But they wouldn't be able to escape in time to sound the alarm, either.

She made her way quickly through the chamber, trying to recall where she'd seen the bone powder last, and hoping that nobody had had occasion to use it up in the years since last she'd flapped fin here. Fortunately, Sebastien her father's seneschal had always been thorough and well-organized. She found it on a shelf with other magical ingredients. Not too far from the squid ink, in fact.
Ursula thought for a moment. Then she grabbed the ink as well.

She turned to go and realized then that she wasn't alone. "Ursula," her father said gently. "Please…"

For a moment, she felt her resolve weaken. Then she shook her head. "The time for pleading is past, father. Don't try to stop me."

"I just want to talk."

She hesitated another moment. Then she squared her shoulders and rose higher in the water. "The time for that is past, too."

"I'm your father!"

She hadn't heard that level of pain in his voice since the day her mother had died. Again, she felt herself begin to give in. And how many times had she given in before? Only to be disappointed when Poseidon's true colors reasserted themselves. She sucked in another breath, and filling her lungs with water seemed to fill them with strength as well. "That's why you're still standing," she said coldly. "Don't worry about the guards; I just shut them away for safe-keeping," she added, gesturing toward the chests.

And then, she was moving past him, and he wasn't preventing her.

But as she made her way out of the palace and back toward the point where she could cross over to the (increasingly misnamed) Land Without Magic, she was forced to admit to herself that not all the salt water in her eyes came from the sea in which she swam.

"Look," Lily blustered, "we didn't know this was your place. We just needed a spot to hole up and word was, it was empty."

"And so it is," Zelena's image nodded smilingly. "At least, for now. I'm somewhat… indisposed."

"Indisposed?" Cruella repeated, a canny gleam coming to her eye. "Can you be a bit more specific, dahling?"

Zelena sighed. "Well, if you must know, I'm in confinement."

"Locked up, you mean?" Cruella demanded.

"Well, that too," Zelena smiled. "Go with one of the older meanings of the phrase."

"You mean…" Lily stared hard at the projection before her. The red-haired woman's clothing was loose enough that she couldn't confirm the woman's words based on looks alone. "You're pregnant?" she finished.

Zelena nodded. "And sadly, that means I can't get up to much mischief until the child's born. Which means not letting on that while I might be locked up, my magic isn't."

"What is it you want?" Cruella asked.

Zelena giggled. "Really, dear," she addressed Lily, "is your companion always this tactful?"

Lily shrugged. "I think she asked a good question. If you're locked up with magic, it sounds like you don't want our help to get free. And even if we did try a jailbreak, it doesn't sound like you
want to help us. So, why should we help you? And if that's not what you're after, then Cruella's right: what do you want?"

Zelena's smile grew warmer and somehow, more sincere. "I must admit," she said, "I've been eavesdropping on your conversations since you moved in. Dormant spells," she clarified. "Activated in case of home invasion. So, yes, I know what you're here for. But you've got several obstacles standing in your way. First, Emma's powerful and getting more so every day as her education progresses. My magic can't defeat her."

"You're not helping your case, dahling," Cruella remarked.

"But if we should join forces, we'll help each other. You strike out at Emma by harming those closest to her. Her parents are already on your hit list. But you're overlooking others. Her pirate lover—"

"Ursula's taking care of that one," Lily quipped.

"By threatening to tell Emma of their shared past if he won't do her bidding? That's hardly likely to impact her very much. Especially if she and the pirate each uphold their end of that bargain. But even if the sea witch double crosses him… so what? She'll get angry, utter a few choice remarks and, like as not, they'll be kissing and canoodling before nightfall." Zelena smiled sickly. "No, I think it would be far better if more… unfortunate… things were to happen to him. Something more permanent," she continued. "But not just to him. There's that boy of hers. And her close friends. Like my dear sister Regina."

Cruella's eyes narrowed. "I must admit we've been wondering about that friendship. It hardly makes sense."

Zelena shrugged. "You want vengeance on the Charmings. I want vengeance on Regina. And if old Rumple were to suffer too, well… I'm told he no longer possesses magic, so that shouldn't be too hard to achieve."

"We haven't been sure how reliable that bit of gossip is," Cruella admitted.

"Well," Zelena said, "after what I did to him, I think the very fact that he hasn't slipped in here to kill me speaks volumes about the limits of his power."

Lily turned to Cruella with a frown. "Sounds like Hook may not be the ally Ursula thinks he is."

"Or," Cruella pointed out, "the Dark One—whether former or current—is playing a long game. He does that," she added brightly. "As you're doubtless aware. So," she added, giving Zelena a hard look, "are you asking us to remove obstacles from your path? Or are we the obstacles? Sounds to me like sending us to take on the Dark One on the assumption he's powerless could backfire spectacularly if you're wrong. Or work splendidly for you, if that's your plan."

"My, my," Zelena laughed, "are you always this suspicious?"

"Give us one good reason we shouldn't be," Lily snapped. "Because if you ask me? Approaching two members of a trio when the third is away is a recipe for sowing dissension in the ranks. I think you're playing us, lady, and I don't like being played."

Zelena shrugged. "Suit yourselves. But you need someone on the inside if your plans are going to succeed."

"Yeah, well, like I said before, it sounds like you're too far inside to be of any use to us. And from
what you said before, you don't want out."

"Not now," Zelena agreed. "But eventually. And until that time comes, well, there's no reason I
can't assist you from within. And as I'm currently demonstrating, my magic can function quite well
outside my current confinement. I can probably give a bit of a boost to any plan you—or we—
concoct. And trust me, my dear ones, I can be a formidable ally."

Lily frowned. "Maybe," she said slowly, "but I think this is something we need to discuss when
Ursula gets back."

"Suit yourselves," Zelena said. "Oh and by the way? Try to be a bit more observant."

"Sorry?"

Zelena shrugged again. "Well, you found the cozy little room I had fixed up for Rumple easily
enough. But did any of the three of you spare a glance for the items on the shelves just outside of
it?" She smiled. "Let's call it a pledge of good faith. In case the pirate lets down Ursula as
thoroughly as he did me."

And with a giggle, the witch's image faded away.

Lily and Cruella exchanged a quick glance. "Storm cellar?" Cruella asked.

Lily nodded, already grabbing her coat for the trip outdoors. "You know it."

Rumple did his best to hide his disappointment when Robin stepped into the shop the next
morning, scant moments after he'd opened for the day. "You came alone," he greeted him.

Robin nodded with a sad smile. "Give him time," he said. "He'll come around."

"But you told him why I asked to see him?" Rumple probed, even as he took the stoppered vial out
from behind the counter and set it down carefully on the smooth glass surface.

"I did," Robin confirmed. "If it helps, he did say that he doesn't, I quote, want anything bad to
happen to you, but neither does he currently wish to face you."

Rumple nodded slowly at that. "I suppose I can understand his feelings. Well," he forced himself
to smile, "your obtaining the potion was never contingent on his presence. I've written the proper
dosage on the label at the back of the bottle," he added, motioning to the leader of the Merry Men
to pick it up. "You're meant to taper off the usage. By the time the bottle is empty, one might hope
the problem resolved."

Robin reached for it, his smile warmer this time. "Thank you."

Rumple nodded. "I…" He winced. "I don't want to force the issue, but I truly regret the part I
played in your son's current issues. Would you please tell him that—when he's ready, of course—I
would be willing to meet him at a place of his choosing, and with as many people present as he'd
prefer, to tell him so to his face?"

Robin blinked. "I'm not sure such ceremony is warranted," he replied. "Roland is only a child, after
all."

"Perhaps," Rumple agreed, "but I did wrong him. And, if I can manage to do so without worsening
matters, I would like to make amends. If he'd be willing to meet me in a place where he feels safest,
surrounded by people he trusts most, I'd… well, I'd say that's understandable. When he's ready, of course."

Robin tucked the vial into a belt pouch. "Of course. And… I shouldn't think it'll be too long. Roland's never been one for keeping grudges."

"He's afraid," Rumple translated. He sighed. "I'll not pretend I can't understand why. Though I had hoped…" his voice trailed off and he turned away quickly.

"For what it's worth," Robin said quietly, "I don't bear you any ill will."

Rumple turned back to him with a raised eyebrow. "Just for that incident? Or do you mean it as a blanket statement for events that occurred prior to your arrival in this land?"

Robin sighed ruefully. "You knew it was me, then. In your castle, right before Roland's birth. I always did wonder about that afterwards."

"I could tell you were using a magical disguise that time," Rumple admitted. "But I wasn't concerned with who you were under it until the day when I was ordered to obtain Regina's heart."

He shook his head. "At least, I finally understood why you came to steal instead of, at least, attempt to bargain first."

"I might not have known what the Dark One did to those who stole from him, though I'll admit I didn't think it could be anything good," Robin said. "However, your penalties for those who struck deals and failed to uphold their end… I took a chance. It didn't go as planned."

Rumple smiled at that, but his eyes were still worried. "I don't believe you answered my question."

Robin sighed. "As I said, I knew that there would be consequences if I were caught. I was and there were. And, while I can't say I enjoyed them, well, it is thanks to you that my wife and son both survived childbirth. And," he smiled faintly, "I rather suspect that had I not alluded to our history before that incident, you wouldn't have brought it up either. So, I suppose it was a blanket statement." He hesitated for a moment, before thrusting his hand forward. "No hard feelings."

Rumple hesitated for an instant before clapping it. "No… hard feelings," he repeated, not even bothering to hide his astonishment. "Thank you."

Robin withdrew his hand and patted the pouch at his belt meaningfully. "No. Thank you."

Ursula returned to Storybrooke in a foul mood. She'd obtained the magical ingredient she needed for the truth serum, yes, but the confrontation with her father still grated in her memory. She wasn't that same trusting child she'd been all those years ago in Neverland. She'd seen her father's true colors, swum away, and never once been back. Until today.

And her father had… Oh, she knew it had all been a ruse, of course. A trick to get her to lower her guard, so he could get under her skin and turn her back into his dutiful daughter. Ironic, really. He'd wanted her to use her voice to lure sailors to their doom. Today, that proposal seemed so much more appealing than it once had. If it wouldn't have meant being back under his thumb. He'd give her back her singing voice, of course, but she'd live every day with the knowledge that she possessed it at his pleasure and if she ever displeased him, he'd likely remove it once more. She wasn't about to give him the opportunity.

_But he'd seemed almost conciliatory. And for one instant, she'd half-considered hearing him out._
She could still go back. Hear what he had to say; she had no obligation to believe him or agree to any request. She shook her head, mentally turning her back on the idea. She had people depending on her and a plan that actually had a chance of working. A real happy ending where she might just get everything she wanted without having to compromise or concede. She wouldn't have that if she went back to Neverland. Back to her father's tyranny. No.

She surfaced under the main pier in Storybrooke's harbor and realized that she was alone. So. The pirate seemed to have acquired the sense not to venture too close to her domain. Pity. She really needed to hit something right about now. Or someone. She allowed herself a small sigh of regret. Then she hauled herself up on the pier, let the freezing water slide away from her, and cloaked herself in a glamor spell for the trek back to the farmhouse. She had the ghost whale bone. Now it was just a question of locating another two items, and if the pirate came through for her, well, she might actually ease up on him. Slightly, anyway. If he didn't, well, at least she'd still have someone to hit.

In the back office, Rumple examined the pewter tea service more closely. One of Storybrooke's newer residents had brought it in to pawn several days earlier and, while it wasn't anything fancy, it was certainly serviceable. Or it would be, once it was cleaned up some. Rumple sighed. The water coming from the faucet of the bathroom sink wouldn't be nearly hot enough and it was always a challenge clearing counter space for the hot plate in an area near one of the two electrical outlets in the office.

Perhaps, there was another solution. He was still struggling with Tinkerbell's spell book. Polishing spells for a variety of household implements were in the early pages, but try though he might, he couldn't quite get them to work. He thought he knew the problem, too. For far too many decades, fairy magic had been anathema to him—at least, in the figurative sense. Nobody with a taint of Darkness could read their language, nor cast even their most neutral of spells.

It hadn't always been so. In fact, those restrictions had only been incorporated into their magical workings within the last three centuries—for reasons Rumple knew full well. But now, even though he was no longer the Dark One, he'd spent so much of his life knowing that his magic couldn't work with that of the fairies that he couldn't fully believe that the rules had changed for him.

Had he been back in the Enchanted Forest, he might have sought out other purveyors of Light magic for instruction. But here? Regina hadn't brought any elementary spell books with her when the Curse had transported them all. Even Cora's old book was too advanced for him now. And Emma had no spell books; she'd absorbed the lessons that Regina had given her and was learning the rest via experimentation. Supervised experimentation. Rumple frowned. Now, there was an idea. It might be a bit embarrassing to ask for such assistance, he acknowledged as he pushed aside the pewter-ware, but it would only sting for a little bit. Whereas fumbling basic spells that even an ogre's spawn could probably grasp in less time than it was taking him now would be far more humiliating.

He sighed again. And then, he reached for his coat and cane. With any luck, he'd be able to catch the Apprentice at home.

"I'm sorry," Tony said at the front door of the Apprentice's house. "Uncle Bené didn't say how long he and Tia would be, but you're welcome to come in and wait, if you like."

Rumple hesitated, but he'd misjudged the amount of walking his ankle could handle before it stopped aching and started throbbing, and he knew he wouldn't be able to make the trek back
without a noticeable hobble. "If it wouldn't be too much of an imposition..." he murmured, taking a step forward as Tony moved aside to admit him.

"Can I offer you anything?" Tony asked, trailing behind. "Coffee? Tea?"

Rumple shook his head. "Thank you, no," he said, sinking into a padded armchair in the front room.

Tony took the only other seat available, one Rumple recognized as that which the Apprentice—Bené—had occupied the last time Rumple had come here. He smiled uneasily.

Tony shook his head. "He's not holding a grudge over that," he said.

"Pardon?"

The younger man smiled apologetically. "I guess Tia and I didn't mention it specifically when we met before. Sometimes, we... know things," he said, fidgeting a bit in the chair. "About people we encounter. She's better at controlling it than I am. Most of the time, I need her to tell me what she's picking up and then I see it too—usually fleshed out in greater detail. Other times, though, it's like a window suddenly opens in my brain and..." He looked away. "I know about the hat," he admitted. "And why you're here now. Maybe I can help."

"Can you?" Rumple snapped, caught off-guard and trying to mask his surprise with anger as he often did. "Your magic, as already established, isn't much like mine."

"Maybe it's more like yours than you realize," Tony said, still sounding diffident. "At least, in terms of methodology." He hesitated. "I think I could use some orange juice. Sure you don't want anything?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not," Tony smiled, pulling his harmonica out of his breast pocket. Putting the instrument to his mouth, he began to blow a lively melody.

Rumple glowered. His appreciation for harmonica music ranked marginally above his appreciation for the accordion—in other words, several notches below that of a two-year-old drumming on copper pots with a wooden spoon. (He'd never lost his temper with Bae, not even after he'd become the Dark One, but that impromptu percussion concert had brought him close to it.) And then, just when he was about to ask Tony whether he'd taken leave of his senses, a nearly-full glass of orange juice came floating out from the probable direction of the kitchen. It halted in front of Tony, just at eye level, until the younger man put down the harmonica and reached for it.

"Tia wouldn't have needed a tool to do any of this," Tony said, and took a sip. "But," he went on, as he set down the glass beside the harmonica, "she also wouldn't have been able to get the juice out of the fridge, pour it into a glass, replace the carton, and levitate the glass to her in here, unless she could see exactly what she was doing. So." He put the glass down on the table. "Would you say that one of us is more powerful than the other? Or would you say, rather, that our power manifests differently in both of us?"

Rumple blinked and Tony smiled again. "I know it's early days, still," he said with a seriousness that belied his friendly expression, "but has it occurred to you that needing a spindle to access your power doesn't necessarily mean it's weaker? Maybe it just needs a different channel than it used to."

Rumple didn't respond for a long moment, as he considered Tony's words. Then, just as the silence
began to grow uncomfortable, he said pensively, "In all honesty, that notion hadn't occurred to me. I'm not overly familiar with your brand of magic. But I take your point."

"Could I ask a couple of basic questions?" Tony asked, sounding in that moment, very much as Henry might. "Uncle Bené was explaining a bit about how the other kind of magic—the one you've always used—worked. I mean, it's what he uses, too, even if Tia and I didn't realize it until much later."

Rumple nodded impatiently. "I'm not hearing the questions."

Tony's eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown. 'I guess, let's start with the really basic one. How does it all… work? I mean, when it comes to spells, I've never heard Uncle Bené say 'hocus pocus' or 'a la peanut butter sandwiches' or anything. So, what happens exactly? Is it pretty much chemistry by another name: mix the right ingredients together and get the results you want? Or is there more to it?"

Rumple settled back in the armchair, relaxing as he felt himself once more on familiar ground. "Just a bit," he said. "You're quite correct that spells need not be spoken aloud. Back in our land, I grant that they often were," a sardonic smile curved his lips, "by pretentious individuals aspiring to commence magical studies, charlatans attempting to pass off flash powder and sleight of hand as genuine sorcery, and thespians playing the roles of magicians—who had either never witnessed true mages at work, or assumed that their audiences came to the theater with certain preconceptions, likely influenced by those aforementioned aspirants and charlatans, about spell casting, and would dismiss any authentic portrayal of the craft as unrealistic. Rather than take the opportunity to set straight the record, those actors almost invariably opted to perpetuate the errors."

Tony chuckled. "My wife's a lawyer," he said, smiling once more. "She can't watch a legal drama on TV for more than five minutes before she starts yelling at the set as though the actors could hear her. I think I know what you mean."

"Indeed," Rumple nodded. "But, getting back to your question, there is a bit more to magic than assembling the components. One must know the proper spell, even if it isn't necessary to voice the syllables."

"But…" Tony's expression grew worried, "how do you go about explaining that you were just studying the spell, but didn't intend to cast it? I mean, what if it goes off by accident?"

"That's been known to happen," Rumple nodded, impressed that Tony had asked a question he'd never received from one of his earlier pupils. "But it happens far less frequently than you might think. You see, in order to release the spell, it requires an emotional trigger. Anger to release it, joy to control it, and…" His eyes grew wide.

Tony leaned forward unconsciously, his face intent. "And… what?"

Rumple gripped the arms of his chair tightly. "I just realized. While I was able to spin magic into the thread on the spindle, when I relaxed my grip and it unraveled and…" His jaw dropped open. "It couldn't possibly be that simple," he said, his voice dropping almost to a whisper.

"Rumpelstiltskin?"

He pressed the tip of his cane to the wooden floor and rose laboriously to his feet. "I think," he said, still sounding thunderstruck, "I think I ought to get back home."

"Your ankle…" Tony frowned.
"I'll manage it," Rumple said, not quite able to suppress a wince. "This is more important."

"I'll tell Uncle Bené you were here," Tony acquiesced, getting up to escort Rumple to the door. "I wish my talent extended to healing. But if an Ace bandage would help…?"

"It wouldn't," Rumple sighed. "But thank you for offering. As for… Bené," he continued, "it would seem that I might not need his assistance, after all." He smiled then. "Thank you for inviting me in, Mr. Castaway."

"Tony."

"Tony," Rumple's smile grew warmer. "I do believe your curiosity may be pointing me in a direction I hadn't thought to pursue."

Tony nodded, unsurprised. "Glad I could help. You sure you don't want to wait, though? Once my sister comes back, she can drive you."

"Tempting," Rumple admitted, "but I think I'd best be getting along. I wish you good day."

"Well. I'll wish you the same," Tony replied, just as formally.

"Good, you're back," Lily said, before Cruella could even drop her glamor spell. "We all need to talk. Privately."

Ursula blinked. Then she looked around the living room-dining room area pointedly. "Isn't that what we're doing?" she demanded.

"No, dahling," Cruella spoke up from the sofa. "There've been some new developments since you've been off in the ocean, frolicking with baby seals."

Ursula fought down a wave of irritation. "There are no seals in Neverland," she said tetchily. Cruella sighed. "And no animals apart from some undisciplined urchins? I think I understand better why you left the place."

"Don't get sidetracked," Lily interrupted. "We need someplace we can talk without anyone magically eavesdropping."

"Who would—?" Ursula started to ask, but Cruella cut her off.

"The former occupant of this house. Who has, apparently, already been privy to most of our conversations here. Possibly this one, too, in fact."

Ursula's eyes widened. "Your car," she said shortly. "It's your property; I can make a shielded space for us there, even if we're still on her property. Otherwise, depending on how strong this person is, I don't think I can block her out, so long as we're in her domain." She frowned. "If this person is listening…"

"She already knows we don't trust her," Lily said. "And I don't seriously believe she trusts us. But I do believe she needs us. And if I have to pick between her knowing we're going someplace she can't listen in to plan our strategy, and her knowing what that strategy is, I'll take option A."

Ursula nodded slowly.
"So," Cruella said, several moments later, "we're agreed?"

Ursula and Lily nodded. "We don't need to trust her to use her," Lily confirmed, leaning over from the back seat of the Golden Spirit to speak to the two women in the front, "seeing as she's probably thinking the same about us."

"Yes, no honor among villains, dahling." Cruella smirked. "Present company excepted, of course."

"Of course," Lily and Ursula replied, neither one voicing the word 'not' that each mentally tacked on.

"But," Lily added, "she did give us something useful to try to demonstrate her friendly intentions."

"Oh?" Ursula replied, her eyebrows shooting upwards.

"How far along are we in developing that truth serum?" Cruella asked.

Ursula sighed. "Well, I got the ghost whale fin, which was the only ingredient we needed that isn't found here. But tracking down the rest of the components might be a challenge. If Hook can point me toward the Dark One's workshop, it'll help. If not… well, it'll take a bit longer."

"Not necessarily," Lily said, with a thin smile. "If we're done in here, Cruella and I have something to show you. Just try not to let slip anything you don't want overheard when you see it."

Ursula's breath caught, as she surveyed the shelves in the storage cellar. "Unbelievable," she said, taking down another stack of cans and blinking as glittering powders and glowing liquids seemed to wink back at her. "To think that all of this has been here the whole time."

"So…?" Cruella prompted.

Ursula nodded. "It's all here. I can get started on the serum tonight. After supper."
Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Summary

A/N: The lines Rumple recalls appear in "I'm Flying," Performed by Mary Martin, Maureen Bailey, Kent Fletcher, and Joey Trent in the 1960 televised broadcast of Peter Pan.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The half-heart in his chest was pounding with enough strength to be mistaken for the whole organ as Rumple made his way home. His ankle would take him to task for the exertion later; for now, he couldn't wait for who knew how long until Tony's sister returned with her car. A pity he hadn't known of public transit when he'd created the Dark Curse in the Enchanted Forest. If he had, he would have ensured that Storybrooke had sprung into existence equipped with an extensive bus network. But towns and villages in the Enchanted Forest were sparsely-populated by comparison and their denizens seldom had need to travel more than a few steps from their front doors—apart from district fair days, when wagon-drivers maintained a brisk seasonal business ferrying travelers to and from the grounds. Otherwise, one generally walked where one wanted to go. Coaches existed, to be sure, but they were generally reserved for the nobles. And one thing that Rumple had been quite firm about when creating the Dark Curse was that in this new land, cursed though they all might be, nearly every resident of the town would possess a personal coach—or whatever the equivalent might be. (He'd made an exception for Snow White, seeing as Regina was enacting the curse in the first place for the sole purpose of punishing her.) Rumple simply hadn't seen a purpose to importing a wagon service in a land where nearly everybody owned a coach.

He was paying for that oversight now.

It was only ten blocks from the Apprentice's house to his own. Ten short blocks. And, from what he recalled of the maps in the New York City subway cars, on certain lines, that distance might have contained at least two, possibly three stations.

He passed green space—more of a grizzled brown at this time of year, with dead grass poking through a thin layer of snow—and debated whether to rest on one of the two benches for a moment, but decided against it. It would be that much harder to get up again and it was already mid-afternoon. The temperature would only keep falling now, as the day waned. And he really didn't have that much farther to go.

And he could always call the number the others had given him to request assistance.

He snorted at the thought. This was scarcely an emergency. He was nearly home.

But it was heartening to know that someone would come to his assistance if he asked. At least, he believed that such would be the case, even if he wasn't about to test it.

Rumple sucked a breath in through his teeth and pressed onward.

August checked the varnish on the last game piece and smiled. "Well," he said to Marco, "I guess
that's that."

Marco looked at the two Battleship sets, sitting side-by-side on the work table, the cases open to display the model ships and pegs. "I think that Merryweather, she was wrong," he said thoughtfully.

"Papa?"

The handyman smiled. "She said that when you took the Dark One dagger, you freed yourself from the possibility of reverting to wood, but that you probably lost any ability to perform magic."

August blinked. "I still don't see—?"

Marco wrapped an arm around his son's shoulders and steered him closer to the work table. "Then look, my boy," he said warmly. "The scale, the craftsmanship, the attention to detail… There's magic in your hands, Pinocchio. The best kind of magic there is."

August shook his head, but he was smiling. "I'm not sure Rumpelstiltskin would agree with that."

"I think he might," Marco returned. "I think he just might. When do you plan to give it to him?"

August considered. "I'm not sure. I want to make sure I can find both of them in a relatively short span of time, but not when they're face to face. Gold's easy; he's usually at the shop during business hours. The captain, on the other hand, gets around."

"I think I can help you with that," Marco smiled. "Leroy, he was here the other day, talking about a ship the captain had commissioned him to build and asking if I'd be able to lend a hand. I may not know much about building a real ship," he admitted, "but I imagine hammers and saws are involved and I do know quite a bit about using those. I'm sure I can find some pretext to ask him to come and discuss his ideas with me. And if you present him with his gift then, well, I can keep him talking long enough for you to dash off to the shop with Rumpelstiltskin's."

Father and son shared a smile.

Fate had, Rumple reflected, a truly twisted sense of humor at times. He hadn't known what this new land would be like, merely that it would have no magic and that, one day, he would find his son in it. Had he been able to discern that events transpiring in the Enchanted Forest and other magical realms would be known to the denizens of this land—however distorted their account might be—he might have enacted certain safeguards.

For certain, he would have ensured that, while under the curse, he would have found better use for his time than to watch an old recording of a musical featuring a certain title character, much less listen to the soundtrack when the cassette tape turned up in the stack beside his stereo. He'd tried to blot those recollections out of his head once Emma had come to Storybrooke and he'd remembered who he was. But now, unbidden, the spoken dialogue that accompanied the insipid song lyrics surfaced once more.

*First I must blow the fairy dust on you!*

*Now think lovely thoughts*

*Think lovely thoughts*

*Think lovely thoughts*
A young boy's voice cried out: *Fishing?*

It was immediately followed by that of a girl: *Hopscotch?*

And then, an even younger boy proclaimed: *Candy!*

The children called forth more suggestions in the same order:

*Picnics*

*Summer*

*Candy!*

*Sailing*

*Flowers*

*Candy!*

And then, the original speaker, a woman playing the part of a young boy, directed with a smile in her voice, *Lovelier thoughts, Michael!*

*Christmas?!*

Of all the curse memories to have stuck, Rumple thought with a wince, it almost would have to have been that one. No wonder Emma hadn't believed the danger Neverland presented until she met it—and his father—head on. But even in such idiocy as that telling of his father's history, there was a grain of truth.

To unlock one's magic, one needed to seize on a memory that made them seethe with anger. That wasn't much of a problem for Rumple. There were so many at his disposal. But to channel that magic, it took memories of a more pleasant sort, and, over the course of his long life, those had been much fewer and farther between. He could have used his recollections of Bae's childhood, but those were all tinged with his misery at later losing him. Much like his memories of those early happy days with Milah were bound up with his recollections of what their life together had been like after his return from the front. Until now, he'd latched onto the only time in his life where he'd felt loved and appreciated unconditionally. Perhaps a delicious aroma and the privilege of the first bite of meat pie were small things, but they'd been enough.

Except that, armed with more recent knowledge, Rumple now knew that most of that had been a lie as well. It hadn't been real; not real enough, anyway. Tony was right. Using the spindle to access his magic might not be something he was used to, but that wasn't the real issue. He *did* have magic and he was able to call it forth; he had more than enough anger for that. But he needed lovelier thou—no. *He needed happier memories* if he was to direct that magic instead of just letting his thread fly apart and hope that the fibers landed where they could be of some use. He'd been lucky with the tomte thistle. How would he manage if it was a fireball spell that went awry?

He reached for the spell book and read once more the de-salting charm on the first page after the introduction. It looked simple enough. *It was* simple enough. But this time, instead of using spinning as a means of calming his mind so that it could be in the proper frame for working magic, he would try to use the spinning as the magic. He knew well enough how to call on his anger; he'd done it easily enough before. But as for the happier memories?

He was surprised to discover how many he'd made in recent weeks. His wedding night. Booth
reaching out to him on the library steps. Waking up that first morning in the hotel and realizing that he wasn't dreaming. So many sincere apologies, so many friendly overtures… connections, re-connections, offers and demonstrations of support… Each had warmed his heart—or what was left of it. But while any of those might prove effective, he chose instead a different moment. One where he had realized, once and for all, that with or without power, he had a value that nobody could deny him unless he denied it himself.

I was never nothing! He snarled once more in his mind. And once again, he felt the Darkness's hold on his mind loosen and melt away in the Light of that unvarnished truth. It hadn't been his first step away from the mindset he'd been locked into, but it had been one of the most important. It had been the moment that he'd finally looked his greatest enemy in the eye and turned his back on it, not in anger, not even out of a desperation to cling to some last vestige of the good man he'd once been, but in disgust that he'd let himself be fooled into traveling down Darkness's road for so long. But even within that disgust there had been the sheer joy that he had finally recognized his foe and defeated it entirely on his own. Now, eyes closed, he gripped the memory of that joy as though it were a piece of wool fiber, twisted it firmly, and fed it onto his drop spindle. When he opened his eyes again and looked at the newly-spun yarn, his eyes widened, even as a wondering smile came to his lips. Spiraling through the undyed grey wool was a glinting thread of gold.

Zelena smiled to herself, even as she gently stroked Billina's head and back. On the whole, she thought, that had gone rather well. Oh, they didn't trust her, of course, and that was to be expected. But they knew who she was, they knew her reputation, and they were almost certainly considering her offer.

In the past, she'd concentrated most of her spying on her half-sister's activities but, while Regina had often operated alone, she'd spent enough time in the company of Ursula and Cruella for Zelena to have observed those two as well.

Based on those observations, either woman would make a decent ally for the short term. And neither would pose a credible threat down the road, when their usefulness ended. Ursula was angry and bitter. Her hatred for the pirate was something that Zelena knew she could twist toward her own purpose. At the same time, the sea witch didn't appear to be overly ambitious—certainly not to the point that Zelena thought she'd need to worry about being stabbed from behind. At least, not from that quarter.

Cruella was a different case. If that one had the power to match her greed, she'd be formidable. As it was, Zelena didn't think she had much to worry about from a foe whose magical gift extended solely to control over animals. She glanced down at the chicken in her arm and frowned. On the other hand, if Cruella did mean to move against her at some point, then Billina would need to be protected. And, Zelena reflected, if she started building up a force of flying monkeys again, they might also be prone to outside influence… Well. She still didn't think that Cruella's power would be a match for hers, but it wouldn't do to be too complacent about it.

Lily, though, was an unknown quantity who would bear careful watching. Presently, she'd demonstrated intelligence, forethought, and ambition. Those alone didn't make her dangerous. But if she were to possess her mother's power, it would be rather a different story. In fact, depending on how the cards fell, Zelena rather suspected that the young woman might be her strongest ally…

…Or her greatest rival.

And before Zelena quitted this cell to take her place in the world outside, she knew that she would need to determine which it would be and plan her tactics accordingly.
Meanwhile, she sighed mentally, she was resigned to waiting. Going by the light filtering in through her sole window, it was getting close to dinner time. She cuddled the chicken closer and resisted the urge to check up on her house guests until after the orderly came by with her tray.

"Chalk?" Astrid repeated with a merry giggle. "On the floor? And Rumpelstiltskin didn't mind?"

Belle was laughing too. "I think it might even have been his idea. I was wondering, though, you're working with children Aggie's age now at the daycare, right?"

"A little younger," Astrid corrected. "You said she's five? Mrs. Herman has me with the two and three-year-olds."

"Oh," Belle's smile dimmed somewhat. "I was hoping you might have some ideas for activities."

"Well," Astrid said, "I can ask Mrs. Herman, but I'd think you'll find a lot of suggestions online or in the library."

"I did," Belle admitted. "But it's one thing to read a list of suggestions. It's something else to know which ones are most likely to work."

"True," Astrid said, "but one thing you need to remember is that no two children have the same personality. Some are going to like doing one thing; some will like something else. And just because they liked something they did yesterday doesn't necessarily mean they'll want to do it again today." Her eyebrows shot up. "You said she was drawing for how long?"

"I don't know," Belle admitted. "Maybe an hour?"

Astrid whistled. "That's pretty impressive, right there. Most five-year-olds have a hard time focusing on an activity for more than about fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. Sounds like she might be advanced for her age." She chuckled. "Or like she really enjoys drawing. All the same," she went on, serious now, "if you're planning a day's activities for her, I'd go in with four or five things planned. You can go back and cycle through them a few times, but if she gets bored with one thing, you want to have something else lined up and ready to go."

Belle nodded. "Thanks. I'll talk things over with Rumple tonight."

Astrid smiled. "He'll probably have some good ideas of his own. I mean, he had a son; he probably remembers what he was like when he was Aggie's age."

Belle's eyes widened. "That's right," she agreed. "He probably will. Uh… could you maybe… hold off on asking Mrs. Herman for now?"

"Sure," Astrid said uncertainly. "I mean, if you want me to. Did I say something wrong?"

"No," Belle shook her head with a smile. "Just the opposite. I think you might have saved me from making an old mistake."

Funny how history had a way of repeating itself, Belle thought, as she made her way back home. When she'd first come to live with Rumple in his castle, she'd put on as brave a face as she could, but inside, she'd been terrified of what he might have in store for her. Those first days, before she'd begun to see the man behind the monster, she'd walked on eggshells in his presence, certain that the slightest misstep might see her chained to the wall in the dungeon he'd called her room, turned into a frog, or blasted to dust.
Gradually, she'd realized that, dark though he was, he truly meant her no harm. She'd seen past the mocking giggling façade to the loneliness within and she'd begun to relax in his presence—at least enough that she felt safe in standing up to him.

She'd never stopped.

Oh, she'd told herself—and him—that she was trying to help him be his best self, and that had definitely been part of it. But part of it had also been the conviction that she knew best, that it was her mission to reform him, and that the only hope he had of breaking free from his darkness was through the strength of their love.

And she'd never stopped trying to make him over into the idealized version of himself she'd concocted in her head until she'd been forced to acknowledge how far from reality that vision was. And then she'd blamed him for not measuring up to acknowledge how far from reality that vision was. Even in New York, when they'd begun to patch things together, she'd still been so focused on the flaws she'd hitherto overlooked (while conveniently ignoring her own failings) that she'd nearly destroyed everything they'd been trying to build together. And although they were slowly backing further away from that brink each day, still the chasm yawned a bit too close by for comfort.

And she'd almost taken another step closer.

You've never raised a child, she told herself furiously. Apart from babysitting Neal for a few evenings—which he mostly slept through, and the one time he didn't, you had his bottle ready and waiting—you've barely even been in the presence of a child for any length of time. And here, you're trying to plan activities for a five-year-old and present Rumple with some... some... schedule, without even consulting him. Or Aggie, she added, wincing a bit.

This wasn't as bad as trying to change Rumple 'for his own good', but it was still the same old problem: she was assuming she knew best and charging ahead with her confidence and her convictions, without pausing to consider whether her way was actually the best way for the circumstances at hand. More to the point, if she and Rumple were together again then, while it wasn't necessary for them to do everything as a couple, at the very least, they could discuss things like this with one another. Between the two of them, they'd probably brainstorm more effectively than either could do on their own.

And if he rebuffs me and tells me that he knows what he's doing and doesn't need my help? She flinched as her mind voiced the question. Then she shook her head. In this case, she answered herself, he probably does. And if he's wrong, then I'll be right there to help him pick up the pieces and not rub it in. Her lips twitched as she added one more word to her unvoiced response.

...Much.

"You've been quiet tonight," Emma said, raising her glass of red wine to her lips. She took a sip and set it down carefully on the white tablecloth.

Killian smiled back. Then he pulled his hip flask out of his pocket and took a swig.

"Rum, not wine," Emma observed, her tone still light and teasing. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were nervous."

Killian raised the flask to his lips once more. When he lowered it to the table, he gave her an uneasy smile. "You're certain we'll not be disturbed?" he asked. "Your parents won't be back early?"
Emma blinked. "No, they promised they'd leave the place to us tonight. They wanted some alone time, too. Granny's watching Neal, Henry's at Regina's... It's just the two of us. At least until Granny's closes at eleven." Her expression sobered. "Why? What's wrong?"

Killian shook his head and started to reach for the flask again. Then he shook his head and slid it back into his pocket. "I'm afraid I'm feeling myself haunted by the past tonight, love," he said heavily.

Emma absorbed that for a moment. "Old memories?" she asked, sliding her hand across the table.

He took it. "In a way, love," he said. "I... Well. This is difficult."

Emma waited for him to continue, but he sat silently, his lips pressed together, his hand gently squeezing hers. Finally, she said, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. It's okay."

"No," he shook his head. "It's not. I do want to tell you... everything. Only..."

Emma nodded. "Only letting down walls, even around people you trust, can be..." She hesitated. "Well... for me, anyway, it's pretty scary."

Killian smiled at that. "Aye," he said. "And not just for you. It's... well. I suppose you might say I'm bilged on my own anchor."

Emma took another sip of wine. "I admit I'm not up on my pirate slang, but that doesn't sound good."

"It's not," Killian confirmed. "You... know I've done many things in the past that I'm no longer proud of. Things that I'm half-certain would drive you away if you knew a quarter of them."

"Killian?"

He took another breath. "Someone I... hurt... long ago is in this town. And she seeks to," a bitter smile came to his lips, "Well. I suppose the past has returned to haunt me in more ways than one. She now threatens my happiness in much the same way that I once threatened Rumpelstiltskin's. And I suppose that the best way to neutralize that threat is," he started to reach into his jacket pocket again. Then he shook his head and took the wine bottle instead, filling his glass nearly to the top but stopping before it overflowed the rim. "Well, I imagine 't'would be better for you to hear the truth from my lips rather than hers..."

Rumple was sitting at the kitchen table when Belle came home with two books under her arm. He smiled a warm greeting as she walked toward him. "If you've not eaten yet, I can have something in the microwave in short order."

Belle smiled back. "I haven't. But I hope you weren't waiting for me; it's nearly nine o'clock."

Rumple shrugged. "It's of no matter. I was otherwise occupied." He got up and walked toward the freezer. "Does bean and barley soup sound all right for you?"

Belle nodded. "I was thinking about Aggie," she murmured. "If she's going to be coming to the shop every week, do you think we ought to plan some activities for her?"

Rumple smiled. "The thought had crossed my mind," he admitted. "Bae was always artistic; it's one of the reasons I thought that the child would appreciate chalk drawing." He smiled. "Of course, that's no guarantee that she'll be as amenable next time. Bae certainly had other interests, as well."
"I... uh... hope you don't mind, but I was discussing a few ideas with Astrid," Belle said, encouraged. "She's working more with the children a bit younger than Aggie, but she had a few thoughts." She briefly outlined what the fairy had told her about children's attention spans.

Rumple nodded his understanding. "She's quite right, of course," he confirmed. "I was rather surprised that she kept at the drawing as long as she did. It did make me think that she might appreciate finger painting, though I believe we'd need to scrounge up an old shirt or two—adult-sized, I mean—to protect her clothing. And likely a roll of brown paper or some drop cloths to protect her work surface, though those paints are meant to be washable."

"I can stop by the art supply store tomorrow on my lunch break," Belle nodded. "Or maybe after you close up the shop, so you can come with me?" She hesitated. "I mean, I've been looking up ideas in these," she thrust the books forward, "but I... well, I've never done any of this before and I'm not sure I would have thought about old shirts or brown paper or..."

Rumple shook his head. "Curse memories have their uses," he admitted. "Otherwise, I'm sure I'd be as lost as you sound on the subject. Bae worked mostly with charcoal; he did odd jobs when he could in order to afford paper. Other times, he'd use lumber scraps or bits of bark." His eyes were soft as he remembered. "He never saw it as a hardship, so much as a challenge."

His eyebrows lifted. "While I agree that a trip to Mr. Eulinspeigel is probably warranted, we could actually make the finger paints here with no more than flour, water, and food coloring."

"That's all?" Belle said, surprised.

Rumple nodded. "It's something I wanted to make for Bae back in our land, but by that time, the taxes were increasing, food was being tithed for the army, and it was wasteful to use flour for such a purpose when one didn't know whether there'd be enough to last until the next wheat harvest." He hesitated for the barest instant before he added, "At least that wouldn't be a concern for... for any child that we might have in due course."

Belle's eyes widened. Then, with a glad smile, she closed the distance between them and threw her arms about her husband.

Emma didn't say a word until Killian was finished speaking. In a way, she was glad that he'd broken eye contact after about the first thirty seconds. She didn't like what he was telling her, not one bit, and she knew her emotions had to be showing on her face. That poor girl...

Which is exactly why he's waited so long to say anything. He knew you'd react this way.

Yeah, that was kind of the point. She'd known, of course, that he'd been a pirate and a villain, obsessed with revenge on Rumpelstiltskin, but somehow, she hadn't thought that he'd have destroyed a young girl's dreams just to get back at her father for thwarting him.

Gold's done some pretty Dark stuff too and you've been willing to overlook that.

She hadn't been thinking about a future with him.

Not to mention your parents.

That had taken longer. And at least they were trying to...

She took a breath. "What you did to this... Ursula. Can you reverse it? Give her back her voice?"
Killian sucked in a breath and locked his eyes on hers for the first time since he'd started talking. "It's not that easy, love," he said. "Not because I don't want to, mind."

"Then…?"

He shook his head. "The shell in which I captured her voice isn't… with me anymore. It was in my cabin on the Jolly Roger and that's currently back in the Enchanted Forest, so far as I know." He studied the table and pressed a hand to his forehead. "I'd need passage back there in order to gain access to the ship. Perhaps its current owner could be persuaded to allow me to recover it for the proper compensation." He hesitated. "Always assuming it's still on board."

"What?"

"It's a perfectly ordinary-looking shell, love. I mean, it's a flawless specimen and worthy of gracing a display, to be sure, but nobody seeing it would know what it contained. It might yet be adorning my cabin's sideboard, or it might be somewhere at the bottom of the ocean." He shook his head. "Until Ursula sought me out here, I'd truly given the matter little reflection these past years."

"You're saying," Emma said slowly, "that in order to fix this, you'll need to get back to the Enchanted Forest somehow."

"Aye," Killian nodded. "If it's at all possible to restore her voice, the answer lies there."

"All right," Emma said, pushing back her chair. "Come on."

"Where are you taking me, Swan?"

Emma exhaled noisily. "If there's any way of crossing realms, Gold would know it. And I think he'd also be interested in finding out that Ursula's looking to rob him, don't you?"

Killian winced. "I'm not looking forward to finding out whether that dream I had was fantasy or prophecy, but I'm afraid you're right." He took a final swig from his hip flask. "After you, love."

Ursula used a pair of tongs to remove the porcelain crucible from atop the Bunsen burner flame. She nodded with satisfaction as she tipped a stream of clear liquid too thick to be water into an iron flask and set the empty receptacle on a wire gauze mat. "This part is still new to me," she admitted, as she turned off the Bunsen burner.

"You mean, using fire?" Lily asked.

Ursula shook her head. "No, I got used to that pretty quickly when I started visiting the surface world. But, generally speaking, back in the Enchanted Forest, crucibles were meant to be used once and then thrown away. They couldn't withstand being reheated very well, and they were cheap to make and replace." She shrugged. "I will admit it's more convenient this way, even if it is one more thing to wash up afterwards. She gestured toward the flask. "Anyway, that's it; it's done. When the liquid cools, it'll have the consistency of honey, though it won't taste like much of anything. You shouldn't need more than a tablespoon's worth for the desired effect, but it'll function as a binder in your cake batter. I'd use one egg less in your recipe if I were you."

Lily nodded. "Got it. I…uh… was looking for recipes online before. I think I've narrowed it down to five."

"Nothing overly complicated, I hope," Ursula cautioned.
Lily shook her head. "Well. A couple call for separating eggs, but I know how to do that."

"This one," Ursula said decisively.

"The jam cake?"

Ursula nodded. "Honey… jam… they're both thick liquids. And if the serum doesn't have fruit chunks in it, well, you're only replacing a tablespoon of it. Just remember; you're going to have to make the batter in two bowls from the beginning instead of dividing it between the layer pans. Unless you're sure you can get him to sample a piece without partaking of it yourself."

Lily gave her an incredulous look. "This thing has pineapple, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, blackberry jam and caramel frosting. You better believe I'm gonna partake!"

"Fine," Ursula said, smiling a bit. "I guess you'd better make up a shopping list and I'll cast another glamor spell. Because as soon as Cruella's woodland spies tell us that the old man's home alone, you need to be ready."

"Oh, I will be," Lily said darkly. "Trust me."
Chapter Twenty-Six

When he received Emma's text, Rumple felt a familiar tension knot in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't precisely tell why. A late-night message directing him to meet her at his shop scarcely boded well, though he wasn't certain if his apprehension was because he feared he'd be unable to help her, or because he was still half-expecting that the camaraderie they'd shared these last months had actually been part of a very long setup. Perhaps it had all been a ploy to back him into a corner and extort some favor from him, 'after everything she'd done for him'. He wasn't sure which option would distress him more.

And his worry only grew when he arrived to find that she hadn't come alone. At least the good captain had done him the courtesy of waiting outside for him this time, instead of picking the lock on the door and going in ahead as he'd done before.

"Well?" he barked, falling back on irritation to mask his fear. "What can the two of you want at this ungodly hour?"

The captain flinched, while Emma took a step forward. "We need to talk. Well, actually, Killian has to tell you something. And... and I'm sorry if you'd already turned in and we dragged you out of bed for this, but I don't think it can wait." She jerked her head toward the barred door of the shop. "Could we go in?"

Rumple's gaze panned from her to the captain, who was studying the pavement at his feet with particular interest. It wasn't until Jones looked up once more and nodded faintly that Rumple shrugged with feigned nonchalance and slid the key he was already holding into the lock on the door. "I suppose as long as I'm here, I might as well listen," he muttered, as he gave the key a turn and hoped that the two of them were overreacting.

From the expressions on their faces, though, he didn't believe they were.

Lily was going through the kitchen cabinets with a frown when she heard two sets of footsteps behind her. She turned to see Ursula and Cruella behind her. "No layer pans," she said, annoyance plain in her voice. "I don't suppose you remember whether we passed any housewares stores when we went into town?"

Ursula shook her head. "I think we need to revise the plan a bit," she said. "Cruella and I were discussing things in the car just now and," she hesitated, "I think this is going to work a lot better if I disguise myself as you and go in your place."

Lily started to protest. Then she thought it over. "Mind telling me why?" she asked evenly.
Cruella sighed. "It's like this, dahling. Seeking out the Apprentice is the first step, but we'll only really have one shot at interrogating him. Once we leave, he's going to be under a sleeping curse and if there was any additional information to be wrung out of him, the opportunity would be lost. And," despite her languorous pose and drawling speech, her eyes were deadly serious, "Ursula knows more about spellcasting than either of the two of us. She'll think to ask questions about the sorts of enchantments he's been using that we wouldn't."

"If the Apprentice knew you better," Ursula spoke up again, "I wouldn't risk pretending to be you. We'd stick to your plan and I'd try to coach you on what to ask as best I could. But he met you once, more than fifteen years ago. If not for that birthmark you showed me, I doubt he'd recognize you now. He won't know you well enough to see through the ruse until it's too late."

"Maybe," Lily said slowly. "But he found me on a bus going from Mankato to Pittsburgh in the middle of the night. He could have been keeping tabs on me all this time."

"Keeping tabs on a person isn't the same as getting to know them. We'll assume he knows some basic facts about you; where you've lived, what sort of jobs you've held, what talents you might possess—and if you can share that with me, it'll help. But as far as your personality, phrases you'd use, things you'd never say in a million years..." She smiled. "I doubt he's been paying that much attention. I mean, we've seen for ourselves that you aren't the only person who's been occupying his time over the years. I don't recognize the man or woman he's been hanging about with from the Enchanted Forest, but they're staying in his house and it's obvious they mean something to him. Close friends or family I don't know, but I'd wager he's spent more time with them than a few minutes on a bus to Pittsburgh."

Lily sighed. "All right," she acquiesced. "I take your point. And actually," she said slowly, "there might be something else I can look into while you're doing that, but we can discuss it later. For now," she reached for the shopping list she was working on, "let's double check I've written down everything. And maybe I'll mix up enough batter so I can make a couple of extra cupcakes or so." She gave the two women a resigned smile. "I really was looking forward to tasting that cake."

Rumple listened silently as Killian made his explanations, reserving his comments for the end. Finally, his eyebrows lifted and his face relaxed into something that was almost a smile. "Well," he said finally, "you have been having a wretched few days, haven't you?"

The Captain pressed his lips tightly together and looked away with some measure of irritation.

Rumple sighed. As much as part of him did want to draw things out a bit—this was a man who had devoted almost two hundred years to plotting his demise after all—he had a feeling that Emma wouldn't approve and, over the course of these last weeks, her approval had come to matter to him. "I do realize that coming to me with this tale isn't something you've undertaken lightly," he said in a more congenial tone. "I appreciate your candor." He hesitated for another second, before adding softly, "and your discretion in not disclosing my current condition."

Killian looked away. "Yes, well, we do have a truce," he mumbled.

"Indeed. But she and I do not. So, you've my thanks for not sharing more with her than you needed to."

Killian gave him a quick nod. "That being said, your current condition appears to be the town scuttlebutt. I mean, she did ask me about it."

"But you didn't choose to enlighten her." Rumple smiled. "That may prove helpful down the road."
He shrugged as though the matter was only of minor import. "Time will tell."

"Is there a way you know that Killian could get back to the Enchanted Forest to find that shell?" Emma asked, steering back to the main subject.

Rumple frowned. "There are three ways I know of offhand. One would be to procure a bean. As I hear it, our diminutive giant granted one to Ruby some weeks back. It would be worthwhile to see whether he has more."

Killian winced at that. "Tiny is rather particular about who he shares that crop with. And seeing as he made the voyage to Storybrooke aboard my vessel under," he paused delicately, "conditions comparable to those under which you spent the better part of the past year, it's fair to say that there's little love lost between him and me. While I'll admit I've yet to ask him, I was hoping that there might be some other alternatives. What's the second solution?"

If Rumple was at all put out by being reminded of his treatment while in Zelena's power, he didn't show it. Instead, he chuckled. "Why, the same one that returned you there a year ago, of course. Get the curse scroll, cast the Dark Curse anew, pay the price, and we all return. Well. Except young Henry, of course." He shook his head and continued more seriously, "It took more years than your quest to murder me for me to find a way to this land. It would likely take as long again to find a way out of it." He turned to Emma.

"As far as the third… You never were successful in crafting that hat for Jefferson, were you?"

Emma blinked. "No. I-I'm not even sure I could make a normal one. I mean, one without magic," she amended. "But a magical one? I wouldn't know where to start."

"Well," Rumple said, "I would. But I shouldn't think you'll be able to put it together in a day. It would be the work of several weeks, at least. And that's if you can get it to work. Fashioning magical artifacts is a good deal more complicated than casting the odd spell."

"If you helped…?" Emma prompted.

Rumple shook his head. "I can lend you the books and show you the enchantments, but I'm afraid I'm less up to the task than you are at the moment." He sighed. "It really is unfortunate that King George let his vendetta against your father lead him to destroy the original. We could have done something with it, damaged though it was. But then, vendettas do have a way of destroying more than their object." He paused, just for the barest instant, before making eye contact with Killian.

"…Unless one finds the strength to lay them aside and move forward," he added. He waited for the captain's startled nod. Then, he continued quickly, "The bean really would be your best chance, you know. But if approaching… Tiny… is too difficult," he smiled faintly, "then I suppose I can do my best to assist Emma with fashioning the alternative."

He frowned then and Emma asked, "Is something wrong?"

"I'm not certain," he admitted. "Perhaps you could enlighten me as to how long Ursula has been in Storybrooke?"

Emma and Killian exchanged a glance. "I don't know everyone here," Emma admitted. "But a lot of people did come over with the second casting."

"Aye," Killian nodded. "That was my thought as well. Although I certainly didn't spend much time meeting people on my first foray into this town. For all I know, she was here all along."
Rumple shook his head. "No, she wasn't. And... I suppose it's possible that the second curse did transport her as it did the rest of us. But when I was last in New York, I..."

Emma waited patiently for him to continue. When he didn't, it was Killian who finally said, "Rumpelstiltskin?"

Rumple took in another breath and exhaled noisily. "In the state I was in after Belle exiled me, I'm sure that you can appreciate that my decision to reach out to her later was not one I made easily. I came... very close... to making contact with another in hopes of stealing back to town a different way."

"But I thought that..." Emma caught herself. Clearly, Rumple had thought that there might be some way of getting through the barrier, or he'd never have called Belle in the first place. "Go on."

Rumple wasn't meeting anybody's eyes now. "When I made plans to look for Bae, initially, I wasn't certain that I was going involve you. After the curse broke, I used blood magic to learn that he was in New York. And then, I cast another spell to see whether anyone else from a magical realm had somehow crossed over."

"That sounds like something of a reach," Killian snorted.

Rumple smiled. "Oh, it was. But Emma owed me one favor and one only. I debated with myself for some time as to whether to call it in when I did or wait in case a more dire need presented itself. At any rate," he continued, "when I cast that spell last year, I discovered that Ursula was then residing in Manhattan. I took note of her address and filed it away for reference. And, when I found myself in that city again, several months ago, I used a public internet terminal to confirm both her address and her place of business."

He frowned again. "I suppose that the listing could have been out of date. She was a mermaid once. And the power to cross realms isn't something she would have lost in her current incarnation." His eyebrows shot up. "I'd always assumed that a magical being wouldn't be able to cross to a land without magic; when I sent Ariel here for Pandora's Box, I told her to ensure she surfaced within the protection spell's boundaries for more than one reason. But if Ursula came here, for whatever reason, one would think she'd have her ways of getting back. And if she'd traveled to the Enchanted Forest at some point before the second curse was cast, once it was, it could have brought her here." His frown was back now and deeper than it had been.

"At least, we can hope so."

"Gold?"

Rumple took another breath. "If the curse didn't bring her here, then it would mean that she not only crossed the town line—presumably at a point when it shouldn't have been possible—but that she somehow learned of this place while residing in New York. Something that should be even more impossible."

From within the confines of the Golden Spirit, Ursula looked from Lily to Cruella. "Well," she asked. "What do you think?"

Cruella hesitated. "There is something to be said for meeting with her in person, I suppose. There's no doubt that she was putting on her best face when she spoke with us earlier. But setting up the meeting isn't going to be as simple as you seem to think, Lily, dahling. I'm not saying it's a bad idea to volunteer at the hospital; you'll probably overhear all kinds of useful information. But they're not
Lily shrugged. "I was thinking I'd start out that way. Play the part of the wide-eyed kid who just can't get over how wonderful it is to be doing something in the grown-up world." She smiled. "And I chat up a few security guards. Did I mention I'm a damned good pickpocket? I'll bet you anything you want that I can steal someone's ID card and be three floors away before they even notice it's missing. And then?" She smiled. "Well, if I can use a glamor spell to pass myself off as one of them, it'll be a bonus. But really? All I need is the right uniform and an idea of where the security cameras are so they won't capture my face. And once I make contact with Zelena, if she's got magic, she can probably help me hide my tracks."

"I don't like that last part," Ursula said at once. "Just because she has magic doesn't mean that she has the spells you want." She took a breath. "But unless I miss my guess," she continued, "in that storm cellar were all the ingredients I'd need for an invisibility spell."

Lily's eyes widened.

"Don't get too excited," the sea witch warned. "The spell will make you invisible. It won't mask the sound of your footsteps, muffle your sneezes, coughs, or hiccups, or neutralize the scent of your shampoo. If you're reading a floor map and someone else wants a look, they'll walk right into you. And anyone watching the security screens might feel it a cause for concern if an empty elevator randomly stops on specific floors. You won't be seen," she emphasized once more, "but that's it."

Lily mulled that over. "I can still work with that," she said slowly. "And even if I mess up, at worst, they'll know that something screwy's going on. They won't know what. And by the time they get someone in who figures it out, I'll be long gone."

"I think it's worth the risk," Cruella said with uncharacteristic seriousness. "We do need to know more about this potential ally before we start sharing more with her than she's already gleaned. Lily's plan sounds like a good way to accomplish it."

Ursula nodded. "All right. And while I'm mixing up that brew, Lily, I'll still need the text of that note we're going to have the Apprentice write before we put him under the sleeping curse."

"I'll get right on it," Lily acknowledged with a triumphant smile.

Emma and the captain had gone, but Rumple remained in the shop, lost in thought. What was Ursula doing here? When had she arrived? And was she only interested in stealing some of his magical components, or was the captain not the only person with whom she wanted to settle old scores?

He never should have gone to Camelot. Had he left the gauntlet where it was, he wouldn't be in this predicament now. Ursula (and Cruella and Maleficent) would never have tried using Belle as leverage to acquire it. Belle would never have banished him. His magic would have kept his heart condition under control. He'd still have his magic.

But he probably wouldn't have his friends. Sooner or later, Belle would still have learned the truth about the dagger, discovered his lies and schemes and left him. His magic wouldn't have protected him indefinitely. And when the Darkness had finally tried to claim him, on his previous path, would anybody have cared to help him avoid that fate?

Even before Emma and the others had used the hat to separate him from the Dark One, he'd had
occasion to regret his past actions. At times, he'd even been remorseful. But he thought he was starting to see what Regina had meant when she'd talked about how every action she'd taken—Light or Dark—had led her to her son, and she couldn't wish she'd chosen otherwise, knowing the end result.

If he'd never been banished and near death, he doubted that he'd have made the connections he had now. He still might have struggled against his worser nature and managed to resist some of his darkest urges, but he wouldn't have had anything close to the support and encouragement he'd had these last months. And without that support, he doubted that he would have even bothered trying to do the right thing at long last, however little, however late.

He had his second chance now, bought at a higher price than he'd thought possible. And while he had remorse for many of the deeds he'd done that had necessitated that chance, like Regina, he couldn't say that he regretted the learning experience.

Except that his magic was currently unreliable and unpredictable, and if Ursula was looking to pay him back for that whole debacle with the gauntlet, then…

Rumple moved swiftly to the windows to ascertain that the shades were fully drawn and that he'd locked the door when the others had left. That done, he went into the back room to assess the magical artifacts he currently had in his possession and to determine the defensive uses to which they might be placed.

"Are you sure you just want to stay here on your own?" Tia asked Uncle Bené at breakfast the next morning. "I mean, it's a gorgeous day and we still haven't seen everything there is to see around here."

Uncle Bené smiled congenially. "I'm afraid I do have work that needs attending to," he demurred. "My master laid a heavy charge on me when he sent me here, and I've neglected it long enough."

"But I thought you couldn't reach Merlin," Tony protested. And when Uncle Bené turned to him with a grave look, he shifted uncomfortably. "I mean, maybe he'd be okay with you taking some time off and relaxing," he amended.

"Believe it or not," Uncle Bené replied, "most of my duties are relaxing. But just because they aren't onerous doesn't mean that they aren't to be done. Quite the contrary, actually. If I can't be trusted with light, simple tasks, how shall I ever expect him to entrust me with something more challenging." He shook his head, but he was smiling. "And just because I currently have no way to contact Merlin doesn't mean that he won't contact me when the time is right. And when he does, I had best have the work he assigned to me completed."

He shook his head. "No, the two of you go off and explore if you like. Feel free to fix yourselves something to eat from the contents of the kitchen, unless you'd prefer restaurant fare. I'll see you later."

Lily ducked into the ladies room on the hospital's main floor and checked the mirror, still not quite believing that the invisibility spell was holding. After all, when she looked down at her shoes or held up her hands, she could still see them.

Ursula hadn't seen it as an issue. "That's how it works," she'd explained. "You're inside the spell, so of course you see yourself as you truly are. From outside the spell, it's a different matter."
"Outside the spell?" Lily had repeated, half-wondering whether the sea witch was setting her up for some reason.

Ursula nodded. "Look in a mirror. Take a selfie. You won't have a reflection or an image to capture until the spell wears off. And that won't be for another twelve hours."

Lily looked at her watch now. She had ten hours, twenty-one minutes, and counting left. Plenty of time to find the way into the secure wing. She thought for a moment. Then she joined a small knot of medical personnel waiting by the elevators.

She didn't know if anyone was going her way, or if this was even the right elevator. But she was going to follow the first person who swiped a key-card before punching floor button and hope for the best. And she'd repeat that procedure as many times as she needed to, in front of as many elevators as she could locate, until she found her objective.

Or until ten hours elapsed. Whichever came first.

When Bené answered his doorbell, it to a woman he didn't quite recognize, but he smiled politely. "Good morning. Or," he frowned, "should it be afternoon? Forgive me. Time has a way of escaping me."

"You don't remember me," the woman said, smiling a bit.

Bené hesitated. There was definitely something familiar about her, something he ought to recollect. And then, he saw that she was discreetly tugging her sleeve upwards to reveal a distinctive mark on her wrist. "Why, Lilith!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

She gave a little laugh with a hint of a sob in it. "I finally made it!"

He smiled and moved aside. "Well, come in, come in, child. It's clear that we've much to discuss…"

Rumple held up the narrow object he'd found the evening before, tucked away in one of the drawers beneath the main display case on the shop floor. He'd forgotten he had it; hadn't thought about it since his return to Storybrooke. Funny, because when he'd first realized that his life depended on returning to Storybrooke, he'd thought of little else.

On its own, it was useless, of course. Even in the correct hands—which certainly weren't his—there was nothing that could be done with it alone. But if…

Placing the object in his pocket, he walked into the back office as quickly as he could. He didn't have any of his more esoteric magical ingredients here now, but he wouldn't need them for this. He reached for a tin of loose tea, measured out a half cup of the leaves into a fired clay pot, added water, and set it on a hot plate to boil. Next, he took out a wooden box with a hinged lid, raised the lid, and smiled. There might be nothing inherently magical about essential oils or acacia gum, but that didn't mean they didn't come in handy sometimes. He didn't think he'd tried anything like this in nearly two hundred years, but there had been a time when…

…Of course, back when Bae had been young, black tea had been a luxury he'd seldom had coin for. Then, he had opted for berry juice instead—a fine improvement over the charcoal Bae had frequently used for his drawings. However, at present, he didn't have berries at hand and he did have tea. And thyme oil. And… And hopefully, Emma's theory wasn't as farfetched as he'd once believed it to be.
He let the tea leaves boil a full fifteen minutes before he removed the pot from the heat, strained the tea into a bowl, and whisked in the acacia gum. Once the mixture cooled, he transferred it to a small jar and added the thyme oil. Then, wondering whether this was all for naught, he lit a candle and, with the aid of a pair of tweezers—the same he'd used to remove Aggie's splinter the other day—he held a razor blade in the flame for a moment to sterilize it.

In his mind, he seemed to hear Emma ask once more, "Why would he need a light savior, if…?"

He sucked in his breath. And then, he nicked his finger with the blade and let a single drop of blood fall into the ink he'd just blended.

For the briefest of instants, the liquid glowed with the same golden light that he was growing accustomed to seeing in the threads he spun. It went dark again at once, but Rumple knew what he'd observed and a wondering smile came to his face as he mentally chalked another point to Emma's account.

If Henry truly didn't wish to take up the Author's mantle, Rumple would do his best to respect that choice. But both quill and ink were now ready and available in the event that his grandson would change his mind.

"Sit down, child," Bené said warmly, ushering Ursula/Lily into the kitchen. "Forgive me," he said, gathering papers and parchments into a messy pile to clear a space at the table. "I wasn't expecting company. Some tea, perhaps?"

Ursula smiled. "I… actually brought cake," she said, holding up the small cardboard box. The cake inside was only six inches in diameter; Lily had realized that, if they wanted to be certain not to accidentally get the truth serum into the top layer, the knife would only be able to slice into it once. Otherwise, there was a near-certainty that some of the crumbs from the bottom layer would cling to the blade and remain in the top layer, should the knife cut down again. This way, the cake could be split in two at one stroke. Ursula tugged at the string carefully. "Hope you like blackberry jam and pineapple."

Bené raised his eyebrows. "That wouldn't be caramel frosting?" he asked hopefully.

Ursula laughed. "Here. While you're making the tea, I'll do the honors."

"As you wish," Bené agreed, fetching two plates from the sideboard. "So, tell me what you've been doing with yourself, child. I rather thought we'd meet again, though I believed it would be sooner."

"Yeah, about that," Ursula nodded, taking the knife she'd brought with her and deftly slicing the cake into two roughly-equal pieces. "I guess it's my own fault. I spent so much time procrastinating that, by the time I got to the aquarium, well…" She shrugged. "Ursula wasn't there anymore and nobody seemed to know how to track her down."

Bené frowned. "Truly?" he asked, sounding somewhat surprised.

Ursula shrugged. "I guess, after so long, I should've expected it. But I went and tracked down those books you mentioned and found the spell and… here I am."

"Indeed." He didn't say anything further as he waited for the tea to boil, but his disturbed expression remained. For a few moments, Ursula wondered whether she'd slipped up somehow. Maybe the Apprentice was thinking about how Lily shouldn't have known to inscribe the spell onto vellum, but that was pretty basic stuff that even a bargain-basement tarot reader in the East Village would know. Probably in another book at that conjuring arts center… No, she remembered. Not
only was that place by appointment only, but you also had to list the books you wanted to look at ahead of time. Lily wouldn't have known where to look up what she needed. *She found a couple of books on the occult at The Strand or some other used bookstore. Even a psychic can't predict what sort of stuff turns up there. Perfect.*

She looked up, jerked out of her thoughts, when the Apprentice set a cup of tea down before her. "Thank you," she said, picking up her fork and delicately slicing off a bit from the top of the cake that was more frosting than anything else.

"Perhaps, it's you I should be thanking. I confess I've a bit of fondness for pineapple," he admitted as he sank the side of his fork into the cake. The bottom layer, Ursula noted with satisfaction.

"If I'd known that, I would've used fresh instead of canned," she replied.

"Really," the Apprentice said, "it matters little." He smiled. "This is really quite excellent."

"I'm glad you like it," Ursula said, casting her eyes demurely downward.

"Oh, yes. You see, in the realm from which I hail, there are no pineapples and cinnamon is hard to come by. Which," he continued, "is really a pity, given the exquisite flavors of each."

"So, you aren't from here," Ursula said.

The Apprentice blinked. "Uh… no. No, I'm not. How did you find me, Lilith?" he asked, sounding somewhat less self-assured than he had a moment earlier.

"I… recognized you the other day," Ursula said.

"So, you didn't just arrive?"

Ursula shook her head. "No, I got here a few days ago. I just… wasn't sure how to go about introducing myself, I guess. I suppose you must have been here for some time," she added.

"Yes, I have," the Apprentice said. "Not only here, of course," he continued. "I've had occasion to be out in the world. And in other realms as well."

"Like the one you're from? Uh… what was that one again?"

"Camelot?" The Apprentice shook his head. "I haven't been back there in… uh… did I tell you that —?"

"You're from Camelot!" Ursula exclaimed. "Really? That's a real place?"

"Yes, it is," the Apprentice said. "And there are times when I do miss it. When I was a boy, I never dreamed I'd leave it so far behind. Truly, no matter how many realms I cross into, no matter how much time passes, I never give up hope that I'll set foot on its soil again one day. But until Merlin bids me return, I fear that hope will be denied me…"

"How long have you been in Storybrooke?" Ursula asked.

"I've been here for several months," the Apprentice replied. "I mean, I've been here off and on, over the years, you understand, but—"

"How did Snow White and Prince Charming get so chummy with Regina?" Ursula demanded in tones rather more strident than she'd been using until now.
"They put aside their differences in Neverland when young Henry was taken captive."

"Young Henry?"

"Yes," the Apprentice smiled happily. "He's Emma Swan's son, you know, but she gave him up at birth and Regina—she used to be the Evil Queen, of course, but she isn't now—adopted him and ten years later, he traveled to Boston in search of Emma and…"

Ursula settled back in her seat with a self-satisfied smirk. "Go on," she encouraged. "Tell me everything…"
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to the Spark Notes website for helping me name a minor character. Washington (along with Warren, Williams, and Geever) is a hospital aide in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ursula locked the cellar door with a worried frown. The Apprentice had indeed proven to be a fountain of information. Ursula now had a fairly good idea of how things currently stood in Storybrooke, the state of Rumpelstiltskin's power—and it really did seem as though they could safely speak his name now—and a number of other things. But she still had one burning question that needed answering. And depending on the answer she received, perhaps there would be more.

Lily's note wasn't going to work now, she realized. The Apprentice wasn't living here alone at the moment and those two companions of his might be back at any time. If they discovered him too quickly, Ursula might never be able to find out what she needed to know. So. Since the serum had made the old man more amenable than usual to suggestion, she'd suggested he accompany her to the cellar, where she'd offered him a drink of water laced with the sleeping curse potion in Cruella's earrings. *Earring*, rather; it had only needed one dose. And now, he would sleep indefinitely and it would be some time before anyone learned his whereabouts. Perfect.

She looked around and her gaze fell on the pile of papers he'd cleared from the table earlier. *Handwritten* papers. Ursula smiled. She couldn't leave Lily's note, but she could leave a note.

She concentrated for a moment. Then she waved her hand over a blank sheet. A puff of blue smoke billowed and spread over the page. When it cleared, a message appeared in penmanship identical to that which was manifest on the other papers.

*I'm afraid that something has come up that requires my attention. I can't say how long I'll be away, so it's best that you not anticipate my return. I hope that we might be reunited once this matter is resolved. Until then, farewell.*

She frowned for a moment, wishing that she knew the old man's proper name. The note really ought to have a signature. But wishing generally didn't hold much water for folk like her. She set the note on the table where it could easily be spotted.

Before she left, she made certain to flush the remains of the cake down the toilet and wash the dishes, removing as many traces of her presence as she could find on her way out.

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In the now-empty elevator, Lily looked at the key panel and ground her teeth in frustration. She had managed to find the location the secure wing; it was in the sub-basement, but for access, she needed a steel key inserted into a lock in the elevator panel, not a key-card. That was bad news. In her experience, key-cards were generally worn in plain sight, clipped to clothing or lanyards. Keys were worn on rings, tucked into pockets, often with other items. And if there was more than one key on that ring, she would need time to try each one.
And the security cameras were everywhere. She made a mental note to ask Ursula whether they'd pick up a key being turned in a lock if the holder was invisible. She rather thought they wouldn't; her clothing had become invisible together with her person, as had the contents of her pockets. Surely that invisibility would extend to whatever she was holding. But the lock resembled a vertical slot. If she were to insert a key and turn it, the slot would go horizontal. Maybe the cameras weren't sharp enough to see it. Maybe they weren't angled right. But maybe they were.

The door slid open and four people stepped inside, two in blue scrubs, one in a blazer of darker blue and a gray skirt, and one in a white coat. Lily pressed silently into one of the rear corners and hoped that none of the other passengers in the car would have the same idea.

"Hold, please!" a breathless voice called over the sound of rubber-soled shoes running on epoxy flooring. The man in the scrubs stuck his hand in front of the door, keeping it from closing. A moment later, a blonde woman in the same blazer and skirt as one of the other occupants of the car came dashing up. "Thanks!" the newcomer gasped, stepping inside. She looked around at the other passengers and smiled nervously at the woman wearing similar attire. "Hello, Blue."

"Green," the woman returned and Lily marveled at how a voice could somehow manage to sound both warm and cold at the same time. "You're late."

The other woman wilted slightly. "Sorry?"

'Blue' sniffed. "Don't let it happen again."

The blonde nodded. "Yes, Blue."

Unseen by the others, Lily frowned. Were those surnames, code-names, or something else entirely? She didn't for a moment believe them to be nicknames; while the blonde might be the type to use them, the snooty one sure as heck wasn't. The other occupants of the car didn't seem fazed by the exchange, she noticed. Maybe Ursula or Cruella could shed some light later.

And then Lily's breath caught as 'Blue' pulled a small key out of her pocket and inserted it into the lock that she'd been gnashing her teeth over moments earlier. Carefully, she sidled out of her corner, trying to position herself so that she could exit without bumping into anyone.

"Is she improving at all?" 'Green' asked.

'Blue' sniffed again as the car began to descend—much to the annoyance of the other three occupants. "That's scarcely your concern."

"I only meant... maybe I could help."

The car came to a halt and the doors opened silently. "I rather doubt that," 'Blue' said, stepping out. Lily darted after her, just narrowly avoiding jostling one of the scrubs-wearers as she passed.

Just before the doors closed again, she heard 'Green' calling, "I do have experience, you know!"

"So," Astrid said seriously, "then what happened?"

Belle had been glad to find her waiting in the lobby of the kickboxing gym this morning. While the workout had improved her mood, she was still feeling upset and it was good to have someone with whom she could unburden herself. They were sitting in the diner now, Belle enjoying a chai tea and Astrid, a strawberry milkshake, as Belle continued. "I was starting to doze off despite myself,
but I heard his key in the lock around half-past midnight. I was going to ask him what they'd wanted, but he seemed to be…” she winced, "well… sneaking about. Like he used to," she added miserably. "I didn't want it to look like I didn't trust him, so I stayed in my room and pretended to be asleep."

"Do you trust him?" Astrid asked.

Belle hesitated. "I-I want to. I'm trying… we're both trying to make a real go of things. Only, at times like this, I wonder if he's slipping back into old habits. But I can't say anything about it, because I don't want to hurt him and I do want to trust him, but I don't know if…"

Astrid nodded. "At least, in this case, there's a reasonable explanation for his tiptoeing about, though." Belle blinked and the fairy broke into a huge smile. "Iit was after midnight and you were in your room with the door closed! Suppose it had been you coming home late and you'd found everything quiet and all the lights off at half-past twelve!"

Belle's eyes widened for a moment. Then she smiled ruefully. "I… guess I might have thought Rumple was asleep and tried not to wake him. And, I suppose that if he'd just been lying in bed, hearing me moving about, it… it could have sounded like I was being sneaky. But…” She caught herself. "Never mind. If he thought I was asleep, he wouldn't have wanted to knock on my door to check for fear of waking me." She shook her head. "I feel so silly."

"Don't," Astrid replied. "You can't help where your mind goes, especially with everything that's happened in the past. But maybe try to think about whether there's another possible explanation." She turned aside. "If I'd done that with Leroy after the curse broke, maybe we'd have gone back together a lot sooner. But I was hurt and he was scared and…” She shook her head. "Maybe I just didn't want to find out how… involved Blue had been in his dumping me back in the Enchanted Forest. Maybe it was just easier for me to believe what everyone was telling me. That dwarfs couldn't love and I was a fool for thinking otherwise." She shook her head. "It's like flying against the wind; even when you manage it, it can just get so exhausting there's a part of you wonders if it's worth it." She smiled again. "With Leroy, it so is, but it took me some time until we both recognized it."

Belle took a gulp of her rapidly-cooling tea and set the cup back down. "Tell me about it," she murmured with feeling.

For the first time in her recollection, the Blue Fairy found herself wishing that her shoes had heels that could clack out her irritation as she made her way down the long corridor. She couldn't say exactly why she was upset. To be certain, she was disappointed that her efforts with Zelena appeared to have hit a standstill. She'd been beginning to believe that she'd actually broken through the walls of bitterness and mockery that the witch had erected, been starting to get to the woman below…

_Been on the cusp of reforming her own villain._

How hard could the task truly be, anyway? Green—one of the lowest-ranking, flightiest, most heedless novices had managed it. Surely the instructor was not inferior to the pupil.

And yet, when Blue had presented the witch with several of the pastoral prints she'd so carefully selected from the convent's stores, Zelena had regarded them quizzically for a moment. And then, with an almost giddy smile, she'd torn each one in two.

Blue had been at a loss. Had the witch been looking for a reaction? Was this just some fit of pique
brought on by pregnancy hormones? Was she trying to drive her away? Or was this really some convoluted cry for help?

Maybe Green would have some ideas.

But confiding in Green would mean admitting her uncertainty. And the other members of her order were already losing faith in her. If word got out that she didn't know how to handle a situation—a situation, she realized with a pang, that she'd often insisted that her subordinates were more than equipped to handle—then it would just be a matter of time before they decided that she wasn't the best person to lead them. And when the next crisis hit, whoever they chose in her stead would lead the order blithely to disaster. She couldn't allow that to happen. Which meant that she simply had to find a way to get through to Zelena by herself.

All at once, Blue paused. Was that another set of footfalls behind her? A frown came to her face. They'd gone silent. With a mental shrug, she continued on her way. There they were again! She whirled about to face her follower, but there was nobody there. Her eyes narrowed and she scanned the corridor intently, but neither her eyes nor her magic could detect the slightest hint of fairy dust. Maybe it had just been her imagination.

After a moment, she turned back and continued on her way.

Pressed against the corridor wall, Lily remembered Ursula's warning and managed not to sigh her relief. She mentally counted to ten and fell into step behind Blue once more, this time hanging back a bit further, so as not to alert the woman to her presence.

Regina was preparing the agenda for the next council meeting and trying to decide where Storybrooke College's request to have several acres of parkland rezoned for on-campus housing ought to fit in. To her mind, the item shouldn't be on the agenda at all. The town wasn't that big and there was no reason why the college needed that many housing units. Then she thought about her own adolescence and admitted to herself with a rueful smile that, had she had the option of dwelling away from her mother for months at a time, she would have seized it gladly.

Maybe it wasn't such a terrible idea. And if it was, then in all likelihood, the council would vote it down.

A polite rap on her open office door broke into her musings and she looked up with a smile. "Well, this is a surprise, seeing you here," she greeted the Apprentice.

The old man did not return her smile. "I'm afraid I need to speak with you regarding a matter of some urgency," he said.

Regina's eyebrows shot up, but she kept her tone pleasant as she beckoned him to a chair. "Of course," she said. "How can I help you?"

Regina's eyebrows shot up, but she kept her tone pleasant as she beckoned him to a chair. "Of course," she said. "How can I help you?"

The Apprentice's brow furrowed. "Forgive me, please, but I must ask. What are the measures that you've taken to protect Rumpelstiltskin's heart?"

Regina blinked. "I thought you felt that it was better if you didn't know," she said slowly.

"I did," the Apprentice nodded. "Unfortunately, circumstances have changed and I've had to reconsider. If there is any way that it could fall into the wrong hands, the consequences would be disastrous."

Regina took a breath. "Well, there's no chance of that happening now," she informed him tartly. "I
used a blood magic lock, along with a little bit of extra insurance…"

Belle stared at the object on the kitchen table with a mixture of distaste and disbelief. "You want me to carry a gun," she stated.

Rumple pressed his lips together and took a deep breath. "My magic is too unreliable to protect you right now. And if the sea witch is in town, it's a wise precaution." He shook his head. "Don't think I'm not hoping that Jones is either trying to delude us or being deluded himself. But I can't fathom his motive if it's the former. And if it's the latter," his expression was still troubled, "well, it might be someone even more formidable. At any rate, Belle, I want you to keep that with you for now. For my peace of mind, at least."

Belle looked as though she wanted to refuse, but she reached for the holstered weapon, picked it up with the same level of enthusiasm she might have reserved for a lizard or a worm, and set about fastening the belt about her waist.

"Here," Rumple came about the table to stand beside her. "If you'll allow me."

Belle gave him an uneasy smile. "You… uh… don't need an excuse to lay hands on me, you know," she joked weakly.

Rumple's chuckle was strained, but his smile was genuine as he drew the strap through the buckle. "You've no idea how relieved I am to hear that," he murmured, as he finished the operation. He took a step backwards, then clapped one hand to each of her shoulders, and drew her to him. "Or how relieved I am to know that you'll have some measure of protection, should Ursula attempt to use you to get to me."

Belle swallowed hard. "I know," she admitted. "And for all the progress I've been making with my kickboxing, I guess this is a more reliable option. I just don't feel… comfortable… carrying it with me."

"But you will?" Rumple asked earnestly, and Belle winced as she heard the plea in his voice.

She gave him a reluctant nod and forced herself to keep smiling. "I will."

His embrace tightened about her and she rested her head on his shoulder and tried not to be conscious of the weight of the gun on her hip.

The mer-lad strummed softly on the zither and Poseidon tried to relax. It wasn't working. The music was sweet and soothing, but the king of the sea was thinking of his wife and daughter. Both lost to him now—Amphitrite to death and Ursula to worse. The surface world had claimed them both.

"Stop playing," he commanded the youth and he saw nimble fingers pause in mid-strum. He sighed and motioned to the musician once more. "Leave me."

The mer-lad bowed and withdrew, taking the zither with him. Poseidon sank back against the seagrass cushions of his throne and rested his head in his hands. He couldn't listen to music now, not when the instruments themselves had been objects that Amphitrite had procured on her forays above.

"I just wanted to show you," she'd said, "that the surface dwellers are capable of great beauty, too."
He'd smiled indulgently when she'd laid on the spells to keep sea-water from damaging the wood and warping the strings. He'd even added a fillip of his own, so that the music could be heard under water and sound as it did on the surface. She'd been so happy then. Ursula had been enthralled. And while he himself possessed no musical talent, he'd been nearly as enchanted by his wife and daughter's performances as the sailors above would have been.

He'd tried to forget that enchantment when he'd lost Amphitrite. He'd tried to forget his thirst for vengeance when he'd lost Ursula. And now, he was trying to forget his sorrow anew by listening to a musician play a song his daughter had once sung on an instrument his wife carried here. He was a fool.

He'd been a fool for too long.

But perhaps, there was still a chance to reverse the tide, change the current, and set things right.

He lifted the turritella shell beside his throne to his lips and blew a series of shrill blasts. Moments later, a mer-man wearing the breastplate and armlet of his elite guard swam into the throne room and genuflected respectfully. "My king has summoned me?"

Poseidon nodded. "Your king has indeed. I've a task for you, captain." He opened the cabinet beside his throne and withdrew a massive pearl, easily twice the size of a large sea urchin. He passed his hand three times over the sphere and its surface cleared to reveal the image of a large sailing ship, a 'sloop of war' cresting a wave. They looked down on its decks as though from a great height. As the stern lifted, both mer-men could read the words "Jolly Roger" painted aft. "I want this ship found," he said grimly. "And its commander," he waved his hand again and the ship vanished, to be replaced by a dark-haired haired man with a neatly-trimmed beard, "brought to me."

"It shall be done, my liege," the captain saluted. "Have I your permission to depart?"

Poseidon nodded and waved his hand in dismissal. "Oh, captain?"

The mer-man, already swimming for the exit, turned back. "My liege?"

"The commander is not to be arrested or otherwise treated as a criminal. Invite him to the palace as you would an honored guest." His jaw hardened. "But don't take 'no' for an answer."

Zelena rolled her eyes when the Blue Fairy entered her cell. "Well, well," she drawled. "What new tactic are we trying today, I wonder? Macramé? Basket weaving?" She laughed bitterly when the other woman flushed. "Did I guess right?" she asked mockingly.

The fairy sighed. "I truly don't understand you," she murmured. "You claim to be bored and yet you scorn virtually every activity I suggest to you. Your sole companion is a chicken——"

Billina cackled at that and Zelena smirked. "You say that as though it's a bad thing," she remarked. "Billina's much more congenial company than some people I could mention."

The fairy raised her eyes heavenwards and sighed. "What exactly is it you'd like?" she demanded.

Zelena blinked. "Well, I wouldn't say 'no' to a bit of exercise," she said tartly. "Even prisoners on death row get an hour in the yard."

Blue shook her head. "That's not something I'm able to grant you," she said primly. "Though I might be able to arrange for you to have a video monitor and some fitness instruction cassettes."
"Cassettes?" Zelena snorted. "My, it's nice to see this place keeping step with the outside world. Tell me, will the monitor be in black-and-white or have you learned about Technicolor yet?"

"Oh!"

For a moment, Zelena thought that the fairy was about to slap her, but then Blue's composure reasserted itself. "I suppose I'll be back when you're more amenable to carrying on a civil conversation."

"Yes, let's work around the pregnancy hormones, shall we?"

Billina clucked again, a loud "Kut-kut-kut, ka-daw-kut! Kut-kut-kut, ka-daw-kut!" and Zelena sprang from her cot to the straw nest with a glad cry.

"That's a good girl," she cooed, gently stroking the yellow hen. "Thank you, beautiful one. Your timing couldn't be more perfect."

"Her timing?" Blue repeated with a supercilious smile.

Zelena looked up, her eyes narrowing. "Why yes," she returned pleasantly. Then she reached beneath the hen, drew forth a small white oval object and, in one swift motion, hurled it at the fairy.

The egg broke on impact, releasing its slimy contents just above Blue's left temple. As the fairy stifled a shriek, the mess slid slowly downwards.

"They do say that egg is good for adding shine to one's hair," Zelena mused, her eyes bright and almost innocent. "You really ought to thank me."

Something incoherent spewed out from Blue's mouth and the fairy turned on her heel and fled, locking the door behind her.

Zelena laughed.

And then, the sliding panel in her cell door slid back and a relieved voice proclaimed, "I didn't think she was going to leave!"

Zelena stopped laughing abruptly. "Who's there?" she demanded. The voice was familiar, but just barely. She got up and moved over to the slot, but saw nobody in the corridor. "Show yourself!"

"I can't," the voice replied. "The spell won't wear off for another nine hours or so. It was the only way Ursula could get me in to see you."

Zelena's eyes widened. "Lily?"

"In the not-so-visible flesh."

"Oh, my!" Zelena laughed again, not out of mockery, but pleasure. "Well! I'd just about despaired of the possibility of intelligent conversation in this place. I'm afraid I can't offer you any tea, but will you stay a while?"

There was a loud sigh. "Well, I guess I'm here in the first place because I can't have any tea, so I'm not exactly missing out…"

Cruella was dozing when Ursula returned to the farmhouse, and Lily wasn't back yet. Which was
just as well. She really shouldn't have used that glamor spell so soon after casting the invisibility spell on Lily. All magic came with a price and right now, Ursula had a splitting headache and a lethargy that made her every step feel as though she'd been clapped in leg irons.

And if their plans fell through and the heroes in this town were able to stop them, she might well find herself wearing them for real.

She could have waited a day or two before assuming the Apprentice's guise. He wasn't likely to be missed for some time. She'd been so flush with excitement after learning everything he'd had to tell her, so eager to put her new knowledge into action. But there had still been one piece of the puzzle that he hadn't been able to disclose.

"So, there's no more Dark One?" she'd demanded. She'd shed the wide-eyed ingenuous demeanor as soon as she'd realized that the potion had worked. "No way to create one?"

And the Apprentice had shaken his head. "There is a way," he'd corrected. "While Rumpelstiltskin is no longer the Dark One, the half of his heart that was absent when his Darkness was cleft from him still retains its previous state. And if someone were to crush that half, then that Darkness freed would overwhelm its liberator and restore itself anew."

"And where is that half now?"

"I don't know."

Ursula frowned. "Truly? You've no idea?"

She read something of a struggle in the old man's eyes for a moment and wondered whether she ought to suggest he take another bit of the cake on his plate. The moment passed. "None. I specifically directed Regina not to tell me," he replied with a pleased smile on his face.

"Regina?" Ursula asked sharply. "What does she have to do with this?"

"Why," the Apprentice said, "it was she who had the other half of his heart in her possession. And after Rumpelstiltskin was freed of his curse, she brought it to me to ask what to do with it. I counseled her to take whatever precautions she thought were warranted and keep them to herself. You see," he said with that same pleased smile, "I realized that if I didn't know the location of the heart or the safeguards woven about it, then I wouldn't be able to reveal anything to anyone attempting to force the answers from me."

For one instant, Ursula had wished that her tentacles could produce venom like those of the Portuguese men-of-war jellyfish she'd tended at the aquarium. Instead, she'd simply have to throttle the man, as she'd threatened to do to Hook previously. She could have. She still might. But if his body were to surface at the wrong time, it might scuttle all their schemes. The sleeping curse was safer; these heroes clearly understood all about guilty consciences and desperate choices. Even if they found him under the curse, they'd read the note and believe his condition was self-inflicted. They'd never believe anything of the kind if they found him dead with bruising about his neck. And if Hook were to reveal her presence here, then things would really hit the maelstrom.

She poured out two cups of tea and surreptitiously emptied the contents of one of Cruella's earrings into one of them. "You look a bit parched," she said, keeping her tone pleasant. "Tea?" Her eyes narrowed. "Actually, perhaps a change of scenery would be helpful. What's through that door?"

The Apprentice blinked. "Why, the cellar, of course," he replied.

Ursula smiled. "I'd love to see what's down there," she said rising to her feet. "After you."
She could have waited before seeking out Regina. But if anyone were to discover the Apprentice
sooner than intended, then she would have missed the opportunity. Taking on his appearance and
paying a call to the mayor's office had been the best idea she could come up with on short notice.
And the gamble had paid off. Clever and savvy though Regina was, at times, she could be
downright gullible. She'd told Ursula everything that the sea witch had needed to know. Now, it
was just a question of figuring out what to do with the information.

And she knew that she'd figure things out better if she allowed herself some time to recover from
the spells she'd been casting so recently. And if she took a couple of aspirin for her pounding head.

Lily passed the better part of an hour talking with Zelena. The witch was happy to fill her in on the
details behind her current incarceration. Lily knew a thing or two about never belonging anywhere
and about having her natural aptitudes go unappreciated by those about her. In fact, it wasn't until
she heard footsteps approaching from behind that she remembered that she was standing in a
hallway in the secure wing, talking to someone who wasn't supposed to have visitors.

"Someone's coming," she whispered. "Quiet!"

She turned to see someone in scrubs drawing nearer. An orderly, she thought. And then, almost at
once, she reminded herself that the days when one could safely assume that all orderlies were male
and all nurses female were long past. The stranger might well be either. Or a doctor, for that matter;
was it only on TV that all hospital doctors sported white coats and stethoscopes, unless in surgery,
or might they go about in scrubs as well? She shrank against the cell door to let the man—
whatever his position here—pass by.

Instead, his face settled into a frown and his hand reached toward her throat!

Startled, Lily's reflexes took over and she twisted away.

And the man reached for the knob on the sliding piece that fit over the slot in Zelena's door and
drew it shut. Then he pulled out a walkie-talkie. "Washington here," he said. "I've just closed the
food pass. Sorry about that, ma'am; I guess I did leave it open."

"It happens," a second voice crackled over the speaker. "Provided it doesn't happen again, I don't
see a need for further disciplinary action. You can return to your other duties."

"Yes, ma'am."

As he moved off, Lily breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't been spotted. He hadn't been trying to
attack her. And, thankfully, she'd neither cried out nor tried to assault him. Her cover was still
intact. But maybe she'd pushed her luck enough for one day.

"Zelena?" she called softly, "could you… uh… tap once if you can still hear me?"

She waited. And a moment later, she heard a perfunctory rap on the door.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. So it's not soundproof. That's good. It means we can sort of talk without
me opening that window."

"True," Zelena returned pleasantly, "but I think we'd better keep our conversations shorter in future.
You should probably leave now."

"Yeah," Lily agreed. "I'll go wait by the elevator. Hopefully, somebody will use it before my spell
wears off."
"Are you planning to return soon?" Zelena asked. Lily knew that tone of voice. Nonchalant on the surface, but somewhere beneath the doesn't-matter-to-me-either-way attitude was a buried plea. And no wonder. If Zelena was down here in solitary with nobody to talk to apart from that prissy-sounding Blue, she had to be starved for conversation.

"I'll try," she murmured.

There was a slight pause. "Thank you."

It was nearly a full forty-five minutes' wait before someone—'Washington', as it turned out—pressed the button to summon the elevator so that she could escape to the upper levels unnoticed.

Cruella woke up as Lily and Ursula were setting the table for supper. The invisibility spell was still in force, but neither of the two older women commented on the 'floating' plates and cutlery.

Finally, after they were done eating, Ursula said, "I think we ought to go for a bit of a drive. Let's head for the car."

"So," Cruella said, "are we driving somewhere, dahling? Or just talking?"

Ursula thought about it. "Talk first," she said finally. "And then we'll see."

"What did you find out?" Lily interrupted. Then, "Ow!"

"Pins and needles in your extremities?" Ursula asked. "The spell's starting to wear off, then. Good. And to answer your question…" She quickly filled them in on what she'd learned from the Apprentice.

"So the Dark One has lost his magic," Cruella said speculatively.

"That makes things easier, right?" Lily asked.

Ursula nodded. "Marginally, yes. But just going by present company, not having magic can't be confused with not being dangerous. At any rate, once I took on his form, I called on Regina. And, as one might expect, she's put a few safeguards around—I guess it's safe to say it then—Rumpelstiltskin's heart." Even so, she looked about nervously, as though she expected him to materialize in the car with a crazed giggle.

"Which are?" Lily asked.

Ursula hesitated. "Without getting into too long an explanation, she used something called a blood magic lock. Only a member of her family—someone with whom she shares a blood connection—can retrieve it. But she added an extra fillip to it. Rumpelst—Rumple's," she amended decisively, "heart can't be accessed by anyone but a total innocent. Not even Regina herself." She sighed. "She told me she didn't want to succumb to temptation. Or allow herself to be put in a position where she could be coerced into surrendering the heart."

"Wait," Lily said. "By 'total innocent'… You don't mean 'never charged or convicted of a crime,' do you?"

Ursula shook her head. "No. I mean someone who has never, not even once, deliberately committed a wicked act. Never called another child a cruel nickname or grabbed a toy or—"
"You mean," Cruella shuddered, "a child of Regina's blood."

"One who hasn't yet reached the 'terrible twos', I'd venture to guess," Ursula nodded.

"So Regina's kid is too old," Lily said.

"Yes," Ursula nodded, "but he's also not of her blood. She adopted him as an infant, remember."

"So there's no way to get to the heart?" Lily asked.

Ursula smiled. "Well, not at the moment," she said slowly. "But even if we were to sit back and let nature take its course, that would change in… oh, I'd say about seven or eight months. However, I'd lay good gold that with the ingredients in the storm cellar, I can conjure up something that might push that date forward. Just a smidgeon…"
A/N: According to Grembert0's "Roaring 20's" Tripod site, "darb" is slang for "a great person or thing; example 'That movie was darb!'" Hopefully, I'm using it right.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

For a moment, there was silence in the car. Then, in response to the blank look on Cruella's face (Lily's was still invisible), Ursula said, "According to the Apprentice, the woman whose house we're currently occupying? That's Regina's half-sister."

There was a sudden intake of breath from the back seat. "And she's pregnant."

Cruella sniffed. "It would seem that children do have their uses on occasion."

"Wait," Lily said. "How does that work exactly? I mean, I don't know a whole heck of a lot about babies, but I don't think a newborn is going to be able to grab anything other than a finger—if someone puts it in their hand. How do you think we're going to get a baby to grab a heart? Or half a heart—I still can't believe there's a guy walking around like that."

"Two guys and a gal, actually," Ursula said. "Snow White and Prince Charming are in similar circumstances." She shrugged. "But to answer your question, we don't need the infant to grab the heart. All we need to do is get it to touch the protection field with bare skin. It doesn't need to be a conscious or voluntary action. Just unswaddle the baby, put its hand on the spell, and the heart will be accessible."

"And then what?" Cruella asked.

Ursula smiled. "Then, ladies, oh ladies, we're back in business!"

"We're back!" Tia called, pushing the door to Uncle Bené's house. "I wish you'd told us that there were cross-country trails in the woods; we'd've brought skis."

"Speak for yourself," Tony laughed. "I haven't been on those things since Dayani and I took that vacation in Geilo. I'm so out of practice, I'd have to levitate to stay upright."

"Seems like you were saying you're out of practice with levitation, too," Tia remarked with a wry smile.

"Not as badly." Tony returned, laughing again, as they pulled off their boots and made their way to the living room.

The room was empty. "Uncle Bené?" Tony turned to his sister. "I guess he must have gone out."

"He said he had work to do," Tia protested, shaking her head. "He wouldn't just up and leave; you know how he gets."
"Yeah. Unless he runs out of tea or biscuits. Or…” He stopped, seeing the single sheet of paper on the table. "Huh," he said, skimming it. He handed it to Tia.

"Something came up?” she said dubiously.

"I guess."

Tia's eyebrows came together in a worried frown. "If he had to leave that quickly, he wouldn't have tidied up before he left. You know if it were that important, he'd just grab what he needed and run."

"Unless he needed everything he was working on," Tony suggested.

"Maybe."

"Wait." Tony crossed quickly to a wooden side table and looked at the messy stack of papers that appeared to have been casually dropped there. "Were these here when we went out or are they what he had on the other table?"

"I don't remember if there was anything there before," Tia replied after a moment's thought. "And we didn't get a good look at what he was working on anyway. Or at least, I didn't."

"Me either. But I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation. It doesn't mean anything happened to him."

Tia nodded. "I know. But I've just got this feeling…”

Her brother knew what that meant. Unfortunately, he also knew that it would take some time before she had more than just that feeling. Pushing her for more details would be counter-productive. As would letting her see that he was starting to get worried too. Her insights came best when she was relaxed and she was already far from that. His jumpiness would only make things worse. So he put a hand on Tia's shoulder and smiled in a way he hoped was reassuring. "You'll work it out," he assured her. "Meanwhile, even if Uncle Bené isn't here, you know he'd want us to meditate."

Tia nodded again, even as she gave him a tiny smile in return. "I know what you're trying to do," she murmured.

Tony shrugged. "Good thing I'm not trying to put anything over on you, then. Your seer talents work best when you're calm. Meditation almost always makes you calm. And even if it didn't, we can both use the practice, right?"

This time, Tia's smile was a bit broader. "Right." She paused. "When did you get this smart?" she asked, poking her elbow into his ribs.

Tony shrugged. "To hear Carey tell it? After I met Dayani."

Tia laughed.

Rumple found the gun in the end table drawer, right where it normally was and sighed. Belle might not have kept arguing about carrying it, but she hadn't taken it with her to the library either. Stubbornness, he reflected, was a double-edged sword.

Had Belle not persisted in seeing the good in him when he hadn't believed he had any left himself, she would never have broken through to him in the Enchanted Forest. Had she not continued to
believe in their love, even when he'd given up on it, they wouldn't be together now. And had she been less convinced of the rightness of her actions, she'd probably be back in her father's house right now, smiling sadly while he told her how pleased he was that she'd finally recognized her husband for the monster he'd always been.

Most of the time, Rumple loved her stubbornness. He was in awe of her stubbornness. He was even, on occasion, amused by her stubbornness. And then there were times like these, where he just wanted to tear out his hair in frustration at her stubbornness.

He couldn't rely on magic to protect her anymore. And as much as he supported her forays into self-defense, her few weeks of kickboxing lessons wouldn't be much use against most opponents, armed or otherwise. The gun was her best chance. And she was foolishly leaving it behind.

Somehow, he had to impress on her the need to keep the weapon with her at all times. Let her know that he was still a coward and a worrier, but let her be safe.

Let her have some credible means of defense, should Ursula try capturing her again to get to him.

Let her understand the danger she was in and take the necessary precautions.

And, he thought, as he unconsciously tore out a hangnail and ignored the small trickle of blood that followed, let his worries be unfounded in the end. He'd happily endure decades—no, centuries—of I-told-you-so's, just so long as nothing happened to her.

Tiny shook his head apologetically. "I can't," he mumbled.

Killian raised an eyebrow. "Can't?" he repeated. "Why not? If it's a question of gold or—"

"It's not," the diminutive giant interrupted. He looked from the pirate to the savior, his eyes pleading.

Emma put a hand on Killian's shoulder. "Why not, Tiny?" she asked gently.

Tiny sighed. "I don't think curse casting is good for cultivation," he said. "Not that the Dark Curse was the only problem. I mean, first, the queen harvested everything early. Ruby and I were able to re-plant the seedlings from her office, but that was only about a dozen or so plants. I'm guessing she probably plucked enough for her personal use and destroyed the rest, or you'd be going to her with this problem," he added. "The trouble is that magic beans only give you about three or four pods per plant in the first crop and each pod only holds three beans. When the queen cast the curse that sent us home, the second crop hadn't matured yet. And," he nodded to Emma, "when your parents brought us back here, the planting season was over and the plants were dead. So, right now, I've got what's left of that first harvest—less than three dozen beans—for next spring's planting. I should have at least twice that number before I start giving any away."

"But you gave one to Ruby, mate," Killian pointed out.

"If you saw how hard she worked with me to save that crop, you would've done the same," the giant retorted. "Planting's important, but so's paying for a job well done. Anyway, she got the only one in that crop I'm giving away. In another two months, three at the most, I should be able to sow what I've got left. And then, the first crop should be ready about seventy-five days later. At that time, I'll willingly give you one. But... the beans I have now are the last of their kind. I can't even chance planting them all at once. If anything goes wrong, a late frost, a flood, a blight... I need to have something left to start over."
Emma and Killian nodded their understanding. "If you could set one aside for us at harvest," Emma said, "we'd really appreciate it." She turned to Killian.

"I guess I'm going to have to learn how to make a hat. Or try to, anyway."

Killian blinked. "I appreciate the thought, love, but if we're to await the bean, why bother with the hat?"

"Because," Emma admitted, "I don't know the first thing about making one and I'm not sure whether it'll be ready before the bean harvest."

In Cruella's Golden Spirit, the three women sat hashing out a plan of action. "You're saying," Lily repeated, her eyes wide, "that you can just speed up her pregnancy."

"It's a little more complicated than that," Ursula admitted, "and given that the witch seems to be still in her first trimester, things will need to proceed delicately, but yes. I can do it. And since she's already in the hospital, expert medical assistance will be just around the corner. Or upstairs," she amended.

"And then… what, dahlings?" Cruella asked. "We can't just waltz in and grab the infant; it's not as though we're taking puppies from an empty townhouse. There'll be staff about. Security. Or were you going to use a glamor spell to pose as a doctor?"

"No," Ursula said with a frown. "I don't know anything about midwifery and, unless I'm much mistaken, that's true for you two, as well."

Both Cruella and Lily nodded.

"Well then," Ursula sighed, "I guess we'll need to hope that Mal's lessons in heart-ripping stuck."

"Wait..." Lily's eyes widened. "What?"

"If I can rip out the heart of the doctor handling the delivery, then I'll control him. He can assist with the birth, give us the infant, and we'll be out the door and on our way with nobody the wiser."

Lily was still staring. "You can rip someone's heart out... and they'll still be alive," she repeated incredulously.

"Hopefully," Ursula nodded. "I haven't tried in years. I suspect it's like swimming; once you've learned, you never forget. Otherwise, it'll get rather messy."

"You know what else has the probability of turning messy, don't you dahling?" Cruella said, sounding far more focused than usual. "The moment the witch realizes her child is gone, she'll raise holy hell. That'll alert the heroes and after the call you paid on Regina earlier, our old friend is liable to put two and two together. Particularly if Zelena tells her that we're in town."

"Can we take her?" Lily asked, looking like she was still reeling from their earlier topic of conversation.

"The three of us," Ursula said slowly. "It's possible, though by no means guaranteed."

"It'll be a lot less possible when we consider that it won't be three against one. The simpering princess and her chisel-chinned consort shouldn't be much of a problem, but if their daughter has as much Light magic as the Apprentice claimed..."
"I know," Ursula said. "We'll need something to distract them then. At least, until we can get our hands on the heart."

Lily hesitated. "I know I'm kind of new to all of this," she said slowly, "but the way you guys were talking before about Rumpelstiltskin, and from what I've read about him in my book, even if he's not the Dark One, he's probably going to figure out what's going on fast, maybe even faster than Regina."

"I'd say that's almost a given, dahling," Cruella nodded.

"And he'll know how to stop us, even if he can't do much directly. I mean, he'll be able to come up with a plan that the others can use, right?"

Ursula sighed. "You've got a point."

But Lily was smiling. "And Emma's practically his best friend right now, you were telling us?"

Ursula's eyebrows shot up. "Just what are you getting at?"

Lily shrugged. "Well, if he doesn't have his magic anymore, we should be able to take him. And if we've got him, then one, he won't be able to advise the others and two, Emma's probably going to tear the town apart looking for him. That's our distraction right there."

Cruella and Ursula looked at each other. Then Cruella's lips curved into a nasty smile. "You know, dahlings, it's not as though we haven't got a nice, secure place to store him once we've snatched him…"

Poseidon looked up in surprise when his herald announced the captain of his elite guard. "You've found the pirate so quickly?" he asked. It had been less than a day since he'd given the order.

The captain bowed low. "I'm afraid I have not, my lord," he admitted.

The king of the sea tilted his head with a faint frown. "I wasn't expecting a daily report from you, captain. Come to me when you have something worth telling me."

The captain raised his eyes to his monarch's. "Forgive me, my lord, for not volunteering information before you asked it of me. While I have yet to locate the pirate, I have discovered his ship."

Poseidon smiled. "Then he must be close by," he exclaimed. "Where is it?"

The mer-man held up a narrow-necked glass bottle that Poseidon hadn't noticed he'd brought with him. "Here, my lord."

Poseidon blinked. "I grant you it's a fair copy, but surely, you can't mean to tell me…?" His voice trailed off and the captain waited until his king motioned for him to speak.

"If my lord would like to examine the ship further," he suggested diffidently, "you will find one aboard who can corroborate my tale."

Incredulous, Poseidon reached for the bottle and peered closely. His eyes widened when they beheld a small red-haired figure waving from the crow's nest atop the ship's main mast. "Captain," he said with a slight frown, "what is my granddaughter doing in your bottle?" The mer-man opened his mouth to speak, but Poseidon waved him back to silence. "On second thought," he continued,
making a gesture over the glass, "I'll let her speak for herself."

For a moment, a blue glow seemed to undulate over the bottle like a rippling wave. Then it was gone and a startled young mermaid stood before him. Her surprised expression quickly yielded to a joyful smile as she made a hasty genuflection and practically leaped toward Poseidon. "Grandfather!" she cried.

Poseidon smiled and returned the embrace. Later, he would need to remind her about the necessity for propriety and protocol in the royal throne room. But this was his favorite granddaughter, and it had been years since last he'd seen her. "Ariel," he said warmly. "What under seas have you been up to?"

Ariel hesitated. "Well," she began hesitantly, "it's a long story…"

Social Studies was Henry's last class of the day on Fridays. When the dismissal bell rang, he quickly gathered up his books and left with his classmates, wishing Mr. Kirke a good weekend on his way out the door.

"Suck-up," Nicholas muttered with a grin that told Henry he was only teasing.

Henry grinned back. "Just being friendly. Maybe he'll mark my next essay easier."

"Yeah, good luck with that."

Henry had already spied another familiar face. "Hey, Cecily!"

Cecily turned her head in his direction. "Oh. Hi, Henry. We're still on for tomorrow at your grandpa's right?"

Henry nodded. "You're bringing Aggie again, right?"

"I have to," Cecily admitted. "Mama still wants me look after her in the afternoon. I hope it's not a problem."

Henry shook his head. "No, actually, I think Grandpa's looking forward to it. At least, he's been asking me if I know what kind of stuff she likes to do and when Belle came by the shop yesterday, she was talking about playdough and finger paints."

Cecily beamed. "Oh my gosh, she'll love those!" Her smile dimmed somewhat as her expression grew thoughtful. "I'll have tell Mama so she knows to send Aggie in old clothes."

"Hey, Henry," Nicholas interrupted, "Ava's already messaged me that our dad's getting impatient. I'd better get a move on. See you later?"

"Bye," Henry murmured, still smiling at Cecily. "Are you taking the bus?"

"Not today," Cecily sighed. "I've got to pick up Skippy at the elementary school; he had to stay late for detention. And since he'll have missed his bus, I'll have to walk home with him." She shook her head. "I know. He's turning ten in a couple of months; he's old enough to walk by himself, or would be back home. But Mama thinks siblings need to stick together and when I say anything about it, she just tells me that we're in a new land, we need to fit in, and just because children are trusted to walk about unsupervised in Sherwood Forest, doesn't mean we should keep up that tradition here!" Exasperation almost had her shouting.
"If it helps any," Henry said, "my mom never minded if I went off on my own when I was his age." Regina had minded it more a year later, after he'd brought Emma here, but mentioning that wouldn't help his case.

Cecily shook her head. "If I tell her that, she'll just give me that other speech about how I'm not you and she's not your mother, and we do things our way. And if I point out that she's just contradicted her earlier argument, she'll tell me that children shouldn't talk back to their elders. Which," she sighed, but she was smiling a little too, "really means she hasn't got a good argument but I still have to do as she says."

"I hear you," Henry said. They were at his locker now, and she waited while he took out some more books and shoved them into his knapsack, together with the history he had already tucked under his arm. "So, I guess things are pretty different here," he said weakly.

Cecily shrugged. "It's okay, really," she said. "It's not really that so much is different. It's that a lot is the same—until it isn't." She sighed. "I'm not making sense, am I?"

"I kind of think you are," Henry said. "Maybe. Uh…" He wiped his hands on the back of his pants. "Look, I know you've got to pick up your brother. I don't mean to keep you. But would you mind if I walked with you?" He hesitated. "Maybe I don't understand completely, but if you don't mind explaining as we go…?"

Cecily smiled shyly. "It might take a while," she murmured.

Henry shrugged. "I've got time. I could even walk you and Skippy back to your place if we need longer. Unless you'd rather catch up with your brother?"

"I can do that at home," Cecily said, still smiling. "If you're really interested and not just… asking to be polite."

Henry raised an eyebrow. "You don't want me to be polite?" he asked.

She blushed. "I didn't mean it that way," she mumbled.

Henry laughed. "I know. And I'm interested. I'll just text my mom and tell her I'll be a little late and that I'm not taking the bus." His phone was already in his hand and Cecily waited as he sent the message. That done, he returned the phone to his pocket.

A thought occurred to him. It was kind of corny and old-fashioned, but going by what they'd just been discussing, maybe she'd go for it. "Uh Cis?" He smiled nervously. "Could I, uh, carry your books for you?"

Cecily blinked. Then she slowly slid her knapsack off her shoulders and handed it to him, still smiling warmly. "Sure."

Cruella made her way down the storm cellar steps that evening and carefully inspected the cage, liking what she saw. The wire mesh was strong and taut, with no widened holes or speck of rust. The padlock was sturdy, though they'd need to ensure that it was positioned so that it couldn't be picked from inside the cage. Perhaps, she smiled, some sort of bicycle lock might work better. Dear Todd at the country club back in Great Neck had been a cycling enthusiast. A dreadful bore of a conversationalist, but one did have to concede that the hours he'd spent on his Litespeed Blade had given him a positively darb behind. And while she'd been passing the evening drooling over his physique every time he bent down to gallantly search for and retrieve the earrings, contact lenses (she didn't wear any, but he didn't need to know that) and sundry other small items she
contrived to drop, she hadn't entirely been able to tune out his dull natterings about 'Kryptonian bicycle locks' or something sounding rather like that. Thick metal or heavy cable, with a secure combination code, yes, that would hold possibilities. And hopefully, it would hold Rumple.

She was smiling as she climbed the stairs once more. To her surprise, she wasn't the only person outside. "Not that I care, of course," she sniffed, "but whatever are you doing out here, Lilith, dahling?"

"Freezing," Lily deadpanned. "We're closer to your car than the farmhouse. Mind if I shelter in it for a bit. The wind's picking up."

Cruella's eyes narrowed. There was no wind. But then, the person who might be listening in didn't know that. "Yes," she said, "and from the wrong direction." She sighed. "Very well. But only until it dies down."

"Thanks."

Once they were inside, Cruella smiled. "All right, dahling. Ursula's spell should still be functioning. At least, we can hope so. Penny for your thoughts?"

Lily was silent for a moment. Then, almost nervously, she asked, "After we get the heart and unleash the Darkness, what happens to the baby?"

Cruella shrugged. "Nothing terrible. You heard Ursula; the spell won't harm it."

"I know. But, do we give it back to Zelena, or…?"

Cruella didn't answer for a moment. Instead, she opened the glove compartment, pulled out a pen, and held it before her face, in a way that reminded Lily of a cigarette holder. Finally, she asked seriously, "Do you think we can trust Zelena?"

"How far?" Lily countered, nearly at once.

"Now that," there was warmth in Cruella's smile for the first time, "is an excellent question. You see, right now, while I'm not sure we actually need Zelena as an ally, it's useful to let her think she is. And I'm not so certain she needs us. At the moment, our goals and hers seem to be in alignment. But that could change. And if it does, well, I rather think we'll need some leverage, don't you?"

"So we… what? Keep it? Raise it?"

"I suppose we could," Cruella said dubiously. "Or you or Ursula might, if either of you are inclined. I'm not exactly mother material. But actually, there's a far simpler solution. We only needed one dose of sleeping curse for the old man. I have a second earring. A couple of drops in the formula and, well, it'll need no more looking after than an Armand Marseille doll. We'll just need to keep it safe is all."

Lily smiled tightly. "Of course."

"Really, dahling," Cruella continued, "it'll be so much easier this way. The baby won't age. It won't require nourishment or," she wrinkled her nose, "diaper changes. It won't be fussy or colicky, nor will it become injured or ill. It's hardly as though we're abandoning it to die, now."

"Of course not," Lily nodded.

"So, if we're all on the same page, I suppose we'd best be getting back to the house," she continued,
opening her door. After a moment, Lily did the same. She hung back a few paces, letting Cruella lead the way. And when she was certain that the other woman wasn't turning to see if she was following, she pulled some folded papers out of her jacket pocket and smoothed them out as best she could.

They were worn pages, with one ragged edge, clearly torn out of some book or other and she looked at them in the moonlight, her eyes cold and flat. "I guess I should count my blessings that you never used that potion on me, Cruella," she murmured. "Then again, I doubt you ever thought I'd be of any use to you when you abandoned me to die in Minnesota. Fate's got a twisted sense of humor sometimes." She smiled then. "I shall have my revenge. It's all falling into place. First the Apprentice. Then Emma and her family. And then, you and Ursula."

The wind started up for real then, swallowing her quiet laughter.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rumple woke up Saturday morning after having passed a frustrating Friday evening. While he was getting the hang of using the drop spindle to focus his magic, such would prove rather impractical in an emergency situation. It seemed as though he could access his magical talents if he focused on what he meant to accomplish with them while he spun his thread. However, that meant that he couldn't just cast his spells with a wave of his hand as he'd been wont to do in the not-so-distant past. Spinning took a bit more time and, after some experimentation, he'd discovered that a longer thread made for a stronger spell.

While a great deal better than nothing, Rumple could see that this new development was going to prove problematic, particularly if Ursula was in town. If the Sea Witch meant to attack him, she could have him in the ocean and at her mercy before he could have the new wool attached to his leader thread. He doubted he'd be able to spin in the water, particularly not if he was also treading it to keep from drowning.

He thought about the shelf in his workroom, where he kept vials of bottled magic against an emergency. He could, likewise, spin certain spells in advance and store the thread. It would be easier to unleash the magic that way. But it would also mean that he would need to know exactly which thread contained which spell before he unraveled it. Otherwise, he might cast a healing spell when he needed a fireball. Or vice versa. In the midst of a battle, well! He pictured himself frantically pulling a handful of threads out of his suit jacket pocket and trying to determine what each one would do as his foe methodically aimed blasts of raw power at him. No, this was not a workable situation, not now.

Perhaps, another visit to Mr. Castaway was in order. Or perhaps, he would be better served discussing his concerns with the Apprentice instead. He'd have to call on one of them this week. Meanwhile, though, he thought as he pushed back his bed covers and sat up, he needed to begin his day. Henry would be at the shop bright and early, set to complete his tasks before his friends arrived. And, there were still a few things that Rumple meant to do (in addition to getting washed up, dressed, and breakfasted) to prepare for Aggie's day.

The fragrance of pancakes wafted upstairs, mingling with that of cinnamon from the overnight oats that had even found its way into his dreams. Belle was fixing breakfast. Despite the trials and tribulations of last night, Rumple found himself smiling as he swung his legs off the mattress and found his slippers. He did need to hurry if he meant to join his wife for breakfast before they both left for their respective places of work.

Cruella drove up the road to the cemetery and pulled into the lot. It wasn't hard for them to spot the vault once they walked through the main gate. "I guess this is it," Lily murmured.

Ursula nodded. "You can't feel it, I know, but magic is practically radiating out from every crack and crevice."

Lily was silent for a moment. Then, "Actually, I… I think I do feel something. Almost like a… a warm thread. Pulling me in. Calling—" She'd taken an unwitting step forward and was startled when Ursula yanked her back.
"Careful!" the sea witch said. "Regina probably has sentry spells to let her know if anyone tries to intrude here. Stay back." Then, in a slightly more matter-of-fact tone, she added, "I guess it's not that surprising that you're feeling that pull. Your mother had magic, after all. It stands to reason you've some aptitude for it. But this isn't the time or place to experiment. Once we've acquired Rumple's heart and accomplished what we're setting out to do, there'll be plenty of opportunity for instruction. Right now, we can't afford to get sidetracked." She waited for Lily's reluctant nod.

"At any rate," Ursula continued, "this is where the heart is being kept. So. Let's make sure we're on the same page, because once we begin, we're going to have to move quickly. So. Today, Lily, you're going back to the hospital for another heart-to-heart with Zelena, where you will ask her…?"

"…Whether she's not getting sick of hospital food and if I can't slip her anything. If there is something she wants, I buy it. If not, I get her something anyway."

"Meanwhile," Ursula nodded, "I brew up something to accelerate her pregnancy. Fortunately, I'll need a few ingredients that aren't in that storm cellar, or she might recognize what I'm up to if she spies what I'm taking out of her supplies. I can mix the potion up on the beach for extra privacy; it'll be more or less deserted at this time of year, so I shouldn't think anybody will intrude. Tomorrow," she smiled, "you'll sprinkle a few drops of the potion on whatever it is you're getting for her. Don't stick around for long after she eats it. The baby will age roughly one month each hour, which means that she'll start to notice that something's wrong around hour two. And since she's about three or four months along, I'd expect she'll go into labor around hour five or six."

"While you're having afternoon tea with Zelena," Cruella continued, "Ursula and I will snatch Rumple. At that hour, he should be alone. His wife will be at the library and as for Emma's spawn, well, he usually leaves a bit before closing time, from what my furry and feathered spies have been reporting. There might be the odd customer, but we can work around that. In and out, like a flash, with nobody the wiser."

"Not too flashy," Ursula cautioned. "We want him to be able to leave some clue to tip off the others that he's in trouble and didn't just step out for coffee."

"That's assuming they'll go chasing after him, dahling."

Ursula sighed. "We can hope. If not, well, at least he'll be off the board and in no position to provide assistance to anyone who might come a-knocking on his door. We give him a minute or two; he's smart; he should be able to leave some kind of message in that space of time. And my tentacles are fast enough to keep him from triggering a silent alarm or pulling a gun."

"If it comes to that," Cruella said grimly, "I pack a pistol of my own. It should be enough to stop him."

"Just don't do anything more lethal than that," Ursula cautioned.

Cruella smiled. "No fear on that score, dahling. I just need to draw mine before he can draw his. And then, we wait for the croaker to get the call."

"Croaker?" Lily replied blankly. "Like a frog, you mean?"

"No, dahling." Cruella sighed. "That's just what we used to call doctors back where I come from. By the time Zelena goes into labor, he'll likely be relaxing at home. We catch him there; Ursula rips out his heart and, well, whichever of you two is the least squeamish takes on the Blue Fairy's likeness and accompanies him back to the hospital. The two of you deliver the baby and just make sure the squalling brat takes a detour on its way to the nursery."
"It'll have to be me," Ursula said reluctantly. "From what Zelena's told us, they don't know she can use her magic. Well, magical control tends to fray under stress and, while I don't have any first-hand experience to go by, I'm willing to bet that going into labor—especially when you didn't have an inkling it was going to happen when you got up that morning—is liable to be pretty stressful. If she cuts loose before any sedatives have a chance to kick in, I'll need to do something. And if I look like the Blue Fairy, nobody ought to be surprised if I use a bit of magic of my own."

"Your magic won't look like hers, though," Cruella cautioned. "It'll be as different as, well, Light and Dark."

"I know," Ursula admitted. "But hopefully, the only people present for the birth will be her, me, and the doctor. Given the situation, I don't think the focus is going to be on whether my magic looks like smoke or light." She frowned. "It might not be a bad idea for me to disguise the two of you, though. If Regina catches wind of what's going on and shows up right when I'm casting something, she might notice the difference and realize what it could mean. So if she arrives at the hospital, it'll be up to the two of you to stall her as best you can."

"Got it," Lily nodded. "And once we have the baby?"

Ursula smiled. "We drive back here and break into the vault. At that point, it won't matter if Regina's intruder alarm goes off. By the time anyone shows up, we'll be long gone."

Rumple looked up when the bell over the shop door jangled a greeting. "Booth," he smiled, as August walked in holding a large reusable shopping bag by its handles.

"Hi, August," Henry called, looking up from polishing one of the glass countertops.

The former puppet smiled back. "I just came by to drop this off," he said, holding up the bag and pushing it toward Rumple. "I'm sorry it took so long to get everything right."

Rumple took the bag from him and reached inside. "I do believe you've outdone yourself, Mr. Booth," he murmured, as he pulled out the case and unlatched it. His eyes widened as he picked up one of the ships and examined it. "Astonishing," he proclaimed.

"I... hope you mean that in a good way," August replied, his chuckle making it plain that he wasn't actually doubting it.

"Oh, I do," Rumple assured him, as he turned to the safe on his wall and expertly dialed the combination. He counted off a number of bills, and then laid two more down atop the pile.

"That's not—" August started to say, but Rumple held up his hand to stave off any protest.

"While I certainly enjoy getting the better end of a deal, I think you've delivered a bit more than what we agreed upon some weeks back. As such, the initial terms are scarcely fair recompense for the work you've produced. I'm simply rectifying the shortfall." He shook his head. "Truthfully, I still think I'm underpaying you, but I suspect you'd be more than willing to offer a discount to a... friend?"

August blinked. Then his features relaxed in an easy grin. "Well, yeah. Especially if it'll get me more commissions down the road."

Rumple nodded, relaxing as he felt himself on solid ground once more. He understood business concessions and deals far better than he did friendship. And while he could recognize full well that the object he held in his hands smacked far more of the latter, it was easier for him to accept a gift
when it was couched in the wrappings of the former. "I believe that I can assure you of that," he returned warmly.

After his disappointing encounter with Tiny, Killian was glad when Marco called him with some good news. "Grumpy, he showed me the plans for your ship," the handyman said. "I know he's applied to the mayor's office for the permit to cut the lumber. He should have her answer at the next council meeting. Now, I may not be a dwarf, but I know a thing or two about carpentry and dubbing." He smiled. "And me and hard work, we're old friends. If you want my help, and Leroy's amenable, I think I can save you three months. Maybe four."

Killian's eyes lit up. "Mate," he said warmly, "you've no idea how happy I am to hear that."

"Well, don't be too overjoyed," Marco cautioned. "The agreement you made with Leroy, that pays for him and his brothers. You want me," he waggled a finger with a warning smile, "I don't work cheap. But I think you know you get the quality you pay for."

"That I do, mate," Killian nodded. "Name your price."

Marco did. Killian considered for a moment. Then he nodded, his eyes scanning the garage workroom. Almost absently, he lifted a miniature clock down from a shelf.

"Ah… careful. That piece, she's fragile," Marco cautioned.

Killian smiled. "I can see that. But it's a fine piece of work. Yours?"

"Me and my boy's," Marco nodded.

"Well, exquisite as your embellishments are, I won't need all this swag and scrollwork on my vessel," the captain admitted. "But if you and your son can turn out pieces like this, I suspect you're quoting me a more reasonable price than you might another man."

The handyman shrugged. "It's been a long time since I've been approached about a project like this. I must say I'm looking forward. If you'll allow me the opportunity."

Killian thrust out his hand and Marco took it, smiling. "I have a standard contract I use for commissions," the handyman added, as the captain released him. "I'll review it and have it ready for you to sign tomorrow. And meanwhile," he added, reaching down behind his work counter and coming up with a canvas bag, "my boy, when he found out that you were coming here, he asked me to give you this. He actually finished it a few days ago," he admitted, "but he's been looking it over, making sure it's as perfect as he can make it. He said I should get it out of here before he found something." He passed the bag over. "Take it home; look it over. And if you find anything wrong, bring it back tomorrow when you come to sign."

Killian smiled. "Doesn't sound as though there'll be much to find the way you're talking, mate, but I shall. And thank your son for me. I'm sorry I missed him."

The hospital was quieter on Saturdays, Lily reflected. Or, at least, on this particular Saturday. She'd been standing in the elevator for nearly two hours, while passengers traveled up and down from main floor to top, until someone finally inserted the steel key to take the car to the secure wing. She made her way down the hallway, her crepe-soled shoes barely making a sound. She'd trained herself to move as noiselessly as possible; there had been more than a few break-and-enters when the house she'd been targeting hadn't been nearly as empty as she'd thought. It paid off. She'd only been caught once, and really, it had been her own fault for not scop ing out the place beforehand.
and realizing that the family in question owned a Labrador retriever pup, who had barked an enthusiastic welcome when it had discovered her in the master bedroom. She'd made it out the window, but after tumbling into the rosebushes below, she'd been in too much pain to do anything but stay there in agony until the cops showed up.

She wasn't caught this time.

"Zelena?" she called, not wanting to risk opening the pass-through.

An excited stage whisper returned her hesitant greeting. "Lily! You came back!"

Lily coaxed a smile into her voice. "Just couldn't keep away. Ursula might be the Sea Witch, but I'm the one who feels like a fish out of water around here. At least I can have a conversation with you without being called 'dahling' or feeling like I'm five again." Maybe she was laying it on a bit thick; Cruella's condescension wasn't anything she couldn't handle. But she was going to need to catch Zelena off-guard, and the more naïve, open, and vulnerable she acted now, the better her chances later."

Zelena laughed. "Sounds like your alliance isn't as rock-solid as you led me to believe earlier."

Lily let out an audible sigh. "What can I say? I've been going along with a lot of little things that bug me and it's getting to the point where they're adding up to one major pain in the…" She let her voice trail off. "Sorry. Not your problem."

"Oh, no," Zelena protested. "Don't stop there! Please, I haven't even got a television in here. At least tell me something entertaining."

And by 'entertaining,' she meant 'useful', Lily thought cynically. Still, she couldn't keep her tongue too closely guarded, not if she wanted to earn the witch's trust. And if Zelena was looking for entertainment, well Lily had enough stories of Cruella to fit that bill and let her do a little venting besides. Beginning with their first meeting…

Rumple had almost forgotten what it was like having a small child about. He'd set Aggie to finger-painting, waiting until she seemed absorbed in her work before resuming his own duties. He'd been going through his ledger, checking who might still owe him back rent, though he had no pressing need to collect it, when he felt a firm tug on his suit jacket.

Startled, he looked down into a pair of wide brown eyes. "Yes, Aggie?"

"I hafta go to the bathroom."

Rumple nodded. "Of course. Come. I'll show you where it is."

There was now a violet spot near the hem of his jacket; Aggie had clearly been mixing the red and blue paints together. He pressed his lips together and reminded himself that the paint was water soluble. No real harm done.

"I don't wanna paint anymore," Aggie announced when she emerged. "Can I watch a video?"

Rumple sighed. "I'm afraid I've neither player nor videos here, dearie. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Aggie said at once. "You got books?"

Rumple raised an eyebrow. "Can you read, then?"
Aggie shook her head. "Not yet, but I know my ABCs. Almost," she added, ducking her head. "But you could read."

Rumple considered. "Well, I don't have any books here at the moment. Not any that would interest you. But I can ask Belle to bring several with her when she joins us."

"When will she get here?" Aggie asked.

Rumple checked the time. "I should think it would be within the next two hours."

The child groaned. "Two hours? That long?"

Rumple shook his head wistfully. When one had lived for over two centuries, two hours were fleeting. But Aggie had not. "Tell me," he said, "what is it you do all day when your brothers and sisters are at school?"

Aggie shrugged. "Uh... I sing, I play, I sweep..."

"Ah. Well, there's a broom in the corner, if you'd care to sweep here."

Aggie glanced at it. "It's too big," she said. "Mine's not so heavy and the stick part's shorter. Mama calls it a wish-broom."

"A whisk broom," Rumple corrected with a faint smile. "A wish-broom would be a fine thing, though. A good deal more convenient than a wishing star, wouldn't you say?"

Aggie shrugged again. "I don't got one of those either. I'm bored."

"Well, we can't have that," Rumple replied. "You were telling me that you sweep. Have you ever tried your hand at polishing?"

Aggie shook her head. "Sometimes, if the spoons an' forks just have some spots on 'em, Mama lets me rub 'em with toothpaste, but if that don't work, Cis hasta use hot water and soda and if they're really bad, they need the smelly stuff," she wrinkled her nose, "and Mama says I'm not old enough."

Tin flatware, Rumple thought to himself. Toothpaste, or a paste of hot water and sodium bicarbonate, could remove some tarnish, but for pieces in worse shape, something on the order of kerosene or turpentine would be warranted. "I had a different sort of polishing in mind, actually. Shall I show you?"

By the time Aggie complied, Rumple had a set of pewter serving dishes spread out on the floor behind the counter. "I like these," she said, stretching a hesitant hand toward a candy dish shaped like a scallop shell.

"You'd best cover those paints so they don't dry out," Rumple directed. "And bring them here; I'll put them aside for next time."

"They're serviceable enough," Rumple nodded. "But they've gone uncared for far too long. Before they can be offered up for sale, they'll require some restoration. So. He slid open a cabinet behind the counter and removed a sack of flour, a gallon jug of vinegar, and a salt canister. "This may be somewhat similar to that paste you mentioned your sister uses, however this one," he smiled, "won't be hot. No risk of scalding."

So saying, he measured out two parts vinegar to one part flour.
in a plastic mixing bowl, stirring it to paste. "And since this is satin pewter," he murmured, "we'll need to make it a drop more abrasive." So saying, he added a small measure of salt to the mixture. "There. Now, Aggie, what I'd like you to do," he smiled, "is put these on," he handed her a pair of cotton gloves. I'm sorry that they're a bit large, but you'll need steel wool for this and it may cut your hands." He waited for Aggie to don the gloves. "Excellent," he smiled. "Now take this," he handed her the steel wool, "and use it to rub this paste all over the pieces."

"Everywhere?" Aggie asked.

"Well, perhaps not the bottom; we'll do that later. For now, just coat the rest—gently, mind—and let them stand. We'll wash it off after."

Aggie's gloved hand closed around the steel wool. "I never done this before," she said.

"Well, you shan't be able to say that after today. Here. I'll do one piece to show you how. Watch carefully, and then you try."

He waited until she'd done three pieces properly before he went back to his ledger, glancing up every now and again to ensure that she was still occupied.

Zelena gave Lily a commiserating sigh. "I'm beginning to see why you suggested that your abortive mace attack on my projection qualified as a win-win. I will admit to finding Cruella's antics amusing in small doses, but you're living with her."

*And you're trying to manipulate me*, Lily thought. Aloud, she said, "why do you think I came over here? Ursula's either working magic or hunting down ingredients and you're better conversation."

"Also in small doses," Zelena cautioned. "These corridors do get patrolled with a certain regularity and you oughtn't to risk our little chats being overheard. In fact, you'd best be running along before they come by with my lunch." She sighed. "Much as I adore green, I think they put real effort into making split pea soup as bland and unpalatable as possible."

Lily hesitated. "Maybe I could bring you something tomorrow," she suggested. "I don't know if I'm the greatest cook, but I could probably scrounge up some takeout."

Zelena's response was a laugh of sheer delight. "Well aren't you the perfect little godsend! I've been wishing for some of Granny's onion rings for some time now."

"Sure," Lily said at once. "I can bring them tomorrow."

"Not right before you arrive, mind." A canny note crept into Zelena's voice. "They're wonderfully fragrant when warm, but that fragrance will point a beacon directly to you. And possibly to me, if they follow it here. It'll raise questions. Get them an hour or so before you come; give them time to cool."

"Okay," Lily said, "but cold onion rings sound kind of…"

"Unappetizing?" Zelena finished. "Well, I suppose they are, compared to warm ones. But at this point, I'd much rather cold than none at all."

"Okay," Lily repeated. "Tomorrow, then."

"Can't wait."
As Lily made her way back toward the elevator, she murmured, "Neither can I."

Poseidon listened to his granddaughter's tale in comparative silence, interjecting only when Arial veered off on tangential topics to steer her back on course. When she was done, he shook his head in astonishment. "Your father never mentioned you'd taken up residence above," he managed. "And we have spoken a few times since your departure."

Arial smiled nervously. "He did say that it might be better if you didn't find out," she admitted. "But you did ask, and I never could lie. Especially, not to you, Grandfather."

"I'm delighted to hear that," Poseidon replied tartly, hiding a smile of his own.

*When one ruled the sea, it was inevitable that one would attract a certain number of fawners and sycophants. And he had recognized long ago the concerted efforts made by his court to shield him from matters that he would prefer not to hear. He'd made it clear to his ministers that such ploys would be tolerated only so long as they did not impinge on the security of his reign or of his realms. Thus far, he had every reason to trust that they were obeying his directive.*

*From the moment that his granddaughter had begun to speak, however, Poseidon had fallen in love with her complete and utter guilelessness. He well remembered her first state banquet. She'd been barely a fry then, far too young to stay up late, but when Triton had asked whether she might, at least, stay for the first course, Poseidon had allowed it. He'd been amused by her antics as she floundered about, occasionally able to swim a few strokes smoothly, but never for very long. And then, he'd attacked his first course—a salad made from no fewer than eight varieties of seaweed, seasoned with rice vinegar and sesame oil salvaged from a sunken merchant ship. Only to hear a small voice pipe up, "Mama says too much sesame oil is fattening."

There was a collective gasp from the courtiers in close attendance, as Poseidon set down his fork and focused his attention on the red-haired scrap of a mer-princess who was regarding him with wide green eyes that gazed at him, frank and unintimidated.

"Does she?" he asked, his tone betraying no hint of emotion.

Arial nodded. "She says the seeds, too. But I like it anyway."

"As do I," Poseidon returned, picking up his fork once more.

"You eat it a lot?" Ariel persisted.

Poseidon tilted his head up at her once more. "I suppose it graces my menu often enough," he allowed. Truthfully, he'd never much thought about it. If he disliked a dish, he informed his cook and it was not served to him again. Otherwise, he knew that he could expect it on his table with some frequency.

"You're not scared you'll blow up like a puffer-fish?"

*This time, the child's innocent question emerged during one of those inexplicable lulls in table conversation and carried clearly throughout the hall. And a horrified voice bellowed, "ARIEL!" Almost before the last syllable of her name had stopped echoing in the hall, Triton and his wife were genuflecting before him. Amphinoe was scooping up her daughter, wrapping a tailfin over the confused child's mouth, as Triton began apologizing for the girl's lack of manners.*

Poseidon waved his hand imperiously and his son fell silent. For a moment, he regarded the three of them, two nervous, one puzzled—but still unafraid. His eyebrows knit together and he half rose
from his throne, one hand clasped about the shaft of his trident for support—the throne had deep cushions, which made getting up from it with any amount of dignity rather difficult. He waited one moment longer.

Then he threw back his head and laughed.

Relief washed over the hall like a tidal wave on the surface.

Poseidon clapped his hands together. "Have my granddaughter seated beside me," he directed his chamberlain. "If I have to endure prattle this evening, I'd rather it be honest prattle."

Now, he smiled at that memory. "Tell me, granddaughter. The captain of the vessel on which my officers found you—do you know where he might be found?"

Ariel's face darkened. "I'm not sure I'd want to find him after what he did to me, Grandfather." Her face flushed and she ducked her head apologetically. "But if I did," she went on hastily, "the last time I saw him, it was in the ocean between the Enchanted Forest and Arundel. I don't know if he's still there now. When I was in Neverland, I heard from some of our people there that he'd lived there too at one point." Her eyes opened very wide. "Or maybe…"

"Ariel?"

She hesitated. "Grandfather, have you ever heard tell of a Dark Curse?"

Henry had been correct, Rumple reflected, as he watched the afternoon's rehearsal-cum-recital. Cecily had quite the talent for acting. The youths were all coming along rather nicely, but Cecily didn't seem to step into her part, so much as let it settle about her like a comfortable cloak. And, he noted, despite the family responsibilities that Henry had mentioned, it wasn't lost on Rumple that Cecily had most of her lines already memorized—a feat the others had yet to accomplish.

"They're talkin' 'bout pudding again," Aggie said. "Is it suppertime yet?"

Rumple smiled down at her. "Not quite," he admitted. "And I'm afraid it will have to be something other than pudding for you when it is."

Aggie shrugged. "The mac-and-cheese was okay. But if I come next time, can I get pudding?"

"Well," Rumple murmured, trying to devote equal attention to the young players before him and the child seated on his display counter—whose rubber-soled shoes were kicking scuff marks into the glass he'd painstakingly polished an hour earlier, "I doubt that your mother would approve of my serving you nothing but pudding for dinner. But I shall endeavor to have some for you for dessert, if you like."

Aggie nodded eagerly. "Sometimes mama makes one with apples and raisins for special."

"I see," Rumple said, his expression solemn. "And next week will be… special?" he asked, fixing her with penetrating eye.

Undaunted, Aggie nodded again. "If you're getting me pudding, it'll be special," she assured him.

It was a good thing that the play before him was a comedy, because Rumple couldn't quite suppress his guffaw. And he only felt a momentary twinge of guilt when he saw Henry flash Nicholas a quick smile of relief, clearly under the impression that his grandfather had been laughing at one of the lines in the play.
He slipped Aggie one of the picture books that Belle had brought and resolved to give the remainder of the performance his full attention.

Whale planned to work the early shift at the hospital the next day. He'd met someone the other night at the Rabbit Hole and he was hoping to see her again that evening. Maybe this time, he'd be able to snag her phone number. Or better yet, her name! He was out the door and just locking up when he heard a raspy breath behind him and something like a dark cable whipped about his torso, pinning his arms to his sides. He had time to release a strangled gasp, before another tentacle plunged into his chest and yanked out his heart.

"Go back inside the house, doctor," a voice as hoarse as it was cold intoned. "Call the hospital. Tell them you're taking the day off, unless there's an emergency. Then stay inside until they call you back. Forget this incident. Forget I was ever here."

The tentacles withdrew and Whale immediately unlocked his door again, sparing neither glance nor thought for their owner. He hung up his coat once more in the vestibule, dutifully made the phone call, walked into his living room and turned on the TV, channel surfing until he found a talk show that sounded halfway interesting. A moment after he sank down into his sofa cushions, he forgot that he'd ever gone outside at all that morning.

Granny Lucas looked the adolescent girl up and down. "Haven't seen you around much before," she said gruffly.

"Yeah," the girl replied, ducking her head slightly. "I… uh… just came over with the last curse, I guess. Still getting used to stuff."

The older woman's face relaxed in a thin smile. "Well. Welcome to Storybrooke. What can I get for you this morning?"

"Is it too early for onion rings?" she asked hesitantly.

"Just a bit," Granny said. "They're more of a lunch thing around here, and on Sunday, we serve breakfast until eleven."

The girl sighed. "I was afraid of that. I've got a test this afternoon I'm cramming for. I won't be able to come back later."

Granny was silent for a moment. Then she shook her head. "Oh, well. I guess we can turn on the deep fryer a little early today." She frowned. "You know they'll get cold fairly quick, right?"

Smiling, Lily affected a shrug. "That's okay. They're almost as good that way. Oh, uh, could I get some ketchup packets, too?"

Granny gave her a brisk nod. "Comin' right up."

Lily's smile widened. "Perfect…"
"Give it time," Tia advised Rumple. "You're only trying to learn a new way to do an old trick after two hundred years."

"For what it's worth," Tony added, "I do understand the problem. I'd have had a much harder time all along without Tia running interference while I played my harmonica."

Rumple nodded reluctantly. "And now?"

Tony shrugged. "After a few years of study, I got to the point where I can do a few more things without it. The harmonica helps me channel my talent and it lets me do more with it, no question. But it's not the source of my power." He tapped his chest. "That's all in here. The harmonica just makes it easier to let it out."

"Meditation helps," Tia added. "We can show you some of the basics of what we do, although I'm not sure whether it's meditation in general or those techniques in particular." She smiled self-consciously. "We didn't really start training until we found our people in Misty Valley," she admitted. "I don't think we 'learned' how to use our powers before then exactly; we just… did it."

"The hard part was learning how not to use them," Tony nodded. "But yeah, once we got back to Uncle Bené, that was when we really started figuring things out instead of learning as we went." Tony gave Rumple a faint smile. "Which sounds a bit like what you've been doing."

Rumple nodded back, but his expression was troubled. "I appreciate your words, but I was hoping to speak with your uncle this morning. You said you have no idea when he'll return?"

Tia shook her head. "He's had to go off like this a time or two before, but usually he's let us know ahead of time. I hope it's nothing serious, but," she sighed, "I just have this feeling…"

Rumple nodded. Then he finished his tea and set the cup down on the coffee table with a sigh. "I suppose I'd best be getting back to the shop," he said. "But if your uncle does come back, I'd appreciate it if you could let him know I'd like to speak with him."

Tony and Tia got up as well. "Sure," Tony said. "Here, we'll walk you out."

"They will find you, you know," Tia added. "Pardon?"

"You just said," Rumple replied, "that 'they' would find me. What did you mean by that? Who?"

For a moment Tia didn't answer. Then, "I'm sorry. Sometimes, I get these… flashes. I just… know things. But I don't always remember the context." She shook her head. "That hasn't happened in a while, not out of the blue, like that. I guess I'm more worried about Uncle Bené than I thought." She smiled uneasily. "If I find out anything else, either about what… just happened or about Uncle Bené, I'll call you."
"I don't recall giving you my phone number," Rumple remarked.

"We have other methods," Tia reminded him gently. "Though if you'd prefer," she pulled out her cell phone, "we can use more conventional means…"

It was a quiet Sunday. Quiet enough that Rumple was actually contemplating closing the shop early and surprising Belle at the library. He couldn't help noticing that Henry seemed a bit restless, though the young man did his tasks uncomplainingly. Finally, Rumple sighed. "Go."

"Grandpa?"

Rumple set down his polishing cloth. "It's a crisp February day. There are only a few remaining hours of daylight. And if that floor were any cleaner, the glare of the sun reflecting off of it might blind me. Now, I am not in the habit of granting early releases from drudgery, so I would suggest that you leave now," he dropped his voice to an ominous whisper. "Before such largesse can be withdrawn." He waved Henry away. "Go on. I'll see you tomorrow."

Henry grinned. "Okay, Grandpa. And thanks."

"You are quite welcome."

After Henry was gone, Rumple went into the back room. On the table, an unfamiliar sheaf of stapled pages caught his eye and he reached for it. After a moment, he smiled. Henry had forgotten his script. Clearly, his grandson had been practicing his lines either on his break, or between duties. A corner of a page was folded down and Rumple flipped to it curiously. So. He'd been reviewing the scene that Aggie had twice interrupted. Understandable, considering that they hadn't been able to complete its performance yesterday. Smiling, he replaced the script where he'd found it and sighed when he realized that, while Henry had been hard at work on the shop floor, this back office was badly in need of sweep and a mop. Shaking his head, but not really put out, he took the broom from the corner and set about rectifying the situation.

His thoughts strayed to dinner. He didn't feel like going out and he wasn't much in the mood to cook. And Belle had mentioned at breakfast that she'd noticed the other day that the children's section of the library was in complete disarray and she meant to stay later than usual after closing to sort it out. Thoughtfully, he pulled out his phone.

"Belle? I was wondering what you might think of takeout tonight. I can pick it up once I know you're on your way home."

He wasn't that surprised to find out that she was missing Granny's hamburgers. Sooner or later, he felt certain that she would go back there. When she was ready. For now, though, she could at least enjoy the food. Still smiling, he made his way back to the shop floor to jot down her order and ruminate on his own.

He was writing it down, his notepad on the counter that ran the length of the wall behind the display cases, his back to the front door, when the bell jangled. "I'll be right with you," he said, without turning, but he happened to glance at the mirror directly overhead and he felt his hands grow cold. Thanks to the captain, he'd learned that Ursula was in town. He supposed he'd been waiting for her to confront him. But while the woman he saw in the mirror was no stranger to him, he hadn't known that she was here as well. Were she and Ursula working together, or…?

Trying to keep his demeanor nonchalant, he finished writing down the order, thought for a moment, and added one item more. Then, as though he had all the time in the world, he turned with
"Well, well," he said, "if it isn't Cruella De Vil."

Cruella smiled scornfully. "It's been a long time, Rumple."

"That it has," he returned, regarding her.searchingly, trying to glean some hint as to her intentions. "What can I do for you?"

That was when she pulled a pearl-handled pistol out of her pocket and leveled it at him. "You can come with me."

Rumple swallowed. "You could have just asked, dearie. Seeing you here after all these years, I'm more than willing to catch up with you, even without that incentive in your hand." He raised both hands, palms out, exuding a calm he didn't feel in the slightest. "Now why don't you just put away that gun, and—"

Quicker than she could react, he flung himself to the ground, trusting that the cases would block any shot she might be planning to take at him. He might not be able to rely on his magic, but he'd learned a thing or two about sleight of hand and subterfuge. He reached into his pocket and waited.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, Cruella was leaning over the counter a sneer curling her lips. "Really, dahling," she drawled, as Rumple drew out the small satin pouch, "you don't think this is just a tad undigni—"

"Agghhh!"

Rumple didn't wait to admire the results of the flash powder he'd just chucked full into her face. Instead, he grabbed his cane and scuttled into the back room, tugging at the curtain and wishing that it was a solid door. It would barely slow Cruella down, but if he could get out the back way…

A metal rod caught him in his mid-section, stealing the breath from his lungs, and he caught a glimpse of a dark-haired woman who looked to be about Emma's age, holding a floor lamp as though it was a quarter staff. She raised her weapon again, preparing for a second blow and he flung up his hands in a defensive posture. Something cold, strong, and slimy slapped itself over his mouth, stifling his instinctive shriek. Before he realized what was happening, another tentacle had wrapped itself about his torso. "Stop struggling," Ursula snapped. "With no magic and a bum ankle, the only place you're going? Is where we choose to take you."

"Here," the other woman said, holding up large cloth bag with a drawstring. "Bend his head forward, and pass me that twine on the table."

As the tentacle around his mouth jerked his head forward, from out the corner of his eye, Rumple saw another one snake its way toward the worktable. Even in his panic, he had to acknowledge that Ursula was right. There was no escape for him at the moment. So he didn't fight when the stranger put the bag over his head and drew the string close enough to ensure that it wouldn't slip off, though loosely enough to allow him to breathe easily. There was no such consideration spared for his wrists—soon bound in front of him, tightly enough that he knew his hands would grow numb ere long.

"Cruella?" Ursula called. "You okay out there?"

"Just fine, dahlings," a voice sang from the front of the shop. "You have him?"

"In the bag," the other woman returned. "Can you bring the car around back?"

"Already done, Lily dear."
Even through the bag, Rumple heard her footsteps draw closer. And then a steely hand closed on his shoulder and he felt something blunt dig into his ribcage. "Just walk, Rumple," Cruella ordered. "And don't try anything. Because I'm more than willing to bet your life that I can pull this trigger before you can alert anyone on the street as to your predicament. Now move. Out the door, to the back alley. No funny business."

There was no help for it now. Unresisting, he allowed the women to lead him outside and bundle him into the car. He could only hope that he would be able turn this situation to his advantage at some point in the not too distant future.

Tony's mind was nearly as blank as he could make it. He sat on the edge of his bed, eyes closed, harmonica raised to his mouth. When he began to blow into it, he didn't consciously try to coax any particular sequence of notes out of the instrument. Instead, he let the music—and his power—flow through him, rippling and coursing as it would. In the small corner of his thoughts that would not be stifled, he knew that the pen he'd placed on his desk had lifted and was scribbling something on the unruled pad of paper beneath it, but he tried to avoid focusing on it.

*Stream of consciousness,* Uncle Bené's voice seemed to whisper. *Let your gift flow through you. Don't steer it; just keep your grip and allow it to show you what it will. The more you try to direct it, the more you'll miss.*

It had taken him a long time to accept that teaching. Passively sitting back and letting his power take control wasn't in his nature. And under most circumstances, even Uncle Bené acknowledged that it shouldn't be. But his "seer sight"—as Uncle Bené called it—followed different rules. As much as he disliked following them, he had to admit that the method worked.

His tune stopped, his eyes flew open, and he got up and walked to the desk. He frowned at the sketch on the page. Now why in the world would he have drawn the cellar door? Bemused, he made his way downstairs until he stood before it. Yes, the rendering was correct in every detail. Now why…?

Hesitantly, Tony turned the knob and wasn't surprised to find it locked. He took in a breath and let it out with a sigh. Manipulating locks had never been *his* strength, but it was Tia's. He tried the door again, just to be certain that it was indeed locked and not merely stuck. Then he sent a mental call upstairs to his sister.

*I think I got something. But I need your help…*

Lily hadn't been able to stay long today. She'd murmured some excuse about Ursula having her combing the beach for some sort of mollusk shells she needed for a spell. Any disappointment Zelena felt was overshadowed by the paper bag the young woman had surreptitiously shoved through the pass-through before leaving. She'd done it! And even included both ketchup and honey mustard! For a moment, Zelena felt something that might almost have been gratitude.

Then she moved into the security camera's blind spot beside her bed, shoved the onion rings under her mattress, and flipped idly through one of the mother-to-be magazines, slowly counting off the seconds. When a full twenty minutes elapsed with no orderly bursting in demanding to know the contraband she'd received, she relaxed. Clearly, nobody had been watching the surveillance when Lily had slipped in the bag. She reached under her mattress and retrieved the bag, removing the condiments before calling a small amount of heat into it. She didn't want the fragrance to waft outside her cell, but she really would rather not eat cold onion rings.
A moment later, she was dipping a ring into honey mustard and chewing contentedly. She meant to savor this treat to its fullest. After all, receiving this gift was probably going to be the most exciting thing to happen to her today…

Rumple did his best to remain calm, despite his predicament. If nothing else, he wasn't about to allow his captors the opportunity to revel in his fear. The more in control he appeared, the less certain they would be of their power over him. He knew how the game was played.

What did they want of him?

He tried to focus on the drive, rather than the tentacle about his waist, pinning his arms to his sides, holding him more securely than the seatbelt they hadn't bothered to fasten about him. While he couldn't see with the sack over his head, he tried to take note of every time the vehicle swerved left or right. Here was the rough patch that Regina had already earmarked for repair, once the threat of heavy snow was lifted for the year. That hard left—did they mean to leave town with him? Doubtful. They were slowing now, turning onto a drive—and not a paved one. And then the car rolled to a stop.

"Home sweet home," Ursula murmured. "At least, temporarily."

"Has he given you any trouble back there, dahling?" Cruella asked pleasantly.

The other woman, the one Cruella had called 'Lily' earlier laughed. "Nah, he's been behaving himself." He felt an elbow dig into his ribs, as she went on, "Haven't you?"

He wasn't even going to try to reply to that. He recalled now that the Apprentice had told them that 'Lily' had been the name of Maleficent's daughter. He imagined he could detect a certain resemblance, based on the small bit he'd been able to observe thus far. What was her angle, he wondered.

He felt the seat move as Ursula got out, still keeping her tentacle wrapped about him. Then it jerked him sideways, and he felt a firm pressure on the back of his head. "Careful, there!" Ursula's tone was cheerful, even jocular. "Don't crack your skull on the door frame!"

He seemed to be standing in an open space, going by the way the wind whistled about him. They weren't in town, then. Not that he expected it; they wouldn't have let him out if there were passersby in the vicinity. But he couldn't smell the ocean and he didn't hear any branches rustling, as the tentacle jerked him forward again. Now where…?

He heard hinges creek and a slam of wood against concrete as a door slammed open a few feet away.

A storm cellar door.

And then his heart dropped to the pit of his stomach and began to pound as his mouth went dry and his blood began to roar. He knew where he was.

Rumple forgot about going along with whatever the three women had in mind. Gone was any thought of putting on a brave face or maintaining his dignity. He didn't care that he was bound and blindfolded and that escape was virtually impossible. All he knew was that they were not putting him back down there.

Lacing his fingers together, he plowed his tied hands into Ursula's midsection and was rewarded by a grunt, as she doubled over and her tentacle released him. He couldn't see where the others were,
but he turned and tried to run—normally an impossible feat for him with his ankle, but adrenaline could allow one to accomplish physical acts of which one might not normally be capable. Maybe he couldn't see where he was going, but if he recalled correctly, this field wasn't fenced. If he could just make it to the road, then there was a chance that—

His foot struck something—an exposed root, a rock, the handle of a discarded farm implement, he never knew. But he pitched forward, landing heavily on the snowy ground, and a moment later, two pairs of hands had seized hold of him by his arms and hauled him to his feet. "Got you!" Lily snarled, close to his ear. Then, "Stop struggling!"

He was past listening, past obedience, past everything but the need to get away before they locked him back in that cage. But despite his efforts, they half carried, half dragged him across the field and through the doorway. Someone pulled the doors shut, cutting off all sounds from the outside. Then Lily said, "Well, if you want us to let you go that badly…"

With no warning, the hands released their grip, and he pitched forward, shrieking as he tumbled down the dusty wooden stairs, to land in an agonized heap on the cement floor below.

Through his pain and his sobs, he heard footsteps behind him. "Really, Lily dear," Cruella said, "you shouldn't go breaking things we might need later."

The hands were back, and he screamed as they jerked him roughly to his feet, seemingly heedless of his injuries. Then someone pulled the sack off of his head and he found himself face to face with his captors. "Hold still this time," Ursula snapped.

With Lily and Cruella keeping him upright, he didn't have much choice. He whimpered while sea witch's tentacles traveled over him from crown to heel, cold and slimy as they inspected him. Finally, Ursula sighed. "I suppose I'd better fix the worst of the damage," she muttered. "Cruella's right; we might need him yet."

Blue-green smoke surrounded him and he sighed with relief as blood clotted, bones knit back together, and pain receded from crushing to merely agonizing.

His sigh was abruptly choked off when Cruella shoved a scarf into his open mouth. And then Lily passed a second scarf under his chin, holding his jaw closed, as she tied tightly above his head. The sack came down again and they dragged him to the cage. And then someone pressed down on his shoulders, forcing him to kneel on the ground. His bound hands were yanked forward, jerked up to what felt roughly like eye level, and held there. They must have looped a cord over one of the ceiling wires and tied it off, he realized. He felt another band of some sort pass about his ankles and tighten.

"We'll be back eventually, dahling," Cruella said, giving the back of his head a light slap. "At least, you can hope so, considering nobody else knows where you are." She giggled. "Do you think they'll even bother looking? Because if they don't, and our plans fall through this evening, well, you might just starve to death before anyone stumbles across you." She giggled again. "I've asked the rats to wait a day or two before they come by for a nibble, but if I were you? I'd really hope that everything goes well for us tonight. Your life probably depends on it."

Rumple heard their receding footsteps, the swinging shut of a mesh door, and the heavy click of some sort of metal lock sliding into place. The wooden stairs creaked again as his captors trooped away. He felt a blast of cold air and the sack's fabric brightened for a moment as the cellar doors swung open again. Then they closed, somewhat less noisily than they had previously, and he heard that bolt slide into place as well, as the fabric went dark.
And now, Rumple began to shake. He tried not to. He had to get ahold of himself, had to calm down, had to keep his wits about him. This wasn't anywhere near as bad as it looked. Yes, he was a captive once more, locked in a place he'd never expected to see again. But he knew he wouldn't be here for long this time. Cruella was wrong. This time, the heroes would notice his absence. This time, they would come looking for him. And they'd find him.

Wouldn't they?

When the initial cramp hit, Zelena's first thought was that she shouldn't have asked Lily to let the onion rings cool after all. Not at room temperature anyway. Her stomach was churning—no, it felt as though it was jabbing her… Jabbing? Her eyes grew wide and her smile wider, as she cupped her hands about her abdomen. The baby! It had to be. Her baby was kicking!

Wait. No, something wasn't right. She thought back to the knowledge she'd studied when she'd had to pose as Snow White's midwife, and to the few details she'd retained skimming those blasted magazines. The child was kicking… but that wasn't supposed to happen until somewhere in her second trimester. She wasn't quite out of her first yet.

"Well, well," she murmured, as she looked down at her belly, "aren't you just the most precocious little—?" She gasped. Her baby bump, just barely protruding that morning, seemed to have doubled in size. What the hell was happening? She got up from the bed, gasping as a wave of nausea hit her and she nearly fell back down. Somehow, she staggered to her cell door.

"Nurse! Nurse!" she called frantically. "I need help!"

"Lily?" Ursula's tone was serious, with an undercurrent of anger, as they headed into the farmhouse. "What the hell was that back there?"

Lily lifted her eyebrows. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"A little more—?" Ursula caught her breath. Then her nostrils flared and her chin jutted forward. "All right. Keeping Rumple under lock and key is one thing. Dropping him down a flight of stairs is something else."

"Hey, I wasn't doing it alone," Lily shrugged.

"Well, actually, dahling," Cruella said, "I wasn't expecting you to release him right at the edge like that. When he pitched forward, I had to either let go or tumble down with him. I just made the pragmatic choice. But you, dahling? If I didn't know better, going by your behavior, I'd say you had some personal beef." Her expression turned speculative. "Is that it? Have the two of you got some sordid shared past you've been hiding from us?"

Lily shook her head. "I've never met him before. But, in a way, I guess you're right. That book of mine," she shrugged the shoulder from which her knapsack dangled by one strap, "it went a long way toward telling me who I was and what my place is in the world. Or would have been. You know that this town was created through a Dark Curse, right?"

Ursula and Cruella exchanged a quick look. "I suppose we must have. We knew that the curse was coming and we had a general idea of what it would do," Ursula nodded. "Mal told us as much. But we ended up here long before Regina cast it."

"Yeah, Regina might have cast it," Lily nodded back. "But Rumpelstiltskin created it. He wanted to travel to a land without magic and he figured that the curse was the best way. But before it hit, he
got Prince Charming to force my mother to swallow a potion. Bottle, I mean. Charming, or maybe I should say 'David', tricked my mom into switching to dragon form and then shoved the bottle down her gullet. That potion is why there's magic here now. The thing is, in order to bring that magic here, Rumpelstiltskin had to get it back. So he sent Emma to kill her and retrieve the bottle." She let out a long breath. "Emma's parents might have made sure that I'd grow up in this land without my mother," she continued. "Emma might have killed her. But none of that would have happened if Rumpelstiltskin hadn't been pulling all the strings. He's been the root cause of all my pain and suffering. Now?" Her jaw hardened. "Now I'm here to make everyone who wronged me pay. And I'm sure as hell not giving the guy in the middle of it all a free pass."

She brushed past Ursula, who took an involuntary step sideways to clear the way. "Let him stew down there for a day or so," Lily ordered. "It'll help ensure he'll be cooperative when we finally get around to using him. Now, if we're all done," she added smartly, "I'm going to go see what's on TV. I need to unwind a little."

The other two women watched as she ascended the farmhouse staircase. "She's her mother's daughter all right," Cruella murmured.

"Yeah," Ursula replied, also in an undertone. "And that's starting to scare me, just a little."

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Bound in the cellar cage, Rumpelstiltskin shivered and shook. He didn't know how long he could last like this. He'd been held captive before, but never like this. When Snow White and Prince David had imprisoned him, he'd allowed himself to be captured. He'd been where he wanted to be. And he'd had his Dark voices whispering at him, reminding him that soon, very soon, everything that he'd worked and slaved and sacrificed for would come to be. Those voices had served another purpose: they had been a buffer to protect him from the depressing reality of his circumstances and surroundings. And, if all else had failed, he could have freed himself with the squid ink at any time.

Similarly, when Zelena had held him, he'd had Bae with him for most of it. The strain of keeping two minds in one skull had been another buffer; he hadn't fully appreciated the severity of his imprisonment until it was almost at an end. And even in those last miserable days, he'd known that release was imminent. Bae had given his life so that his father could tell the heroes who the enemy was. And once they knew, Rumple had recognized that they would defeat her and her defeat would mean his freedom.

But now, he was alone in his head, alone in this cage, bereft of magic, unable to free himself.

They will find you, you know.

His shoulders felt as though they were on fire. His bones ached, both from the tumble down the cellar steps, and from the damp, cold air seeping in from outside. The straw on which he was kneeling was sharp, its ends poking at his bare skin where his trousers had ridden up above the tops of his stockings. He shifted position as best he could and felt another straw tickle. At least, he hoped it was another straw and not some manner of vermin.

A soft whimper escaped him. How long had he been down here anyway? How long did they mean to keep him confined? What did they want from him? He imagined that Cruella and Ursula were still holding a grudge over that chernabog incident, to say nothing of that debacle with the gauntlet, but he had no idea why Lily had so seemed to revel in hurting him, unless…

She had Emma's Dark potential combined with her own. In the outside world, such a burden would be difficult enough to bear, but here where magic was powerful, a dragon-scion, particularly one
unaware of her true nature would be vulnerable to Dark's influence. And that would be true even were she not carrying the burden of another's baser tendencies.

If his suspicions were correct, Rumple realized that his current predicament was even more precarious than he'd thought.

*They will find you, you know.*

He tried to cling to Tia's prediction, but he couldn't help but notice that she hadn't specified who "they" were. Had she been referring to the heroes, or to his current captors?

His arms were on fire and he couldn't feel his hands anymore, but he cringed when he felt the tickling sensation again. He couldn't take much more of this. How long had it been since his capture? Had anyone even noticed that he was gone, yet? And if they had, were they looking for him? Or did they assume he'd just gone off on his own somewhere and would be back when he was ready?

He hadn't had time to leave much of a message and the one he'd managed to leave had hardly been straightforward, but maybe…

Maybe.

The wind outside began to howl and he shivered as a draft of cold air filtered through the chinks in the storm cellar walls.

Maybe they were waiting for the weather to die down before they came looking.

Maybe they weren't coming looking at all.

A chill that had nothing to do with the wind wrapped itself about him and he began to shake.

Zelena's pulse raced as she doubled over in agony. Her maternity dress stretched tight against her abdomen. She'd been calling for help, but nobody seemed to hear her. She'd tried to use her magic to teleport to one of the upper floors—subterfuge be damned—but pain and panic shredded her focus. What the hell had Lily done to her? Well. She knew *what*, but she didn't know *why*. Another labor cramp seized her—they were coming closer together now, and she screamed.

And then her cell door flew open and the Blue fairy was there and Zelena had never thought she'd be so glad to see her.

"Just lie back, dear," the fairy said gently. "I've already called Dr. Whale. He's on his way."

"What's going on?" Zelena demanded, horrified at the quaver in her voice.

The fairy smiled gently. "It would appear that your child is coming now."

"That's not… possible."

"It would seem that it is," the fairy countered. "We can look into the whys and wherefores later. For now, the important thing is to get that child out of you safely."

"I—"

Whatever she might have said was cut off abruptly as Whale raced into the room. "I'm here," he announced tersely. He gave Blue a look, then turned back to his patient. "How far apart are your
contractions?"

Zelena fixed him with a furious look. "I haven't been timing them! They're coming every few min—Argh!"

Whale frowned. "All right. Let's have a look." He glanced over his shoulder at Blue. "Help her get undressed and into a robe. Wait." He rummaged in his bag and pulled out a syringe and a vial of medication. "Maybe this is unnecessary," he admitted, "but you're under a lot of stress right now. From what I understand, that cuff you're wearing should keep blocking your magic, but knowing something about how powerful you are, I don't want to take chances."

"What is that?" Zelena demanded, even as Blue set about unfastening the maternity gown.

"Just a sedative," Whale said reassuringly. "To help you stay calm." He shook his head. "I don't know how this happened, but first things first. Make a fist, please." He took her arm and expertly jabbed the needle in.

Zelena had more questions, but before she could voice them, she felt a pleasant warmth radiating from the site of the needle until it filled her entire body. She knew that Blue had gotten her into the gown and removed her lower garments. She heard, as though from some distance away, Whale's voice explaining that he thought it was better to deliver the child here, rather than move her now. And then, he was telling her to push and she wasn't certain that she was obeying until the tense atmosphere was broken by a thin cry.

Whale clasped her arm. "It's a girl," he smiled.

Wan and sweaty, Zelena smiled back. "I want to see her," she said.

"Later," Blue replied, wrapping the wailing infant in a blanket. "Rest now."

"No, please!" Zelena insisted. "Let me hold my daughter." She struggled to rise as she saw Blue turn and head for the door, still holding the baby. "Give her to—!" She broke off, feeling another sharp jab in her arm and turned a disbelieving face to Whale. "Why?" she demanded, her voice thickening and her eyelids already beginning to droop as she sank back to the cot. "Why would y…"

Blue regarded the sleeping witch with a smile. "You've done well, Doctor," she said. "Go home; get some rest. And in the morning, you won't remember any of this."

She carried the baby toward the elevator, paying no mind to the two staffers in scrubs, shower caps, and surgical masks who fell into step behind her. Once all three were in the elevator, though, her smile grew wider. "That was easy enough," she said. "How did you two make out?"

Lily shrugged. "Cruella distracted the security guard long enough for me to get to the camera tapes and substitute some old footage. I didn't have time to really cover our tracks," she admitted, "and without an access code, I can't remote-hack anything, but as far as any normal inspection goes, Zelena never went into labor and we were never here."

Ursula nodded, satisfied. "I'll keep the glamor spell up until we're back at the farmhouse," she said. "We'll pick up some formula on the way."

"We're not going to the vault?" Cruella protested.

"We will. But not yet." Ursula sighed. "We haven't come this far to get sloppy. It's hit me that, while Regina might have a blood magic lock on Rumple's heart, that might not be the only
protection on the vault itself. Before I trip some sort of silent alarm, I want to take time to scout out any other defenses—magical or otherwise—that she might have in play. And I'll do better with that after a good night's sleep."

"If it's non-magical," Lily remarked, "I can probably help."

"I'm counting on it." She made a face. "I can't wait to get out of this uniform. Wool is so… itchy."

"Yes, dahling," Cruella agreed. "But sadly, nuns generally don't wear furs. And neither do fairies. Pity. If you kept that glamor spell up a bit longer, you might be able to start a new trend."

Ursula shook her head. "I don't think so," she said wryly. "Let's get out of here."
Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Notes

A/N: In Disney's Robin Hood, only three of the many children in the Rabbit family are named (Sis, Skippy, and Tagalong). I've borrowed one name from Beatrix Potter for a fourth.

Chapter Thirty-One

"Well, this is lovely," Snow said, as she placed the salad on the table. "It seems like it's been so long since we could all sit down together and eat as a family."

"Mostly because our newest member seems to keep his own dining schedule," David added, sparing a glance in the direction of the crib where baby Neal lay napping.

"And Henry has after school rehearsals, and the Sheriff Station has paperwork mounting up, and…"

"Always something," Emma smiled at her parents. "Well, we're together now, and since quiet times in Storybrooke never last long, let's just—" She broke off abruptly, feeling her phone vibrate against her hip. "Hang on," she said, rising from her chair and pulling the phone out of her pocket. "It's Belle. I can call her back after supper."

"No," Snow said, smiling. "We can wait. It's not like the salad will get cold."

Emma grinned back and accepted the call. "Belle. What's up?" As she listened, her smile fell away. "Why are you asking—? Never mind. I'll be right over to take a look," she said after too long a pause. "Don't touch anything." She pocketed her phone and stepped back from the table.

"Emma?" David asked.

Emma hesitated. Then she looked at her son. "Henry, when Gold told you to leave early, did he seem… agitated? O-or was he acting, I dunno, suspicious?"


Emma's eyebrows knit together in a worried frown. "Gold's disappeared. Belle phoned him when she was leaving the library; he was supposed to pick up supper at Granny's for them. When he didn't answer, she went by the shop. She said the door was unlocked, but he wasn't there."

"He wouldn't forget about something like that," David murmured, rising as well. "You think he's in trouble?"

"Belle does," Emma replied. "She called to ask me how to recognize… 'signs of a struggle'. I wasn't sure I could explain over the phone, and if her instincts are right, I need to check it out anyway."

"I'm coming with you," Henry said, already heading for the ladder to his bedroom. "I think I'm the last person who saw him; maybe I'll notice something that wasn't there earlier."
Emma's protest died on her lips. "Good point. Grab your coat and let's go."

"I'll come with you," David said. "If it's sheriff business, I'd rather assess things firsthand than have to be filled in later."

Snow sighed. "I want to go too, but," her gaze flicked toward the crib. "The only two people ready to babysit at a minute's notice are Belle and Granny. Granny's in the middle of the supper rush, and Belle has other things on her mind right now. So," she said, forcing herself to smile, "I guess I'll have to be filled in later."

"We'll be back as quick as we can," David nodded, embracing her and giving her a peck on the cheek before he headed for the coat closet.

"You're quiet tonight, son," Robin remarked, watching as Roland spooned up his pottage mechanically. "Is everything all right?"

Roland nodded and forced a smile. "Yes, Daddy."

"Roland? Did Skippy say anything to you this afternoon?" His eyes narrowed. "He wasn't picking on you, was he?"

Roland shook his head. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I... guess I just... miss New York. And I liked Billina before she..." He shook his head again. "I'm sorry."

Robin smiled sadly. "No, son, you've nothing to be sorry about. I didn't have an inkling as to Billina's true nature either. And I do believe that you were adjusting to life in the city. To be back here again's another thing to get used to." He frowned. "Have your dreams returned?"

"No," Roland said immediately and sincerely. "The potion's working."

Robin sighed with relief. "That's something anyway. I'll be sure to stop in and tell Rumpelstiltskin when next I go into town." Roland flinched at that and Robin sighed once more, this time with a note of mild exasperation. "He did help you, you know," he said. "If nothing else, we do owe him a debt of gratitude. And our thanks."

Roland seemed to find the bottom of his pottage bowl inordinately fascinating. "Yes, Daddy," he murmured, slumping a bit on his wooden stool. "M-may I be excused please?"

Robin nodded. "Go on, then. And mind you help Friar Tuck with the dishes."

"Yes, Daddy."

"I haven't touched anything," Belle murmured, as she led Emma, David, and Henry into the back room. "I was afraid I might accidentally upset something you needed."

"Good call," Emma nodded, taking in the scattered papers and broken knickknacks on the floor by the work table. "Does anything seem to be missing?"

Belle shook her head. "I don't think so, but I don't know everything he had back here. I... I haven't spent a lot of time in the shop since we came back."

Emma had witnessed first-hand Gold's destructive temper on one occasion already. The mess on the floor didn't look anywhere near extensive enough. Still, she had to cover all bases. "How was
he when he let you go early?” she asked Henry. "I mean, did he seem angry or frustrated or anything?"

"No," Henry said, sounding more than a little surprised. "He was… good. Seriously."

"Okay." She thought for a moment. "Why don't you have a look out front? Maybe you'll notice something different from when you were here before."

Henry nodded and headed back to the shop floor.

Meanwhile, David had spotted something else. "The back door was unlatched when you got here?" He asked.

Belle's eyes widened. "I didn't notice that. H-he'd never have left without locking the front door, but I don't know that I've ever seen him unlock the back, not for anything."

"Check the alley?" Emma suggested.

David nodded. "Anyone have a flashlight?" he smiled apologetically. "We came straight from the loft. I didn't think to stop off at the sheriff station for our gear."

Belle nodded. "In the front. Rumple keeps one behind the counter. I'll get—"

"Mom! MOM!" Henry dashed back into the office, clutching a piece of notepaper. "He's in trouble! Look!"

Emma reached for the paper, looked at it and frowned. "Henry… this is just a takeout order. For Granny's, from the look of it."

Belle nodded. "He was going to order supper from there once I was ready to leave the library," she confirmed.

"No, Mom. It's not. Look at the last item!"

Emma blinked. "I don't get it. Why would you think…?"

"Because Grandpa's watched us perform that scene in the play twice. He knows it's code for 'adventure'. And in the play, the 'adventure' part comes in when Cornelius and Barnaby are in danger. Sort of. I mean, it's about as close as you can get to it."

Emma blinked again. "Pudding? Seriously?" She looked at the list again. "Just because 'pudding' is a code-word in your play doesn't mean he wasn't planning to order some from Granny's."

"It does when she doesn't serve it," Henry insisted. "Go on. Call her and ask."

"You don't have to," David spoke up. "I think he's right." His expression was grim, as he held something up so that they could all see it. "I was checking to see what I could find outside, just using the light from in here, and…"

Belle grew several shades paler. "Rumple would never have gone anywhere willingly without his cane," she said, almost whispering. "Something's happened to him."

"You mean," Emma said, just as softly, "Someone's taken him."

"This doesn't look like the way back to the farmhouse," Ursula said.
"That's because it's not, dahling." Cruella kept her eyes on the road. "I don't know if you've forgotten, but that place isn't exactly what you can call private. Even if Zelena's less intelligent than we think she is and doesn't figure out that we doctored up those onion rings, once that sedative you had the doctor give her wears off, she's going to be looking in on the house. And even if we could walk on eggshells constantly and not say anything that might tip our hand to her, we'll be hard-put to explain the presence of that tiny creature in Lily's arms. No, my woodland spies have found an empty cabin in these woods. We can stay there for a day or two."

"But what about…?" Ursula's voice trailed off.

"What about what?" Lily asked.

"Well we'll have to feed him eventually, won't we?" Ursula muttered.

"Sure, but he'll keep overnight." Lily made a scoffing sound. "Please tell me you're not going soft on us."

"Don't be ridiculous," Ursula retorted. "I'm just a bit concerned about someone dying on us before we can make use of him."

"This is getting tedious," Cruella snapped. "I don't recall your showing much concern for that pirate's well-being when you were sending a little payback his way, and if you ask me, you've got just as much reason to exact retribution on Rumple, if not more."

"I didn't ask you. And I haven't done anything to Hook that put him in any real danger either."

Cruella sniffed. "Maybe you are going soft, at that. Well. No matter, dahling. If you'd like to stay behind and nurture the infant, Lilith and I will poke about town tomorrow. We just need your glamor spell."

"Not really," Lily said speculatively. "In winter coats, hats pulled down, scarves covering our faces… We might just be able to get by without magic." Her voice turned colder. "Though the spell would make things easier. I mean, if we did get caught, I'm sure we'd be questioned. And if I got nervous, who knows what I might let slip out? About who else is with me and where to find them?"

"Are you threatening me?" Ursula demanded.

"No. Just pointing out that keeping up our alliance is probably the smartest thing any of us can do. Right?"

Ursula sighed and told herself that Lily had made several valid points. Going without supper oughtn't to hurt Rumple too much more than what they'd already done to him. He was probably fine—relatively speaking, anyway—where he was. And, at least for now, she was probably fine or—at least—better off with Lily and Cruella than without them. Or, more dangerously, opposing them. "Right," she said resignedly.

In the shop, Belle held a small, opaque vial over a shallow clay bowl and tilted it. A sprinkling of muddy green liquid dropped into the bowl. Belle sucked in her breath and gave the vial a shake. A single droplet more fell in. Belle set down the vial with shaking hands and dashed once more to the sliding-door cabinet beneath the counter. "No," she whispered. "No, please!"

"Belle?"
She looked at Emma despairingly. "There… there isn't any more hippogriff spittle. Without it, I can't make the locator spell."

"Maybe at the house?" David suggested.

Belle nodded. "I suppose so. Let me," she gave the others a wan smile, "let me see if I have everything else." She made her way back to the table and reread the spell recipe. Her face fell. "It won't work," she groaned.

"What do you mean?" Emma asked.

Belle stabbed her finger on a line of spidery script. "It won't work because I need fresh hound's tooth, and Rumple's preservation spells wore off when he died!" she exclaimed. "I don't know how to renew them. Only he does!" Her eyes opened very wide. "Unless…"

"Belle?" Emma asked.

Belle closed her eyes. There was someone else who might be able to renew the spell. Or might be able to supply the ingredient. But talking to her would be harder than talking to Granny. She could ask one of the others to place the call. They would. But they'd also think she was being silly. And they'd ask her whether Rumple's life was worth her pride. And they'd think… No. It wasn't about what they would think. It was about what she thought—no what she knew. Rumple was in danger and she had to stop acting like a silly spoiled child. She had to stop expecting everyone around her to step in and do what needed doing. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and took a breath. This wasn't going to be easy.

But heroes don't do what's easy. They do what's right.

Once, long ago, she'd prioritized a memory rock over a new friend. She'd thought she'd learned better since. But here she was now, about to prioritize her hurt feelings over her husband's safety. Enough. She'd let this go on long enough. Enough. She took another breath, opened the phone, and brought up her address book. "Regina?" she began hesitantly. "I… I was wondering if you happened to have any fresh hound's tooth? And, perhaps, some hippogriff spittle…?"

Regina heard Belle out in silence and it was another long moment before she replied. "Well," she said finally, "I do have those items. And, while I'm happy to donate them, you ought to know, that potion takes about six hours to brew."

"I-I know," Belle said, not hiding her relief. "But what choice have we got? It's our best chance to find him."

"Most accurate, I quite agree," Regina countered. "But it may not necessarily be the fastest. And if Rumple's in danger, then time might be of the essence."

"What are you suggesting?"

She could hear the smile in Regina's voice. "Just that an experienced tracker may be able to find him quicker. And while he's working on that, you can work on that potion." She hesitated. "Or I could. Granted, it's been a long time since I tried, and it probably won't be a powerful as one that Rumple might have brewed, but it should get the job done."

Belle felt a surge of her old resentment. She'd specifically asked Regina for the ingredients because she wanted to do something to save Rumple herself, not foist the job off on others. She didn't need anyone lifting that burden off of her shoulders! She…
Wanted Rumple home safe, and Regina's suggestions made sense. What was more important: for Rumple to be all right, or for her to be the one to save him? She took a breath and told herself that by involving Regina, she probably was the one saving him. "We'll work on it together," she said firmly.

"All right," Regina agreed, sounding pleasantly surprised. The queen's voice turned serious. "Belle, I know it couldn't have been easy for you to call me after everything that's happened between us. I appreciate that you did."

Belle pressed her lips together for a moment. "That's… not important now," she said, trying to keep her emotions in check. "Rumple needs help. Our help."

She was certain that Regina could hear the hint of a sob in her voice, but all the queen said was, "I'll head for my vault as soon as I call Robin. Meet me there. Oh, and if you're heading in that direction now, I'd leave the shop keys with Emma or David. Robin might want to look around and see if he can find some hint of where to start searching and I shouldn't think you'd want to leave the shop unlocked overnight."

"No, I wouldn't," Belle agreed. "I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"I'll expect you."

Roland wasn't yet able to fletch his own arrows, but he had learned how to properly trim the feathers that would grace their shafts. His expression was serious as he trimmed a quarter inch from the vane of a goose feather, then reached for another.

He heard the tent flap unzip and looked up as a gust of cold air blew in, his father just behind it. "Time for your medicine, son. And then bed."

Roland nodded and began to gather up his supplies. Robin picked up one feather and examined it approvingly. "You're becoming quite the expert, son," he said, smiling. He strode to a wooden cabinet, opened it, and began lifting out various pieces of equipment. Roland's eyes widened when he saw his father set down a flashlight, a compass, and a first aid kit. It wasn't until a flare gun joined the pile that he drew in his breath. "You're going out? Now?"

Robin turned to him with a smile. "Little John will check in on you. I'll be back by morning, I should think."

"But where are you going?"

Robin hesitated. "It would seem that Rumpelstiltskin has gone missing."

Roland felt his hands start to shake and he quickly sat upon them. His father smiled sadly. "I doubt he's up to any ill scheme," he reassured him. "In truth, to hear Emma and Belle tell it, he's likely in need of assistance. I'm off to town to see whether I can find his trail."

Roland closed his eyes and took several long slow breaths.

"Roland?" Robin crouched down to his son's level and rested a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Roland, it's all right. You're in no danger. Not from Rumpelstiltskin, nor anyone else. You're safe here."

Roland's only response was to screw his eyes more tightly shut, while his breathing grew faster.
"Roland?"

A tear leaked past his closed eyes and he opened them to see his father gazing at him with love and concern. "Daddy, y-you don't have to go to town," he whispered.

"Of course I do," Robin answered, with no small surprise. "If there's a man in need of help, it's my duty to provide it. I thought you understood that."

Roland closed his eyes once more. "I-I do," he whispered. "That's why you don't have to go to town." He took another breath. "I know where he is."

He'd been over at the Lapines, playing with Benjie and Aggie and trying to remember his manners and be polite when Skippy kept pestering them. He didn't know why the older boy kept hanging around and trying to boss his little brother and sister around while acting super nice to him. Although he had a feeling it had something to do with his being Robin Hood's son. Daddy had told him that, back in their old home, Skippy had been trying to join the Merry Men since he'd been younger than Roland was now. Skippy had once told Daddy that he slept with the bow that Daddy had given him for his seventh birthday. (Roland knew how silly that was. What if it poked Skippy in the eye when he rolled over? What if he broke it? But Skippy insisted on keeping it with him, because it was a gift from Daddy.)

Skippy made Roland uncomfortable. He didn't know exactly how to put it into words, but he had the distinct impression that Benjie and Aggie were his friends because they enjoyed playing together, but Skippy was his friend because being his friend was one more way for the older boy to get closer to Daddy.

Still, even if Roland didn't like the way Skippy always hung around him, he had to admit that some games—like tag—were more fun when there were more players.

Skippy had been 'it' and Roland had been laughing as he scrambled away. He sensed that Skippy didn't actually want to tag him, for all he was chasing after him. Wouldn't do to beat Robin Hood's son, after all. And because Roland was having fun, and because part of him thought that if Skippy was rigging the game in his favor, he might as well enjoy it, he turned and ran—not across the Lapines' back yard, but up the packed snow drifts against the fence, nearly as high as the topmost horizontal logs. He didn't have the best balance, but the logs were wide and he'd crossed many a stream this way in their old home.

"You can't keep this up forever!" Skippy had called behind him, trampling through the drifts himself, though not attempting the fence.

"Just gotta be faster than YOU!" Roland yelled over his shoulder. The Lapines had a speckled alder growing in one corner of the yard, one of its branches overhanging the fence, and while it wasn't a very tall tree, it was tall enough and Roland was a good climber—this, despite Daddy having forbidden him to scale any tree taller than he was unless Daddy or one of the Merry Men was watching. Roland didn't care about that now. Laughing, the young boy ran toward it and, on reaching it, swung himself up into the bare branches, scrambling higher.

He could hear Skippy laughing and cajoling below, but he'd all but forgotten the game. He'd never been up this high in open country. He reached into his coat pocket for the collapsible spyglass that Will Scarlet had given him some days after he and Daddy had returned from New York and peered through the eyepiece. And so, he had a clear view of the farm up the road, where three women he'd never seen before were wrestling a bound man with a sack over his head toward an open storm cellar.
Roland's eyes widened. The man was wearing a dark suit and fighting hard, despite tied hands and a bad limp. But it was the sprinkling of snow on the man's shoulder that made his heart pound and his mouth go dry.

That day in the forest, when Rumpelstiltskin had threatened him, trapped him in a rut and turned Daddy's own arrow toward him... Rumpelstiltskin had worn a similar suit then, and there had been a white stain in nearly the same spot. That suit had been torn and filthy, but the man wearing it had been about the height of the struggling captive.

He shrank back, lost his footing, and tumbled from his perch into one of the banked snowdrifts.

"Roland!" Skippy was bending over him. "Roland, are you okay? Roland!"

Slightly dazed, Roland struggled to sit up—not easy, since the snow had sunk beneath him when he'd landed—a near perfect imprint. For once, he was grateful when Skippy helped him.

"You okay?" Skippy asked again, once they'd both slid down from the drift.

Roland nodded. "I... I have to go home," he said quickly.

"Roland?"

But he was already running, pretending he didn't hear Skippy shouting after him, relieved that the older boy was only shouting, and not giving chase. He had to get home. He had to talk to Daddy.

And then Daddy would be angry that Roland had climbed a tree without a grownup watching.

Maybe he could leave that part out.

No, then Daddy would be angry that he'd gotten so close to that farmhouse when he knew he was only supposed to be at the Lapines or on his way back to the forest. The farmhouse was in the opposite direction.

Roland hated it when his father was mad. Daddy was never mean. He didn't yell or throw things or cuff him. But he'd get that look in his eyes, the look that seemed to say, louder than any words could, "I thought better of you than this. I'm ashamed that my son could behave in this manner. You've let me down."

He knew he had to tell what he'd seen, but he didn't know how to get the words out and not get that look. So he thought about it. He thought about it while he picked at dinner. He thought about it while he stared with glazed eyes at the coloring and activity pages his kindergarten teacher had sent home for him to do over the weekend. He thought about it while he trimmed goose feather for fletching.

But it wasn't until Daddy came into the tent to give him his potion and bid him goodnight and goodbye that he finally screwed up his mettle enough to say what he'd been meaning to all afternoon. "You don't have to go to town... I know where he is."

"Got it, Regina, thanks," Emma said tersely. "I'll get a few things together and meet you and Belle there."

She ended the call and met her father's inquiring gaze with a sigh that was half relief, half worry. "We caught a break," she said. "According to Robin, Roland saw three women dragging him into Zelena's storm cellar." She cupped her hand over her eyes. "He was tied up with a bag over his
"A bag?" David repeated. "How can he know it was Rumpelstiltskin?"

"Have we had any other missing person reports in the last few hours?" Emma demanded. "Or, like, since the fairies got sucked into the hat?"

"Good point." Her father looked around the shop. "I heard you say we needed to gather some things?"

"Uh… yeah," Emma nodded. "His coat's still here; he's going to need that, along with his cane. See if you can find a first aid kit—"

"I think there's one in the patrol car."

"But you're not sure?" Emma asked. "Better grab a spare if we can find it. Blankets. And if you see any food around here while we're looking for that stuff, grab it; who knows if he's eaten anything?"

David nodded. "Uh… slight problem. The back door isn't going to lock. It looks like those three women broke it when they forced their way in. Did Rolan recognize them, by the way?"

"I didn't think to ask Regina if Robin mentioned anything." Her eyebrows drew together in a frown. Just who had taken Gold? Zelena was one of the obvious suspects, but she was under lock and key. As for the door... "Give me a hand," she said, bracing herself against a heavy shelving unit. We can use this for a barricade. Any ideas who might have had enough of a grudge against Gold to pull off something like this?"

David was shaking his head as he moved to assist her. "Try half the town," he murmured. "I guess… I mean, we know he's trying to change, but if word's gotten around that he doesn't have his magic anymore… There could be," he puffed, "a lot of people with old scores to settle." He thought for a moment. "Let's find him first. With any luck, he can tell us. If not," he took a breath, "when you and your mother fell into the Enchanted Forest, Rumpelstiltskin asked my help when Belle went missing. When I gave it and started making inquiries, I got an earful about things he'd done in the past. We can check the files at the sheriff station for my notes if we have to."

Emma nodded, gasping a bit as she and her father shifted the unit the last few inches. That done, she ducked into the bathroom and emerged seconds later, holding a metal first aid kit aloft triumphantly. "Got it. How are you making out?"

"Uh…" David opened a hinged wooden chest. His eyebrows shot up as he reached in and held up a reddish-brown velvet cloak trimmed in brown fur. "I gave this to him a long time ago," he said wonderingly. "At the time, he said he needed it because his castle was drafty."

"The storm cellar doesn't seem like it's going to be very warm," Emma replied. "And that's as good as a blanket. Let's take it."

Regina's Mercedes was already parked in the field when the patrol car pulled up. As David parked, the Mercedes' doors opened and Belle and Regina emerged. "You made good time," the mayor remarked. The four approached the storm cellar and Regina raised her hand aloft. "I gave this to him a long time ago," she said wonderingly. "At the time, he said he needed it because his castle was drafty."

"The storm cellar doesn't seem like it's going to be very warm," Emma replied. "And that's as good as a blanket. Let's take it."

Belle took a breath. "I think it'll probably be better if just Emma and I go down," she murmured.
"The two of you should stay up here in case anyone else shows up."

"Farmhouse is dark," David observed. "But if Rumpelstiltskin is down there, whoever put him there could come back. We'll wait."

Fear, pain, and falling temperatures had sent Rumple drifting into an uneasy doze, but the sound of the cellar doors flying open shocked him to alertness. The footsteps on the wooden stairs were light; two people. One wearing heels, the other flats. He tried to tamp down the wild hope that rose in his heart. Zelena had played tricks like this, too—pretending to be Belle come to rescue him, and then just when he'd leapt forward to embrace his true love, dropped the glamor spell with a malicious giggle.

In any event, Cruella had been wearing heels earlier.

Crisscrossing beams of bright light stabbed his eyes, even through the burlap of the sack over his head and he whimpered and flinched away as best he could. He thought he heard the soft click of the pull-chain of the ceiling lamp, followed almost at once by a gasp.

"Rumple!"

Belle! Or... was it another glamor-spell trick?

"Hang on!" another voice spoke with grim authority. Then he heard something like a muted thunderclap behind him and the cage rocked. Something small, heavy and metallic hit the concrete floor with a dull thud. "Okay," the second voice—he wanted to believe that it really was Emma, but he knew he wouldn't quite be able to until he could see her—said more gently, though still with an undercurrent of anger. "Okay, sorry about that. We'll have you out in another minute."

Footsteps circled the cage, stopping directly before him. Then that second voice swore softly. "Belle, I think he must've been like this for hours. Once I cut his hands loose, you'd better be ready to catch him."

There was no verbal reply, but he knew at once when he was joined by another in the small space. There were hands at his neck, fussing with the string of the sack.

"We can deal with that in a minute," the second voice spoke again. "Gold, assuming you can hear me, I know your hands are probably numb right now. I gotta tell you, as soon as that cord comes off, they're gonna hurt, so brace yourself."

He tried to nod, but he couldn't be sure whether anyone noticed.

"Easy," the voice went on. "Easy, you're safe. Okay." His hands were suddenly loose and, as predicted, he slumped and would have fallen, had gentle arms not caught him. A sob of relief tried to push its way past his gag. And then, sensation came flooding back as needlepoints of fire seemed to stab at his hands.

"Belle, rub his wrists!" There was an awkward moment where the person holding him—he still didn't entirely trust that it was Belle—struggled to comply while still supporting his torso.

He felt the cord about his ankles loosen and firm hands massaging those joints as well. "Okay. Easy. You're safe now. It's all right. Here."

The bag was off his head, and he was staring at once into Belle's loving blue eyes. And for one glorious moment, everything was all right. And then, even as she held onto him, he saw the joy on
her face melt away to be replaced by a cold fury he'd seldom seen before—not in her eyes.

But before he could start to fathom the cause, she was already pulling the scarf from his mouth, heedless of the saliva trail that followed it and he could feel other hands—Emma's, he surmised—working the knot at the back of his head. And then Belle was hugging him again, nearly crushing him to her and he pressed his head into her shoulder and sobbed.

"Y-you found me," he whispered hoarsely.

Emma's hand pressed down on his shoulder. "Did you think we wouldn't?" she asked.

He'd hoped they would. He'd tried to believe they would. He'd wanted to, with every fiber of his being. But… "I must admit that the cage and the cellar gave me pause."

Emma's other hand was on his opposite shoulder. "We brought your cane with us," she murmured. "You about ready to go or do you need a little longer?"

For answer, he scuttled backwards as best he could, still holding onto Belle, grateful when each woman gently took one of his arms and helped him out of the cage. His ankles buckled as they helped him to his feet and Emma quickly bent to the floor to retrieve the cane. "Can you manage?" she asked worriedly. "I can have Dad call for an ambulance if we need a stretcher."

He shook his head. "I don't think that'll be necessary," he said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice, even as his eyes rested on the cage with distaste. He'd sworn once that it would never hold him again. He would not be forsworn a second time. Almost without realizing what he was doing, he dropped to one knee and retrieved several pieces of straw that had probably been stuck to his clothing.

"Rumple?"

He didn't answer at once. Instead, he held a long straw horizontally against the top of his cane. "Too stiff," he muttered. "I-I need a leader."

"A… leader?" Emma repeated blankly.

"A piece of thread or string or…"

Belle had already gently slid out from under his arm. She went back into the cage, stooped down, and picked up something from the floor. "Will this do?" she asked, returning to where he stood.

He took the twine from her with an approving smile. "It will indeed," he replied. He noted that a good part of the cord was bloody from where it had dug into his wrists. "In fact," he added, "I can't think of anything better."

He fastened one end of the twine around his cane and gave it a slow twirl.

"Gold?"

He didn't answer. His focus was on the spin, as he continued to wind the twine with one hand, letting the free end rest between the index and middle fingers of his other, while holding the straws tightly between the other two fingers. He wasn't overly surprised when the twine started to glow golden—blood had a way of strengthening most spells, even those spells that did not fall under the 'blood magic' designation. When he had less than two inches of twine dangling free, he quickly plucked one straw loose and held it, overlapping, against the end of the twine. The straw twisted into the spin, following the leader and winding about the cane. He repeated it with a second straw,
as the winding cord glowed brighter. As he added the third, he said with deceptive mildness, "I do believe it would be best for the two of you to back toward the stairs. Don't bother assisting me. I'll manage." He couldn't risk their efforts shattering his focus or his spin, not when the forces he was controlling had reached this pitch. It was only three feet or so to the cellar steps, but it seemed to take an eternity before the backs of his legs bumped against the bottommost stair.

"Savior," he said calmly, "you might want to throw up a protection spell the instant this cane leaves my hand."

"Uh, sure," Emma returned and he knew she'd noticed what he'd just called her.

He took another breath. Then he flung the cane back toward the cage as though it were a javelin. "NOW!"

In the shadowy cellar light, he saw the faint shimmer of the protection spell in the instant before his cane crashed into the mesh side of the cage. The cage exploded, sending a hurricane of metal shards and wood splinters flying about the cellar. Behind him, Rumple heard the others shriek and he wasn't entirely certain he hadn't joined them. Then the debris settled and he exhaled and sank to the dusty wooden step.

"Are you okay down there?" David and Regina's faces peered down at them from the storm cellar entrance. "We heard——"

"We're fine, Dad," Emma called up. She looked at the others. "I think. Are we?"

Belle nodded, as Rumple replied slowly. "Yes. I… do believe we are. Now. But I think I will need some assistance managing these stairs, as I," he smiled wryly, "appear to have misplaced my cane."

Wordlessly, Belle wrapped her arm about his waist, the ferocity of her embrace belying the warmth of her smile.
Chapter Thirty-Two

The wind was starting up again as they emerged from the storm cellar and Rumple sighed with relief when the prince draped something heavy and warm about his shoulders. Then he took a good look at the cloak and gave David a sharp glance.

The prince shrugged. "We found it in the shop. Thought it might be useful."

"How did you get those bruises?" Regina demanded abruptly.

Rumple shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

Emma and Belle exchanged a look. "The… lighting wasn't great down there. I was hoping it might've just been shadows o-or dust—" Whatever else Emma might have said was choked off with a dismayed gasp when an incandescent ball of light appeared in the mayor's hand, illuminating the field—and Rumple's face—as though it were daytime. Neither Regina nor David were quite able to conceal their shock, now that the full extent of the damage was made plain.

"Rumple?" Belle whispered, horror writ large in her eyes.

Rumple closed his. "My… entry into the cellar was attained with less dignity than I would have preferred."

"Explain," David demanded.

Rumple took a breath. "No. As grateful as I am for your assistance," he opened his eyes again and rested his gaze on each of the four in turn, "and I am grateful," he added in a softer voice, "this isn't your concern."

"Gold," Emma said, "if the people who nabbed you did this to you, then… then I have to get photos. The prosecution will need them to build their case."

Rumple laughed harshly. "Due process?" He demanded. "Here? That hasn't been the norm since your mother was accused of murder."

"Maybe it should be," Regina cut in.

"No," Rumple said, shaking his head. "I'll deal with this myself."

"Then," Emma said, not missing a beat, "I still have to get photos. The defense will need them to build their case."
Rumple flinched. "I beg your pardon?" he snapped.

Suddenly, there seemed to be too many people in too small a space. Emma shot her father a quick pleading look and made the slightest gesture to indicate that he step away. She smiled her relief when he did, motioning Regina to follow him. Then she wiped her hands on the bottom of her jacket and took a breath. "I know I'm stating the obvious," she said finally, "but sometimes I guess you have to. You didn't deserve what just happened and the people responsible are going to pay. But it's going to happen in a court. We—all of us, including you—can hash out the details. Whether it's a jury trial, o-or a council, or I-I don't even know how it might've worked back in the Enchanted Forest, but we'll figure something out. But if you do this on your own," she closed her eyes and fought to keep her voice steady, "I'm still the sheriff. I'm going to have to bring you in. Not because I think you're wrong, but because right or wrong, you still can't take the law into your own hands."

"You can't be serious."

"I wish I wasn't," Emma said, meeting his eyes once more. "But I am. Both about bringing you in, and about giving those photos to your attorney." She locked her eyes on his. "I know the shape you were in when we found you. I get why you want to hit back, and I can't blame you for it. If I weren't law enforcement here, I might even cheer you on." She took a breath. "You used Light magic to blast the cage. Belle and I both saw it. You've come a long way from the guy who tried to trick me into the hat and crush Killian's heart. I-I'd hate to see you throw all of that away now. But that's not my call; it's yours," she added seriously. "If you want to handle this your way, when the time comes to face the music, I'll testify on your behalf if you need me to. I'm no lawyer, but if they want me, I'll happily help your defense team look up every law and precedent that might help. Because seriously? If I were in your place, I'd probably want to do exactly what you want, but if I actually did it… You always say that magic comes with a price. Even if you're using it for the best of reasons?" She added, her voice rising on an interrogative note. When Rumple nodded, she sighed. "It's not only magic." She put a hesitant hand on his shoulder, and while he shook his head irritably, she noticed that he didn't try to evade her grasp. "You're the only person who can decide if it's worth it." She smiled sadly. "That doesn't mean you have to make that decision tonight. Or alone. Again, it's your call."

Rumple's eyes seemed to bore into hers, searching, probing for something. A sign of weakness? Some sort of confirmation? Emma didn't know. Then, abruptly, he twisted free, both of her grasp and of Belle's and staggered toward the rail fence he hadn't remembered was there when he'd tried to run earlier.

"Rumple?" Belle started to follow. Emma held her back.

"Wait. Let him… try to work this out himself."

Belle seemed about to protest, but she waited until Rumple reached the fence and watched him stand, his face tilted toward the moonlit sky, both hands resting on one squared-off wooden post. She observed him silently for several minutes before she muttered at a volume Emma suspected she was meant to overhear, "Because that's always gone so well in the past."

"He's not the Dark One anymore, Belle," Emma reminded her.

Belle sighed. "I know," she said a bit more audibly. "I…" She took a breath. "You knew he'd want to make whoever did this pay, didn't you?"

"It crossed my mind," Emma admitted. "I was… sort of hashing out what to say in my head on the drive over, but I didn't know how it was going to sound once it came out. And I didn't know about the bruises," she added. "I had to improvise that part."
Belle nodded. "I was worried, too. Because until now, every time he's wanted to do something… well… wrong… I've left him. Or threatened to. And as much as I'm trying to change, I didn't know if I could just let him have his revenge. I mean, Good doesn't exact vengeance, but I don't want whoever did this to get away with it either, and I didn't see how to stand by him without condoning…"

Emma hesitated. "I… guess it just comes down to supporting him, even when you can't support all his choices. Hopefully. I mean, if this backfires, I'll be kicking myself. But from everything he's told us before, support from anyone around him isn't something he's ever felt able to count on in the past. Maybe now, he—"

Belle nudged her and jerked her head toward the fence. Rumple was coming back. He was leaning on a wooden stake, the sort one might use in a vegetable garden to train beans or tomatoes—Emma realized now that she could see several like it leaning against the fence where he'd been standing. His bruises were stark in the moonlight. There was no way to read his expression. When he reached them, he looked from Belle to Emma.

"These photographs," he said slowly, "you mean to use them to build a case?"

Emma nodded. "Maybe not me personally, but whoever's involved in the trial will." She delicately avoided mentioning who might be on trial. She doubted he'd already forgotten their earlier conversation.

Rumple gave her the slightest answering nod in return. "They won't be shown to anyone not directly involved with said case?"

"Not unless you authorize it in writing."

He took another breath. "What about the Mirror? I mean, well, this is news, is it not? How much do you intend to divulge?"

Emma made a show of looking from left to right. "I don't see any reporters hanging around, do you? As far as I'm concerned, at this point, nothing anybody else needs to know happened tonight." Under her breath, she added, "Being too open about stuff might even hurt the investigation."

Rumple nodded, a faint, relieved smile ghosting across his face. "Very well," he allowed. "If this must be done, then I suppose we'd best repair to the sheriff station. You'll have better lighting there. And, no doubt, numerous questions to ask of me." He held up a warning hand, as Emma and Belle started to smile. "Don't hope too far," he cautioned. "I don't promise to stay this course you're charting me through to the finish. But for now… I'll try this your way. And trust that justice prevails."

As they made their way back to the others, Belle wrapped an arm about his shoulders and shot Emma a quick, wondering smile.

Had the prince not been in the patrol car beside his daughter, Rumple might have broken down again in the back seat, as he had in the cage. So much had happened in the last hour, so much of it unexpected.

He wondered whether Belle knew she was still holding his hand. He prayed she had no plans to release it anytime soon.

As much as he'd hoped for rescue, to say he'd expected it was something of a stretch. In fact, even when Belle and Emma had found him in the cellar, he still hadn't been certain that they were there
to free him, and not—as so many had in the past—merely to ask his help and abandon him to his captivity once more. He hadn't wanted to think that such might be the case, but precedent was a powerful thing and difficult to discount altogether.

He'd never been good at talking about his troubles. Not even to Emma. Not even to Bae. Not even to Belle. He'd learned early that people only tended to concern themselves with his needs and wants in order to obtain what they needed and wanted from him. Once he'd accepted that reality, it had made it so much easier to strike his deals and bargains. If nobody cared about him except insofar as they could make use of him, he certainly didn't need to care about anybody else, except insofar as he might make use of them.

After the battle with Zelena, after he'd been denied his opportunity for vengeance, his pent-up anger, frustration, and exhaustion had actually managed to extract an emotional… well, if not quite a plea, it had at least been an appeal. "She killed my son!" Even if he hadn't articulated it, even if he hadn't truly realized it until now, he'd really been asking for some level of empathy or understanding. Some acknowledgment of what the witch had cost him. Some assurance that her deeds would not go unpunished. Even now, he couldn't quite repress a scowl at the response Regina had given him instead.

_How many lives have we taken trying to get what we want?_

Yes, he'd flung that same line at her over a year ago at her mother's funeral, but he'd at least had the decency to express his condolences first. To have the sentiment cast back at him then had only hammered home the truth that, so far as the Heroes were concerned, his pain was inconsequential, his sorrows meaningless, and his grievances beneath redress. If he didn't safeguard his own interests, nobody would.

Apologies had come later, both from Emma and Regina. And later still, from a number of others. But while he'd accepted them when offered, he'd known that unless a similar situation presented itself again, unless when it did, those who'd wronged him in the past would behave differently now than they had on earlier occasions, those apologies were little more than lip service.

Tonight had been different. Tonight, they'd come for him. Tonight, they'd rescued him without pressing him for favors or information. Tonight, they'd cared. And tonight, he truly believed that they—or, at the very least, Emma—would still be in his corner, even if he did decide to take matters into his own hands.

He'd thought he'd have to. Since his return from New York, he'd been trying to do better, trying to make amends for his past, trying to take the second chance that had been offered, but at the back of his mind, he knew that he was bound to fail sooner or later, and then he'd be back to being the town pariah once more. And this time, it would be far worse, because he'd truly appreciate the friendship and camaraderie now lost. Oh, things had been going well until this point, but nothing good ever lasted. And if the Heroes meant to waggle their fingers disapprovingly at those who had abducted him, then welcome them into the neighborhood and offer them an automatic second chance, because 'Good didn't exact vengeance', well, _trying_ to be good wasn't quite the same as actually achieving it. And if Good could disregard his grievances, then he was done with it. True, his magic was currently unreliable and unpredictable, but he was slowly getting a handle on it. There was no doubt in his mind that he would remaster it soon enough.

But Emma had made it clear that she was still on his side. That she would continue be on his side, even if his attempts to be a better person fell short of the mark. That even if she couldn't condone the actions he was prepared to undertake, she understood them and she wasn't horrified that he was hardly prepared to let bygones be bygones.
And Belle… Belle had been listening to all of it. And now, even after what she'd heard, she wasn't trying to force him to set aside his desire for justice. She wasn't threatening to leave him if he couldn't forgive what had been done to him. She was still holding his hand, still beside him, even though she knew better than anyone the depths to which he could sink. She wasn't giving up on him.

A glance out the window told him that they were almost at the sheriff station and, despite himself, Rumple felt his heart quicken. This wasn't going to be easy.

There was a firm, almost painful pressure on his hand and he turned to Belle, startled. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

He nodded. Tonight he was. He'd worry about tomorrow when it came.

Snow hung up the phone with a sigh of relief and turned to Henry. "They got him out," she said.

"He's okay?" Henry asked eagerly.

Snow hesitated. She'd asked David that same question and, even though his answer had been in the affirmative, his tone had indicated otherwise. "He's at the sheriff station now," Snow said, "giving a statement."

"But he's okay," Henry repeated, making it more a statement than a question this time.

Snow bit her lip. "Your grandfather thinks he will be."

Henry slumped down at the table. "I shouldn't have let Mom drop me back here. I should've gone with them."

"And if whoever took Rumpelstiltskin had been there?"

"I can take care of myself!"

"Your mother didn't want to take that chance and I don't blame her." She let out a sigh. "And I wish I could have gone too," she admitted.

"It's the waiting," Henry muttered. "The waiting and… and everyone still acting like they have to protect me from hearing bad news. I wish you'd all just tell me stuff already. If I know, I can deal. It's when I don't know that I start imagining all kinds of things that could be wrong."

Snow nodded. "I used to be that way too," she admitted. And when Henry shot her a disbelieving look, she sat down at the table beside him with a sigh. "Why do you think I fight so hard to not give up hope? If I believe that things will work out for the best, then I'm better able to notice when they start to." She closed her eyes. "I'm worried, too."

"If it was really bad," Henry said after a moment, "Grandpa would've said, right?"

"I hope so." She took another breath. "It's late. You should start getting ready for bed."

Henry got up reluctantly.

"I'll wake you if I hear anything else."

"Good or bad?"
Snow nodded. "Good or bad. But let's focus on good."

Henry smiled. "Thanks, Grandma."

Rumple wondered whether David realized that he'd positioned himself so that, as they made their way into the sheriff station, his body blocked Rumple's view of the holding cells. Deliberate gesture or not, he was just as glad not to have to face any more cages right now.

Emma cleared her throat. "I... guess we'd better get the pictures out of the way, first. Then I can take care of those bruises. And then, if you're up for it, I'd like to get a statement from you about what happened. If you're not, that last bit can wait a day or so, but it's better to take care of it while the details are still fresh."

"Believe me, dearie," Rumple snorted, "I'm not about to forget what was done to me today."

"I know. But we should just... deal with all of this quickly so we can get it over with, right?" She pulled open a wooden door and flicked the light switch just inside the room beyond, revealing an interview room. "Okay, close the shade," she gestured to the Venetian blind covering the glass window that faced out on the corridor, "and, I guess, knock when you're ready. Uh..." she hesitated. "Would you be more comfortable if it was my dad taking the photos?"

Rumple shook his head slightly. "No. But thank you for asking," he added with a smile he rather suspected was more nervous than he'd have liked. While he no longer had the need to go about in dragon-hide armor, his expensive suits denoted wealth, comfort, and status that were a defense all their own. Today's ordeal had made it clear to him just how unsafe he was without his magic. And now, he was about to shed the last layer of protection he had. He had no wish to appear defenseless and exposed, but if he had to, then he'd prefer to do so before someone who had already seen him at his lowest ebb and stood by him, supporting—not pitying—him. No, he didn't want to go through this ordeal, but if it needed to be done, then better Emma be the one to do it.

"Okay," she said. "I'll wait for your knock." She hesitated again and Rumple was surprised to see a faint flush rising to her cheeks. "Um... just to be clear... Sorry, I can't think of a-a a more... um... tactful way to say it. You..."

It wasn't just her cheeks, now. The tips of her ears were practically glowing pink. "Sheriff?"

"You can keep your undershorts on," she mumbled, staring very hard at the space on the floor between her shoes.

"Ah. Well," he said dryly, "I'm delighted to hear that. Expect my knock momentarily." He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

On the whole, he reflected, he rather thought he'd done a better job of hiding his relief than the sheriff had her embarrassment. He twisted the rod on the window blind to close the slats.

Half an hour later, Emma emerged from the interview room, her face set in a grim mask. Belle rose from her seat at once, while David looked at his daughter expectantly.

"Well?" Belle asked.

Emma took a breath. "He's getting dressed. Then, we'll take a statement. Is Granny's still open? I don't think he's had anything to eat since lunch apart from that energy bar I had in the glove compartment."
"I…" Belle took a breath. "I can go."

"You sure?" Emma asked. "I mean…"

"I know what you mean," Belle sighed. "It's okay. I… haven't eaten either. He was going to get takeout," she reminded them. "How… how is… How bad was it?"

Emma exhaled noisily. "I'm not showing you the pictures," she said. "And I cast a healing spell on him before I came back out here, so the physical damage is gone now. But it was bad."

"What did they do to him?"

"I don't have the details, yet," Emma admitted. "I didn't think asking him when he was in—when he was feeling… vulnerable… was a good idea."

"Of course," Belle replied, a bit chagrined that she hadn't thought of that.

"And we still don't know who," David said.

"We don't. Hopefully he does. We'll find out soon."

"Emma," David frowned, "about those bruises."

"Look," Emma said tightly, "I didn't ask him how he got them. All I know is that he didn't have them this morning when we had coffee." She cast an apologetic look toward Belle, knowing that the librarian still wasn't happy about their morning meetings. Belle only nodded.

David wasn't finished yet. "Okay," he said, "but did you happen to notice that they looked… old? I'd think that if he'd just gotten them a few hours ago, they wouldn't have faded yet. And those scabbed-over cuts didn't look fresh either."

"I saw," Emma said. "I don't want to jump to conclusions."

"But…?" Belle prompted.

Emma hesitated. "But I don't think I should discuss it now. Maybe there's a better explanation for what I'm thinking."

"What are you thinking?" Belle asked.

Emma shook her head. "I'm thinking that if I'm wrong, I'm going upset you needlessly, because what I'm thinking is… bad. I'm also going to upset him, because I told him I'd keep things confidential."

"I'm his wife!" Belle protested.

"Yeah," Emma nodded. "And I don't want to start getting you worked up with theories and speculations that might be dead wrong. Let's find out what really happened, okay?"

She really, really hoped she was wrong. But she was thinking back to a conversation she'd had with August in New York, back when she'd been trying to puzzle out what Merlin had been thinking in creating that damned hat. That conversation had led them off on a tangent about the overlap between Light and Dark magic…

"I mean," she'd been saying, "I admit I don't know much about how magic works and maybe I'm a little unclear sometimes on the whole dark-versus-light business if it's not something obvious, like
crushing someone's heart. I mean," she said again, "Gold can heal. Which, to me, sounds like it should be light magic. Regina didn't lose her fire spells when she switched sides, which makes sense because fire isn't necessarily good or bad; it's what you do with it."

"Just about everything can be like that," August had replied with a nod. "Maybe not healing..." He stopped. "Actually, if you're torturing someone and then you heal them, just so you can keep them alive to hurt them more, then yeah. Even healing."

She didn't want to jump to conclusions now. But she had a strong suspicion that someone had hurt him badly and then patched him up just enough to keep him out of danger, but left him injured sufficiently to ensure that he wouldn't be able to attempt escaping his predicament. Then again, it might have been that whoever it was who'd fixed him up simply hadn't been a very good healer and had just done the best they could. But that theory wouldn't explain how he'd gotten those bruises and cuts in the first place, she knew.

She saw the door to the interview room open and forced her mind away from speculation. A moment later, Rumple emerged. His face was haggard, but the bruises that had graced it earlier were gone. And while his suit was still creased, his tie was straight and he'd made some effort to pat his hair into place. He walked toward them, leaning on his cane only slightly more than usual.

"I suppose I'm ready for the next step," he said wryly.

"It can wait if you'd prefer," Emma said. "I guess it has been a long day."

Rumple gave her a faint smile. "Thank you, but I'd prefer to, as you mentioned earlier, get this ordeal over with."

"Okay," Emma said, smiling back. "Uh... In that case, Belle's just going to do a run to Granny's. If you tell her what you'd like, she should be back by the time we're done."

Rumple's eyebrows shot up, and he started to reply to that statement, but something about Belle's expression checked him. Instead, he simply smiled at her and said, "Well, if you're certain it won't be any trouble..."

He appreciated their efforts to make the ordeal seem more like a conversation than an interrogation. Emma had done a fair job of explaining that some questions would be repeated and rephrased in order to make sure that they understood his meaning. He'd noted aloud that it was also a precautionary measure intended to catch answers that might be less than honest. To her credit, Emma had only shrugged and said, "Yeah, sometimes my superpower goes a little screwy." Then her expression softened. "I know you're not the bad guy in any of this. Seriously. But I don't want some lawyer for the other side poking holes in your statement, assuming this goes to trial."

"A rather large assumption in this town."

"Yeah, well, hope runs in our family." She locked her eyes on his. "If it didn't, I don't think any of us would be here in Maine." She paused for a beat. "Would we?"

Well, he'd certainly never have groomed Regina to cast the curse that had created this place, had he not hoped to find Bae again. He started to nod, but froze as the full import of Emma's declaration crashed over him. Our family. She'd claimed him as such before, but it had always felt like an exaggeration of convenience if not an outright falsehood. At Boston Airport, it had been a means of avoiding what might have been a messy situation, had his terror at shedding Bae's old cloak—and possibly forgetting who he was—triggered an outburst of temper that would almost certainly have
seen him hauled off by security, possibly incarcerated, perhaps barred from the airport altogether. In New York, it had been a way to get the hotel desk clerk to check them in and overlook the toll that six weeks of homelessness had exacted on his clothing and hygiene. Even aboard the Jolly Roger, he could have chalked up Emma's assertion to her trying to make his last hours a bit more comfortable with a harmless lie.

She'd just implied—in front of her father—that she counted him as family. And the prince, while somewhat startled, hadn't protested.

He shook his head. "No," he said, unable to completely avoid a stammer. "I suppose not." He took another breath and shifted about a bit in his chair. "All right. Proceed."

David turned on the recorder, cleared his throat, and stated the date, time, and location. "Interview with Rumpelstiltskin," he continued. "Conducted by sheriffs David Nolan and Emma Swan." He nodded in Rumple's direction. "Could you state for us, in your own words, what happened earlier today? Starting from after you dismissed Henry?"

Rumple nodded. "It was a quiet afternoon," he began slowly. "There wasn't much to do, but I still went through the motions of dusting and polishing." He felt the tension in his shoulders ease somewhat as the details sprang into clear focus in his mind. "I knew that Belle would be working late at the library, and I'd thought that we might obtain supper from Granny's this evening..."

"I can't say I care much for your woodland spies' idea of appropriate shelter," Ursula snapped, after making a thorough inspection of the premises. "I thought my old apartment was a dump, but this..." While the cabin's main room was decent, if a bit dusty, the sole bedroom was a shambles. It looked as though someone had smashed everything that was breakable, and flung about everything else that hadn't been nailed down, in a fit of sheer rage. Breakables included the window pane, which made the room far too cold to sleep in at this time of year, even if they could have found clean bed linens anywhere on the premises.

Cruella sighed. "It's just temporary, dahling, though I agree it leaves a lot to be desired." She kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the sofa. A dreamy smile came to her face. "This is actually rather comfortable. I think I can sleep here quite well."

Lily rolled her eyes. But then she sank into a leather armchair with deep cushions and stretched. "I guess I've bedded down in worse places," she muttered. "Probably ought to start a fire, though." She looked down at the baby in her arms, thought for a moment, and then folded her jacket and placed it in the kitchen sink. "I think she should be okay here," she murmured, depositing the swaddled infant in the basin. "It's not like she'll be sitting up and cracking her head on the faucet."

"Fine, dahling," Cruella waved her off. "Just so long as you keep the brat from squalling."

With chair and sofa claimed, Ursula realized glumly that the only sleeping spaces available for her seemed to be the woven rug and the bathtub. When she opened the bathroom door, she realized her error. No tub. She was not sleeping in a shower stall. And until the other two were ready to turn out the lights, she doubted that the rug was an option at this hour.

She reached for her coat. "I'm going to have another look at Regina's vault," she muttered. "I want to figure out exactly what kind of security she's got."

Lily yawned. "Don't try tripping any non-magical stuff without me," she said.

"As long as you're going out, you might as well pick up something for us to eat," Cruella drawled.
"I'm absolutely famished."

"Got money?" Ursula demanded.

Cruella gasped. "Dahling, you know that when my dear husband was arrested, I was turned out of doors with little more than the furs on my back. True I was able to appropriate a paltry sum, but—"

"But it's almost definitely more than I've got. Working at an aquarium isn't exactly a lucrative career and I left to come here without getting my last paycheck."

"Oh, very well," Cruella sighed, reaching into her stylish fur wrap and pulling out a black, beaded purse. "Get some gin while you're at it."

"Not when you're the only one of us with a car," Ursula snapped. "With everything we've set in motion today, we might have to drive off in a hurry."

"I can drive," Lily offered.

"Not in my car, you can't," Cruella said quickly. She turned back to Ursula.

"Fine," she sighed, adding another couple of bills to the small pile in her hand. "Get champagne. We'll need it later. To celebrate our victory."

Ursula raised an eyebrow. "Can't recall the last time I've had one of those," she admitted, but she pocketed the funds without argument. "I might be a while," she added. "Teleporting's risky when you don't know the area very well, and I don't want to chance a sudden appearance where people might spot me."

"Fine, fine," Cruella waved her away. "Just make sure that whatever you bring back is worth the wait."

Ursula didn't bother to dignify that with a reply.

Tony gently pulled the coverlet up and tucked it about Uncle Bené. The old man hadn't stirred once, apart from the slight rise and fall of his chest that assured the siblings that he was still breathing. "He's in there," Tia said, with a confidence that belied her worried expression. "It's faint, but I still have a sense of him."

"Very faint," Tony nodded. "Does he know we're trying to reach him?"

Tia frowned for a moment, her face intent. "I don't know," she admitted. "It's like his mind jumped realms while his body's still here."

"Astral projection? I didn't know he could do that," Tony murmured.

"I'm not sure he did," Tia replied. "I think it was done to him."

"By who?"

Tia shook her head. "If we can wake him up, maybe he can tell us."

Tony hesitated. "Maybe we should get him to the hospital," he ventured.

"Tony!"
"Tia, this isn't Witch Mountain. These people know we're… different. No matter what their tests show, they're not going to-to-to lock us up somewhere and study us o-or try to use our powers to play the stock market or assassinate some world leader. And maybe they'll know what's wrong!

Tia closed her eyes. As much as she knew her brother had a point, the idea of involving outsiders didn't sit well with her. Their people preferred keeping to themselves, away from prying eyes and probing questions. And it wasn't like she and Tony hadn't run afoul of those who had sought to exploit their talents upon discovering what the two of them could do. Lucas Deranian, Aristotle Bolt, Victor Gannon, Letha Wedge… Not all people on this world were like that, but enough were. "Let's give it another day or two," she said finally. "Maybe he'll wake up on his own."

She didn't believe her own words, but that wasn't going to stop her from hoping they were still true.

Really, Rumple thought to himself, this was beginning to get out of hand. He'd described his ordeal several times over, and while Emma continued to press him for further details, painful as it was to for him to dwell upon them, frustrating as it was to admit ignorance regarding various aspects of his experience, it was David who seemed to be fixated on one aspect of his account, almost to the point of obsession.

"So," Emma sighed, "they didn't let anything slip about why they grabbed you."

Rumple shook his head. "Nothing. As I related, I have some history with both Ursula and Cruella. Revenge is certainly possible. But they said nothing to confirm it; not to me, nor in discussion with one another."

"And you're sure it was Ursula and Cruella De Vil?" David asked again. "No chance of mistaken identity? Or a glamor spell?"

Rumple struggled to keep his temper under control. "I suppose there's always a chance," he said testily. "Are you suggesting that someone is seeking to frame them for what they did to me, then?"

David held his hands up in a placating gesture. "Now, I didn't say that," he murmured. "I'm just trying to establish that we're not dealing with a case of mistaken identity. I mean, it's not as though anybody else has seen them in town, is it?"

"Actually," Emma spoke up, "Killian's encountered Ursula a few times. She was trying to blackmail him into helping her get some of Gold's spell components."

David's eyes widened. "And you didn't think this was something worth telling us until now?"

Emma felt the heat rise to her face once more. "Uh… sorry?" Belatedly, she wondered whether they should have stopped the recording. She'd need to go back and edit it later. Wait. Would excising parts of the record bring into question the admissibility of Gold's statement in court? Best not to do anything until she could check that.

David shook his head. "Let's say for a minute that this is some elaborate hoax. Who would have the means and motive to try to pass themselves off as those two?"

Emma stopped the recording.

"Okay," she said tersely. "What's up?"

David flinched. "I'm just trying to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that—"
"I think Gold's already done that," Emma pointed out. "Why is it so hard to believe that it's not Ursula and Cruella? And Lily," she added.

"We knew Lily was on her way," David said. "The Apprentice told us that much. But he didn't say a word about those other two."

"So?" Emma demanded.

"So how did they get here? How did they find this place? They sure weren't here during the curse."

"Uh… Dad? You were in a coma for most of the curse. How do you know that they weren't? And even if that's true, when Mom cast it the second time, it brought over a whole bunch of people who weren't here the first time. What's going on?"

David didn't answer. The seconds dragged on as both Emma and Rumple regarded him expectantly. Finally, he took a breath and replied, "The first curse couldn't have brought them to this realm, because they were already here. They fell through the same portal that transported Maleficent's child here, before Storybrooke was ever created. Which means that they should have been out there, with no magic and no idea that this town even existed."

"And yet," Rumple murmured, a slight widening of his eyes the only indication that he'd grasped what the prince was trying to articulate, "here they are."

"How?" Emma asked.

Rumple shook his head slowly. "That," he said drily, "is an excellent question."
Chapter Thirty-Three

A/N: The fishing season in Maine actually begins in March, but the National Marine Fisheries Service doesn't generally visit Storybrooke all that often.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ursula paused for a moment to examine her reflection in the side mirror of a parked car. Satisfied that she once more resembled the misfit schoolgirl, she pushed open the door to Granny's.

She'd stopped by Regina's vault first, but the sight of the Mercedes parked on the gravel path outside it had deterred her from trying to go inside. She didn't want to confront Regina tonight; even on a good day, she wasn't much of a match for the Evil Queen, not on land anyway. Instead, she'd decided to get dinner, then head back to the storm cellar to retrieve the spell components.

She couldn't even convince herself that that was the only reason.

She picked up a paper menu from the holder just inside the door and stepped into line, studying it. Sandwiches were probably a good bet; they hadn't checked the appliances and who knew whether the stove was even working? She couldn't remember if she'd seen a microwave. Hot dogs and hamburgers, she thought to herself. Typical student eats and they wouldn't be overly disgusting eaten cold. She ought to know; she'd done it a few times when she'd only been able to afford lunch at a hotdog cart, but not had enough time left to eat it until her break.

And maybe an egg sandwich. He could probably manage that with his hands tied.

Her eyebrows drew together in an angry frown. She was not going soft! Just because he was probably cold and hungry and she had no idea when—or if—it would be safe to go back to the cellar once Zelena woke up.

Ursula knew Cruella too well. If she didn't need Rumple, then she wasn't going to trouble herself to feed him. And as for Lily, Ursula had to admit she didn't know her at all. Fine. She'd get him a sandwich. She didn't have to be nice about it. In fact, she meant to advise him that his best chance at surviving any of this was to be as cooperative as possible. He was a smart man. He'd see reason. Giving him a bit of hope now might just help their cause.

She wasn't going soft. She was being smart.

She kept telling herself that as the line moved forward.

Belle kept her head down and tried to tell herself that nobody cared that she hadn't stepped foot here for weeks. She knew that nobody was staring, that just because customers happened to glance her way didn't mean that they were wondering what had finally brought her back here, but she would have given anything for an invisibility spell right now.

Silly, she told herself. If you couldn't be seen, nobody would know you were here to take your order. The person behind you in line would keep stepping into you. Not to mention anyone else
who didn't see you blocking their way.

She was at the head of the line now and she fished out the paper Emma had handed her earlier—a scanned copy of the list Rumple had left behind in the shop. (The original was going into the sheriff's files to be used as possible evidence.)

"Belle!" Granny greeted her warmly. "So nice to see you here again!"

Maybe she only imagined every eye in the place turning in her direction as she pushed the page across the counter. "I... uh... have an order here," she murmured.

Granny glanced at the sheet and stabbed her finger on the last item. "I don't generally do pudding," she said. "Though if you want me to whip some up special, give me 24 hours advance notice and I can have it done for you. One quart minimum, mind."

"Oh," Belle flushed, realizing that neither she nor Rumple had looked anything over too thoroughly. He'd just told her that what he'd written down earlier would be fine and she'd asked Emma to give her a copy to take with her. "No, that's all right. I mean, thank you; I'll let Rumple know for future. For tonight, just give me everything else, please."

"Belle?" There was no mistaking the concern behind the older woman's gruff exterior. "You look utterly frazzled. Is everything okay?"

Belle forced herself to smile. "It's just been... a hard night. I'm hoping this will make things easier."

Granny's answering smile was tight. "I'll get the kitchen started on it then. Grab a seat; it'll be about half an hour." Her shrug was only half apologetic. "We're busy this evening."

Belle nodded and turned to make her way to a booth.

"Belle?" Granny called after her. And when Belle stopped and turned back toward the counter, the older woman asked in a slightly lower voice, "I... couldn't help noticing the two orders of fries. I don't meant to pry, but can he still have fried food? I mean, with his heart condition?"

Belle blinked. "Dr. Whale hasn't warned him to avoid anything," she murmured. "And tonight, he's getting whatever he wants."

Granny shrugged. "Okay," she said, doubtfully. "Coming right up."

Belle thanked her and headed toward the booth, sliding into it with a sigh. She barely looked up when a girl still wearing her school uniform practically bolted out of the diner, clutching two large paper bags to her chest.

How the hell, Ursula asked herself, could they have been so stupid? She'd spoken to the Apprentice. She knew Rumple only had half a heart and that what Regina had done was so radical that neither the Apprentice nor Whale nor Regina knew the long-term prognosis for it. Nor how resilient that half might be under stress.

Stress. They'd left him bound, gagged, caged, and blindfolded in a storm cellar. And while Ursula certainly didn't have any friendly feelings toward the former Dark One, she'd never really enjoyed killing people.

She didn't like Rumpelstiltskin much, but she didn't want him dead either. At least, she told herself
firmly, not until they'd gotten as much use out of him as they could. There. That was more like it. She wasn't going soft.

Questioning what they were doing and whether they were on the right track wasn't going soft. Having some concerns about Lily's rapidly-emerging cold-blooded nature wasn't going soft. Feeling that she was rapidly losing control of the situation and getting shunted to the sidelines wasn't…

Enough. Enough. The street was deserted. There were no lights on in any of the windows. She spared a quick glance to her left and right. Assured that no cars were coming, she teleported herself back to the farmhouse, materializing inside the barn that had served as a garage for Cruella's car. It was cold inside; Cruella hadn't bothered shutting the door when she'd driven out, and Ursula hugged the food bags more tightly to her chest as she made her way to the storm cellar.

Her breath caught. The cellar doors gaped open and, when she peered down the steps, she could see that someone had turned on the light. Mentally, she rehashed what Rumple's former maid—and current wife had been saying in the restaurant. Or more, what she hadn't said.

When the old busybody had inquired after Rumple's health, Belle hadn't said that he was missing. She'd been upset, yes, but she hadn't been talking like a woman who was frantic over her husband's disappearance. In her mind, she once again heard Belle's reply to Granny Lucas's query about the French fries. 'Tonight, he's getting whatever he wants.' Which sounded like…

Ursula set the bags down on the top step and hurried down. Halfway from the bottom, she stopped. The cellar was empty. Rumple was gone. And so was the cage. With mounting dismay, she clambered down the last steps. She didn't remember so many splinters and… She stooped to pick up a short length of metal wire. Wood splinters, wire scraps… The cage wasn't gone after all.

Her own heart was thumping as she turned almost mechanically to the shelves lining the walls. Whatever it was that had destroyed the cage—and she had a few ideas on that—hadn't extended to the spell components. She caught up a burlap sack—perhaps the same one they'd used on Rumple earlier—and began stuffing it with jars, pouches and bottles, taking care that each in turn was still tightly sealed. If any of the substances contained within were to leak and mingle with one another in transit, Ursula had no idea whether she'd survive the trip back to the cabin, or whether there'd be anything left of this town by morning.

A new thought struck her. Rumple had seen them all. He knew who they were—well, perhaps not Lily, but he'd recognize her too if he saw her again. And if he told his liberators about them…

She swore under her breath. She had to get back to the cabin now and tell the others that time was of the essence. They had to break into the vault and get the heart before the entire town came looking for them with crossbows and pitchforks. That was the only sensible play left to them. She knew that.

So. Why was she hesitating? What was it that had her feeling so… conflicted?

Emma poured a cup of coffee from the carafe and shot Gold a look. "Black, no sugar?" she asked.

Gold shook his head. "Actually, you might put a spoon or two of sugar in, I think," he replied.

Emma nodded and added it. "I'm… trying not to ask you if you're okay for the twentieth time," she murmured as she brought the cup over. "But if there's anything else I can do…?"

He shook his head again. "You've done… a great deal more than you know tonight," he managed,
clasping the cup with both hands. "And I suspect you'll have more to accomplish tomorrow." He let out his breath with a sigh. "When I called you 'savior' earlier, it wasn't a slip of the tongue."

Emma nodded. Weeks ago, at her request, he'd agreed to reserve that moniker for times of crisis. She couldn't say this wasn't one of them. "Yeah."

She saw her father approaching and shot him an inquiring look as he joined them at the table.

"Your mother isn't taking the news well," David admitted. "Understandably." He looked from Emma to Rumple. "I think we'll need to meet tomorrow—all of us—and figure out a plan of action."

"By 'all of us,'" Emma said, "you mean…?"

"Well, your mother, of course. Belle. Regina, though we should meet a bit later in the day—she went back to her vault after we came here, saying something about cooking up a few spells that might help. I don't think meeting first thing in the morning is going to catch her at her best after pulling an all-nighter." He thought for a moment. "Do you think we should bring August up to speed, too?"

Emma started to nod, but Rumple shook his head. "Ideally, yes, but he won't be able to be here tomorrow."

Emma uttered a mild expletive. "That's right," she groaned. "I forgot. There's a woodworking trade show in Boston this week. And now that the barrier's down again, he thought it would be good to check it out." She shook her head. "You want to call him?" she asked Rumple. Her phone was out. "I could—"

Even as Rumple started to nod, he held up a hand to stop her. "Tomorrow, perhaps. I… don't care to rehash this any further tonight. And you do realize that as soon as he's been informed, he will want to discuss matters."

Emma nodded back. "Yeah, I hear that. Okay. We'll hold off for now." She turned to David. "Better hide Mom's phone or…"

She was only half-joking on that one, but there was nothing remotely humorous about the appreciative look in Rumple's eyes.

"So," she went on, pocketing her own phone, "tomorrow." She looked back to Rumple. "Should we meet at the shop or would you prefer somewhere else?"

It was a fair question. The shop was, indisputably, his territory. He was more at ease there than anywhere else in town. At the same time, the shop was the place from which he'd been abducted earlier today. The savior was doing her best to avoid making assumptions about his preferences. Rumple considered carefully. "The shop will do," he said finally. "Shall we say, sometime in the afternoon?"

"Two o'clock?" David asked. "Neal should be done with his feeding by then and it'll be after the lunch rush, so Granny should be able to watch him."

Rumple nodded. "That sounds fine."

Belle arrived with takeout then, putting an end to any further conversation.
It was foolish to walk by the shore alone with the sea witch about, particularly at this hour, but
Killian Jones had much on his mind. Emma hadn't divulged many details about what had
transpired earlier, but a man for whom mutiny was a professional hazard learned to stay alive by
listening to what he wasn't being told.

After everything that the Dark One had taken from him, every manipulation, every foul scheme
he'd been forced to participate in, Killian was surprised to discover that his first reaction upon
hearing what had befallen Rumpelstiltskin had been dismay—followed by relief that Emma and the
others had located him so swiftly.

He'd sworn on Milah's crushed heart and his own severed hand that he would not rest until he'd
exacted his vengeance on the Crocodile. A truce was one thing; it was useful to know that one
could walk down the street and not be stabbed in the back or turned into a hardtack biscuit without
warning. But apparently, matters ran deeper than a mere ceasefire, and Killian wasn't entirely
certain he liked it.

He'd moved on from Milah, true. But didn't he owe her memory some favor for those glorious
years they'd spent at one another's side? Could he truly let all of that... go? What of his oath? What
of his honor?

He rubbed his forehead with some measure of irritation. There had to be a way to go forward
without going back on his word. And, ironically, the person best able to spot loopholes was the last
person he wanted to talk this over with. Besides, he doubted that Rumpelstiltskin would be in any
mood for this sort of conversation for the foreseeable future. So. Here he was trying to find some
way out of this... boondoggle, and since he always thought better by the sea, well... Here he was.

As he watched, a large wave rose up from the ocean and drew close to the shore. Instead of
breaking several yards out, though, it climbed high, higher, higher.

Wide-eyed, Killian leaped to his feet. Tidal waves shouldn't be a danger this far north...!

The wave towered over him and, though he knew it was futile, he shut his eyes and flung up his
hands as though that would stave off his doom.

And then he reeled back from shock as the wave crashed over him—ice cold, but with a great deal
less force—and water—than he'd anticipated. His eyes flew open to the sting of saltwater streaming
into them, blurring the scene before him. Before his vision could clear once more, a stinging slap
landed on his cheek and a furious voice snarled, "That was for making Blackbeard walk the
plank!"

He swiped at the last of the water and immediately wanted to close his eyes once more. There were
two mer-people standing before him. He recognized them both. Apparently, a man did not need to
be aboard a scuttled ship to get a sinking feeling.

"Hello again, Captain," Ariel said coldly. "I think you've already met my grandfather?"

He had indeed. And although it wasn't exactly good form to curse before royalty, he couldn't quite
keep a groan of "Bloody hell!" from escaping his lips.

"This is cold, dahling," Cruella snipped when she opened the Styrofoam clamshell.

"It was a long walk back," Ursula shrugged. "Oh, and the liquor store was closed at this hour, so no
champagne. I'm afraid you'll have to choose between soda and non-alcoholic beer."
Cruella leaned back on the sofa, raising her wrist to her eyes in a melodramatic gesture. "Soda," she sighed. "At least it's not pretending to be something it's not."

Lily noticed what else Ursula had with her. "You went back to the cellar."

"Hard to work magic without ingredients, Lily," Ursula pointed out.

"And you wanted to check up on him."

Ursula shrugged.

"Bet she fed him, too," Cruella smirked.

Ursula shook her head. "No, I didn't feed him." She took a breath. "Actually… he wasn't there."

"Wait. What?" Lily snapped.

"The cellar was empty. And there wasn't enough left of the cage to hold a goldfinch."

Lily thought about that. "Well, I guess that's that, then," she sighed. "I mean, we can't go searching for him without some idea of where he is. At least we didn't discuss what we were up to while he was in the car. He can't share what he doesn't know."

"True, dahling, but he's remarkably good at guessing games." Cruella sighed. "We're going to have to move quickly. As soon as the heroes find out what we did to Zelena, they'll go to him for assistance. And once he starts connecting those dots…"

"Regina was still at her vault as of an hour ago," Ursula said. "Short of camping out in the graveyard and waiting for her to drive off…"

"Afraid my Golden Spirit isn't the most inconspicuous of getaway vehicles," Cruella admitted. "But if she's there all night, she'll likely be sleeping the morning away. And much as I'd prefer to do the same," she sighed, "I suppose I could turn in now. We'll drive back to the vault in the morning and the two of you can work your magic—or whatever it is Lilith has—on its defenses. We can have that heart and be well away before the heroes know what's hit them."

As a boy, Killian had always taken the tales about the mer-folk with a grain of salt. He'd been in his thirties before he met his first and, even before then, he'd never quite believed the stories of how they loved to lead a vessel to its doom. Time and experience, however, had taught him well the truth of those sailor's yarns. It was official. The three merfolk with the most reason to hate him were now within the confines of the same town. And they all seemed to have a penchant for drenching him with the waters of the North Atlantic.

"Poseidon," he gritted. "It's been a long time."

The ruler of the mer-folk raised his hand in a gesture that might almost have been placating. "Peace, Captain. I mean you no harm tonight."

"The ice bath says otherwise," Killian snapped.

"I needed to ensure I had your undivided attention." Poseidon took a step onto the shore. "Many years ago, you took something of mine. I'd like it back."

"Something?" Killian repeated. "Are you certain you don't mean someone?"
Poseidon inclined his head in tacit acknowledgment. "If you relinquish the one," he said, "I've high hopes that I'll retrieve the other."

Killian shook his head. "Unfortunately, may—Your Majesty," he amended hastily—Poseidon, ruler of the mer-folk was not now nor ever would be a 'mate' to him—"I no longer have what you seek."

"No?" Poseidon asked skeptically. "Am I to believe that you sold or bartered it for… rum?"

"Hardly," Killian snapped. "The shell was on my vessel. And while I did trade it away, it was for something far harder to come by than strong drink—passage to this realm. Now that I'm here, unfortunately, I've no way back to the Enchanted Forest to retrieve what once was mine. Believe me, your Majesty, I've been trying." He paused a beat. "In case you weren't aware, your daughter's here."

"Here?" From Poseidon's expression, it was clear to Killian that the ruler of the ocean depths hadn't been expecting that tiding.

"Aye," he nodded. "She is. When I learned of her presence, I thought to find some means of returning to my ship and either buying it back or fighting its current captain for her possession." He shrugged. "It was my hope that if I restored to her that which I'd taken, she might forgive me the wrong I did her. Alas, passage between realms does not come easy for one such as I and no ready means has, of yet, presented itself."

"Wait," Ariel spoke up for the first time since her previous greeting. "If it's on your ship… Grandfather, where—?"

"My treasure vault," Poseidon replied swiftly. He twisted a coral ring from his finger and handed it to her. "Show this to the guards as a sign you're acting on my orders. They'll bring it to you. And Ariel," he smiled gently, "I know that cavern holds many wonders. Stay focused on the one for which you're going and return here as swiftly as you can."

Ariel bowed her head and dipped her waist. "As my lord and grandfather commands," she said demurely. Then, with a giggle, she ran from the shore into the lapping waves. When the water was just past her waist, she raised her arms over her head and dove beneath the surface, kicking her legs up behind her. In the moonlight, Killian saw them shimmer and then fuse together in a long tail tipped by a delicate lunate fin. After a moment, it too disappeared beneath the ocean.

Poseidon turned to Killian with a reluctant sigh. "I suppose we'll have a bit of a wait."

Killian nodded, somewhat dazed yet by the turn events had taken. "Your granddaughter," he ventured. "Forgive me, your Majesty, but can she pilot a ship? Or do you have a crew capable of such a feat?"

Poseidon shook his head. "That won't be necessary. Your ship won't carry her. She'll carry it." At Killian's even more befuddled expression, the mer-king chuckled. "To hear Ariel tell it, it would seem that the most recent captain of that vessel managed to annoy the Queen of Arendelle. She found a way to neutralize its potential as a threat."

"Arendelle?" Killian tilted his head questioningly. From what he knew of Elsa's power… "She encased it in ice?"

Poseidon's smile widened. "Not precisely…"

"I thought this might help," Belle said, as she came into the living room from the kitchen, an
earthenware mug in hand. "It's a little fancier than warm milk, but it's worked for me when I've wanted to relax before bed."

Rumple looked up with an uncertain smile, but he took the mug and murmured his thanks. "Aniseed?" he asked, his eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"I developed a taste for it back in Arendelle. I… guess I should have asked if you liked the flavoring; I know it's not always popular."

"I do," Rumple said quickly. "Thank you." He took another sip. "And… thank you for everything you did earlier. I…"

Belle shook her head. "I didn't do much. Emma and David noticed that the shop's back door was unlocked and that you'd lost your cane in the alley. Henry found your message." She smiled bitterly. "Roland told Robin where you were. Regina and Emma blasted the locks on the cellar and cage doors. I—"

Rumple set the mug down on the end table and gripped her hands in his. "You were there," he said. "That's enough."

"It doesn't feel like it," Belle muttered. Then she caught herself. "I'm sorry."

Rumple shook his head. "How did the others find out that I was missing? I can't imagine that anyone but you would have come by the shop after hours. They might have texted my phone. Or, if it were a real emergency, I suppose they might have come here. But the shop?"

Belle's eyes widened. "I-I did go back there when you didn't answer my call."

"And you saw something that concerned you enough to call the others."

Belle winced. "I'm afraid the back room's a bit of a disaster."

"Which you didn't write off as my having had a fit of temper." He gave her a pained smile. "I do have those from time to time."

"Not recently," Belle pointed out.

"Not yet." Rumple corrected. He exhaled heavily. "Don't make the mistake of thinking that the Darkness was responsible for all my shortcomings. In many cases, it simply gave free rein to urges I'd always possessed. Before it entered my life, I merely lacked the courage or power to actualize them. That may no longer hold true." He took another breath and gave her a real smile as his grip tightened on her hands.

"I was trying to point out to you, Belle that more than one person was involved in my rescue tonight. While I'm probably more astonished than you by that fact," his nervous chuckle belied the wonder in his eyes, "surely you must realize that such rescue might not have happened at all—and certainly not so quickly—had you not recognized that something was amiss." He drew her toward him. "Without your phone call to set things in motion, I…" Despite himself, he felt his heart pound as the memory of those wretched hours crashed over him anew, "I'd likely still be down there."

Belle closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder. "And we still don't know what they wanted of you. Whether it was revenge or… or…"

He shook his head. "No."
She pulled slightly away and locked her eyes on his. "Are we safe here?"

Rumple sighed. "As safe as we can be anywhere. But you might want to take the gun out of the end table and keep it on your person, as I asked earlier."

Belle flinched guiltily. "Carrying it about made me nervous."

"Your failure to carry it about makes me nervous."

Belle nodded. "I understand. I'll take it with me in the morning."

Rumple sighed again, this time with no small measure of relief. "Well. It's late. And tomorrow will bring new trials. I suppose we'd best get to bed."

Belle's eyes widened slightly. "D-did you mean... 'Get to bed' get to bed?"

Rumple's mouth hung partly open and Belle was instantly ashamed of herself. They were supposed to be taking things slowly. And she'd already probably made enough of a mess tonight between acting like the worst thing about tonight had been that she hadn't single-handedly taken on Ursula, Cruella, and Lily, and worse, carrying on like she'd been the one who'd suffered most this evening. And to even suggest what she'd just suggested after everything Rumple had just gone through demonstrated an insensitivity that bordered on callousness. But then, Rumple replied with a hesitant smile, "I-I suppose I did." And a moment later, he amended nervously, "But only if it's something you truly want."

She embraced him anew. "It is."

Even though Poseidon had explained the fate of his ship to him, Killian couldn't quite suppress a groan of dismay when Ariel finally returned with the bottle.

"Patience, Captain," Poseidon smiled. "My magic is more than a match for some land-dwelling queen's."

"Aye?" Killian asked.

Poseidon fixed him with a steely look. "Aye."

Suddenly the Jolly Roger was out of its bottle and in the sea king's hand. For a moment, Poseidon held the shrunken ship before him, its bow facing him. Then he drew back his hand and flung it backwards into the ocean. The ship seemed to inflate in mid-air like a child's balloon. Its keel and hull spread, its masts thickened, and its canvas sails expanded, billowing as they caught the east wind. It was full-sized when it hit the water and slightly over a mile out from shore. "I didn't want to scuttle her, by landing her too close to shore," Poseidon remarked in a tone that was nearly apologetic. "And being more accustomed to the oceans depths than these shallows, I thought it better to err on the side of caution."

Killian nodded. "I thank you, then. Unfortunately, this means that I'll need to wait till morning to procure a boat I might use as a tender to reach my ship."

Ariel tilted her head. "You're not just planning to take one?"

Killian shook his. "I don't expect you to believe me," he replied with a pained expression. "Not after what I did. But I am trying to be the man you believed me to be when first we met. I'm not saying I wouldn't borrow a craft in advance of the owner's permission if there were no other way,
but if that shell is yet aboard the *Jolly Roger*, it's been there many years already. A few more hours shan't matter. And if it isn't, then taking the craft will only incur its owner's enmity with no profit to me." He smiled tightly. "I may yet lack a hero's moral compass, but there's wisdom in taking a pragmatic approach."

"I could carry you," Poseidon remarked.

Killian winced. "My apologies, Your Majesty, but I've only just begun to dry off. I've no desire to be soaked anew."

The sea king considered that. "Very well. As you say, a few more hours shouldn't matter over much. But do not tarry long."

"The harbor opens with the morning watch," Killian remarked. "By two bells into it, there should be a number of fishing folk preparing to take advantage of the thaw to try to catch something early in the season. I'm certain I can prevail upon one of them to row me out there."

He debated whether to point out to Poseidon that offering to restore Ursula's voice to her might not suffice for the reconciliation he so wanted, but he decided to remain silent. There was less point in borrowing trouble where it might not be warranted than in borrowing a fishing boat where the owner might yet grant permission if one only waited to ask it. One watched for bad weather to become imminent before battening one's hatches, after all.

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Rumple was asleep now, the charm against nightmares around his neck and clasped loosely in one hand. Belle slid out of the bed carefully so as not to awaken him and picked up her robe from the floor. She shrugged into it and, unable to find her slippers in the faint light filtering in from the street outside, padded barefoot to the half-opened door and out into the hallway.

She couldn't sleep. She was still trying to work through everything that had happened today, both good and bad. And she couldn't shake the conviction that she should have been able to do more to help. What, she couldn't say. But there had to have been something.

Months ago, the Snow Queen's mirror had played on her fears and magnified doubts she hadn't known she'd had. Rumple had convinced her that it had been lying to her and she'd believed him because she'd wanted to.

But it hadn't been lying about the dagger being a fake.

And it hadn't been lying about how she'd abandoned Anna.

So, had it been lying when it had told her that she'd never been cut out to be a hero?

"I saved Philip," she told herself fiercely. "I helped Mulan."

But she hadn't done much since then, had she? Despite Rumple's reassurances, Belle couldn't shake the feeling that sounding an alert wasn't nearly as important as going out and *fighting*. True, there hadn't been any of that tonight either, but there would be. And when there was, she knew how it would go.

"Belle, we need you to translate this inscription."

"Belle, could you look something up for us?"

"Belle, stay here on the sidelines where you'll be safe."
She clenched the fabric of her nightgown in her fists, drew her elbows tight to her sides, closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. Being a hero meant facing danger, not hiding from it! Her eyes flew open. She was going to be part of whatever was coming next. A big part. She shook her head in exasperation. Emma was already talking about how they were going to deal with those villains, but the savior didn't have a clue about how she could even find them, much less stop them!

But, Belle sat up a little straighter, maybe she would have better luck. After all, she'd tracked a yaoguai to its lair on her own. She'd been clever enough to mislead the other hunters, at least, temporarily. She knew something of unarmed combat, thanks to her kickboxing lessons. She could use a sword somewhat. And…

Belle sucked in her breath. She closed her eyes once more, deliberating with herself. Then she exhaled and nodded silently. Padding over to the end table, she pulled open the drawer and retrieved the Walther PPK from where she'd left it. She was about to fasten it about her waist, when she realized that it was a bit silly to do so while she was still in her nightgown.

She tiptoed back upstairs to make a quick stop in the bedroom she'd been occupying until tonight. Her regular handbag wasn't going to be suitable; Rumple had given her one with a concealed carry pocket. Until now, she hadn't wanted to use it, but she had to store the weapon somewhere and she wasn't about to sleep with it under her pillow.

Tomorrow, she'd decide whether to keep it in the purse or wear it holstered on the belt. For now? It was time to sleep. She carried the bag with her to the master bedroom, leaving it beside her neatly laid-out clothing before she crept back into bed beside her husband.
Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm taking the tack that Zelena's been out of the loop since being locked up. So far as she knows, Rumple's still the Dark One. Also, I happened to notice that on the OUAT wiki, it's listed as a blooper that David can be seen breathing while under the sleeping curse in S2. (Per Regina, it's supposed to make the victim appear as though dead.) And since I was guilty of writing the same blooper in a couple of chapters ago, I decided to have some fun and come up with a (hopefully!) decent explanation.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The corridor outside her cell was noisier than usual. That was the first thought to filter into Zelena's consciousness. Next was the realization that her head was oddly light, while her limbs felt strangely heavy. Billina was squawking and scratching at the ground and…

Zelena tried to leap up from her bed, but she was surprisingly loose-limbed this morning and it took her a moment to find her balance and keep her feet from getting tangled up in each other. Her breakfast tray was on the floor and, from what she could see, Billina had managed to peck a decently-sized hole in its Styrofoam cover. She was usually awake well before her first meal arrived. She winced. She must have overslept.

As she swung her feet to the floor, she realized that there were stockings on them. On the heels of that observation came another: she was wearing a hospital robe. Why in the world…?

Memory came flooding back full force. The baby! She was a mother! A mother! Now, when would she be permitted to hold her new daughter? For surely, Regina and Robin couldn't mean to deprive her of her child utterly? If that was their aim, then…

She checked herself. There was about as much point in jumping to conclusions as there was in trying to strike up a conversation with most of the hospital staff. Get dressed, she ordered herself. Have breakfast. Feed Billina. And wait. The Blue Fairy usually called on her after lunch—and Zelena had a number of choice words she wanted to say to the little sprite when she did. She'd control herself for now, though. If she gave into her temper, who knew whether the staff here would deem it unsafe for her child to be around her? No, better to be on her best behavior, at least, until she saw how matters were going to proceed.

And if they weren't going to proceed in a manner to her liking? Zelena cupped her hands together and smiled at the swirling puff of green smoke within. If Regina truly meant to keep her from her newborn daughter, then all bets were off.

"I don't feel so good," Henry said, as he stirred his cereal listlessly at the breakfast table. "Maybe I should stay home from school."

Emma shook her head. "Nice try, kiddo, but my superpower says otherwise. You can stop by the shop after school."
Henry groaned, but he gave her a rueful smile. "I had to try."

"I know."

"So," Snow said, "your father and I have been talking. Now that we know that Ursula and Cruella are here, I think we ought to pay a visit to the Apprentice. He sent them to this realm thirty years ago, together with Lily. If all three of them are here now, well, from what he told us a couple of weeks ago, it's clear he's kept tabs on Lily all this time. Maybe he can tell us more about what Ursula and Cruella are up to."

Emma nodded. "I guess one of them could have raised her. I mean, I never met her mother, just her dad—for about thirty seconds. He seemed… normal." She hesitated. "I mean, from what I remember after more than fifteen years. Anyway, I guess, one of those two could have married him. Maybe," she added dubiously. "Then again, the last time I saw Lily, she told me her parents kicked her out, so I don't know."

"Well, you were fostered by Ingrid at one point," Snow pointed out. "Maybe Ursula or Cruella fostered her after her adoptive parents put her in the system."

David made a face. "Somehow, I can't picture either of them getting through the screening process."

"It's possible," Emma sighed. "I ended up in a couple of placements that had me wondering the same thing. But if Lily met them later, if this… team-up is recent, then it sounds like she's here for something bigger than just finding her mother."

"What, though?" Snow asked.

David shook his head. "Hopefully, that's something the Apprentice will be able to answer. We'll stop by his place after breakfast."

Emma was just unlocking her car door when her phone buzzed. She looked at it, read the text, and immediately tensed up.

"Trouble?" her mother asked, looking up from where she was strapping Neal's car bed in the space between the truck's two front seats.

Emma sighed. "Yeah, kind of. You know what I promised Gold last night about how the people who abducted him were going to be brought to justice?"

"Your father told me," Snow nodded. "Why? What's happened?"

Emma sighed again. "Well, according to Killian," she stabbed her index finger against her phone, "this just got a little more complicated. We're stopping off at the shop first. I'll have Killian meet us there. And," she winced, "it looks like he'll be bringing company."

"What company?" David asked quickly.

"Well, Ariel," Emma replied. "And her grandfather. Poseidon. Who, as it turns out, is Ursula's father. And he wants his daughter back."

David and Snow exchanged a look. "And if she chooses to go with him," David said slowly, as he realized the ramifications, "it means that she basically gets away with what she did yesterday."
Emma nodded. "I got Gold to stand down by convincing him that the people who hurt him would be handled through the court system. How do I go to him now and tell him that Ursula's father—?"

"Poseidon may just be named after a god," Snow murmured, "but if we get in his way," her eyes widened, "he rules the seas. He's got enough power to summon a tidal wave that would wipe Storybrooke off the map."

"Hang on," David said, shaking his head. "Let's not go borrowing trouble quite yet. Emma, instead of the shop, tell Killian and his… friends… to meet us at Granny's. I think we're going to need more details before we talk to Gold, and I don't think texting back and forth is the way to get them."

"Poseidon's a king," Snow said. "That would make Ursula a princess. Even in this realm, diplomatic immunity exists. You can't just… lock up a princess."

"Yeah?" Emma asked. "When Zelena's time portal sent me there, Regina threw me in her dungeon and she was going to have me executed at dawn. As far as she knew, I was Princess Leia. She didn't even bother trying to find out what kingdom I was visiting from; all she cared about was that I'd helped you escape. And diplomatic immunity didn't protect Belle either," she added angrily.

"Now, nobody's saying that Ursula's getting away scot-free," David said, raising his hands in a placating gesture. "Nobody's even saying that she wants to be back with her father. That's why we're going to set up this meeting. To find out what page everyone's on and whether we can work out some kind of… compromise."

Emma nodded slowly. "Fine. But after yesterday, it's got to be something we think Gold can accept. And if it turns out we're wrong about that, then we figure out something else. He backed off last night, because when I told him that he was going to get justice, he believed me. He trusted me. And that is not something I'm going to betray."


The bell over the shop door jangled merrily some ninety minutes later, and Rumple looked up with a smile. It faded quickly when he saw the serious demeanors on the faces before him. And then, he got a good look at the bare-chested man in the center of the group and took an involuntary step backwards.

"Poseidon!" he whispered. While they'd never met face to face, he had no difficulty in recognizing the sea king now. He was every bit as imposing in person as Rumple had guessed from the images he'd seen in his scrying pool, back in his Dark castle long ago.

The king of the mer-folk inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. "Rumpelstiltskin. We have… something to discuss." There was a moment's hesitation, and Rumple didn't miss the look that Snow White cast in the ruler's direction. "Please."

Rumple's eyes narrowed. This was not a man accustomed to saying 'please'; he could tell that much. Poseidon wanted something, and he wanted it badly. "Go on," he said quietly, keeping his tone even.

Poseidon hesitated once more. "You'll have to excuse me," he said—and while the words were diffident enough, there was enough arrogance in the sea king's tone to make the request sound like an order. "I'm not accustomed to asking for favors or discussing matters with surface dwellers that ought not to concern them."
"Indeed?" Rumple asked neutrally.

Poseidon took another breath. "It seems that today, I must do both."

"Grandfather," Ariel spoke up, "I could—"

"No." Poseidon shook his head. "The responsibility is mine." He fixed his eyes on Rumple. "Many years ago," he said, "I had a daughter, whom I loved very much. Unfortunately we... failed to see eye to eye on numerous points. I sensed that I was losing her, but in my attempts to keep her by my side, I... only succeeded in driving her farther away."

Rumple flinched. Despite his best efforts to maintain emotional distance, he felt a chord in Poseidon's account resonate in his heart.

"Eventually," Poseidon continued, "I contrived a plan to keep her with me and," he turned his head briefly in the captain's direction, "enlisted the aid of another. Things went... awry, and my daughter paid a heavy price for it. She left me in the end," he sighed, "her feet fixed firmly on a Darker path than I'd dreamed she'd take. And for many years, I knew not where she was, nor how to get her back. I've only recently learned that she's come here."

Comprehension flooded him and his furious eyes flashed from Poseidon to Emma, and then back to Poseidon again. He'd never paid much attention to the origins of his erstwhile 'partners', but only one of his attackers yesterday had any connection to the sea. "Ursula," he breathed. "Your daughter is Ursula." He glowered at Emma once more.

"And you're siding with him, now, I suppose?"

Emma's eyes went wide. "I—"

"Well," he snapped. "So much for your heartfelt speeches last night." He shook his head. "Get out. All of you!" he added loudly.

"Gold..." Emma said.

"I don't want to hear it. And even if I did, how could I possibly believe it now?"

"Hey!" Emma shot back. And then, more softly, "Hey. Yes, he's here hoping to reconcile with his daughter, but I am still on your side. I meant every word I said last night. I'm just... trying to see if there's any way that you can both get what you want."

"If you've indeed suffered at my daughter's hands," Poseidon interjected, "I'm prepared to make whatever reasonable reparations you think fitting. I just... want her to know that I still love her. And I want her to come home."

"And you think that's what she wants?" Rumple asked sarcasm adding bite to his angry tone.

Poseidon shook his head. "I don't know what she wants," he admitted, all trace of his former arrogance gone. "And if she turns down the second chance I'm offering—the second chance I'd ask of her—if she chooses to remain here, I'll accept that. So long as she does so with full understanding of the consequences that await her."

Rumple's eyes narrowed. "I think I begin to understand," he said slowly. "You want your daughter to return with you, yes. And since you can't compel her to your side by force, you seek to use us to corner her and then drive her back into your waiting arms."

Poseidon was silent, but from the sea king's involuntary flinch, there was no doubt in the minds of the others that Rumpelstiltskin had divined the truth of the matter. Rumple regarded him soberly and then his eyes darted to each of the others in turn. Finally, he smiled thinly. "Well. Now that all cards have been laid on the table, there are a number of chairs in the back room. Suppose someone were to fetch them out, so that we might be able to sit down and hash out negotiations in a more... civilized fashion?"

Zelena wondered how much time had passed since she'd awakened. She knew that she was unlikely to receive visitors this early in the day, but surely someone would come in check her vitals. Or something. She'd just given birth after all! Surely, although childbed fever wasn't as common here as it had been in the Enchanted Forest—or Oz, for that matter—they'd have tests to run. Someone ought to ask how she was feeling or whether she was experiencing any pain or weakness or...

...Unless they didn't care. Unless this had been the plan all along. To have her deliver the child, then surrender it to Robin and Regina to raise and leave her here to rot. Well. They'd just see about —

A new thought struck her. If Regina had been behind her accelerated pregnancy, why would she have acted now? Her sister had imprisoned her here nearly two months ago. She'd had plenty of time to do this, if that had been her plan.

Unless it hadn't been her plan from the outset. Regina could be spontaneous, even impulsive at times. Maybe she'd suddenly realized that she didn't have to wait months to steal her sister's bundle of joy.

Zelena's eyes opened wide. Maybe it hadn't been Regina's plan at all. Everything had been normal until yesterday. Until Lily brought me those onion rings. But Lily didn't have magic, and, so far as Zelena knew, there was nothing in this realm's science that could account for yesterday's events.

So far as you know.

And anyway, Lily wasn't exactly here on her own, was she? Ursula had magic and plenty of it. But why...?

Well. It wasn't as though there were no spells requiring the use of an infant. Or an innocent. Or a part of one! Her heart lurched. Where was her baby? What did they want with her?

She was getting ahead of herself. Pregnancy hormones, most likely. She'd just check in on the farmhouse and reassure herself that all was well.

The farmhouse was empty. Not just empty of people; empty of all personal effects—including, she noted, the few knickknacks she'd brought with her to make the place seem a bit homier. With mounting trepidation, she shifted her focus to the outbuildings. The cage wasn't where it was supposed to be. And the shelves in the storm cellar were notably emptier than they had been. The barn doors gaped open silently. The car—she might not be able to hear any conversations taking place within it, but she could always see who was inside it, at least—was gone as well. Clearly, her uninvited guests had moved on. And, to Zelena's mind, there was only one good reason for such a hasty departure.

Maybe she was jumping to conclusions. Maybe they'd just decided that they didn't like knowing someone could monitor their every conversation and they'd decided to hole up someplace more private. There was no reason to assume that they had her child.
Except for that point about my going into labor after having those onion rings.

She'd also gone into labor after having marmalade on her bran muffin that morning, instead of her usual strawberry jam. Just because Ursula had magic didn't mean she'd used it on her. There were plenty of other people in Storybrooke who had magic. Including Rumple. She had to stay calm. In all likelihood, her infant was in the nursery. She ought to teleport there and check.

And have everyone know that you can use magic again. You've been patient this long. Hold out a bit longer.

She took a breath, held it for a ten count, and let it out. She'd bide her time for now. But if she didn't see her newborn daughter by sunset, then all bets were off.

"We're agreed, then?" David asked, tugging a bit at his shirt collar. His chair was directly in front of the heater and he was feeling slightly uncomfortable.

Heads nodded soberly. "If I am able to convince my daughter to return home with me," Poseidon began, "then you," he turned to Rumple, "will waive your right to redress." Rumple caught the faint edge in the sea king's voice when he spoke the word 'right', but the others didn't seem to notice. "Once we return home, I will use my magic to block off passage to this realm to all my subjects."

"But only to mermaid magic," Ariel interjected with a worried expression. "Right?"

Poseidon nodded. "I can't very well block off magic beans or other gateways," he confirmed. "Such channels aren't easily located, but if you can find one, there'll be nothing to prevent your using it."

Ariel smiled her relief. "Eric and I've made friends here," she said. "I'd hate to never see any of you again."

"The feeling's mutual," Snow smiled back. She took another breath and turned her face toward Poseidon.

"But if Ursula refuses to go back with you..." She let her voice trail off.

Poseidon winced. And for a moment, he didn't look much like the king of the mer-folk. He just looked old and weary. "Then she will have determined her own fate. I won't intervene," he said heavily. "I would, however, take it as a favor if you didn't sentence her too harshly."

Rumple took a breath. He'd been thinking about that during their conversation, and he believed he had a proposal that the Heroes wouldn't instantly veto. "When I was in her power," he said slowly, "she and her companions thrust me back into a situation I'd thought myself well rid of and never hoped to experience again." He regarded Poseidon and each of the heroes in turn. "I daresay that there's justice in granting her that same fate. Exile her from Storybrooke; return her to the life she's left behind her in New York; perhaps alter her memories just enough that she won't recall how to find her way back here—I've more confidence in that brand of magic than in the one that's supposed to guard the town line—but leave her the memories of her time here and the chance she squandered." He smiled. "And, well, the city in which she was residing is situated at a point at which a river meets an ocean. Perhaps, in time—assuming that you're able to acquire one of those... other means of passage," here he gave Poseidon the faintest of smiles, "you might be able to visit her once more. And perhaps, you'll have better luck at persuading her."

Poseidon scanned the faces about the table, reading each expression in turn. At last, he nodded slowly. "Let it be as you suggest," he assented. "And on the matter of compensation...?"
Rumple shook his head. "Your daughter's actions weren't at your behest," he pointed out. "I'm hardly about to hold you accountable. So long as you're in agreement with what's been discussed here and now," he added, his voice hardening slightly.

Poseidon's lip curled, and for a moment, anger flashed in his eyes. But then he nodded once more. "So shall it be." He took a breath. "It will take a bit of time for me to properly seal off passage," he admitted. "Such power is within my purview to wield, but I've not had occasion to use it before. I'll need to ensure that nothing goes awry before the spell is cast."

"Actually," David spoke again, "before Killian," he smiled apologetically at the pirate before turning his focus back to the mer-king, "let us know that you were in town, we were planning to call on a man this morning who has a certain… aptitude for portal magic. Perhaps you'll accompany us there now?"

Poseidon turned the offer over in his head for a moment. Then he rose to his feet with a half-shrug. "Very well."

The others got up as well. They were halfway to the door, when Rumple called after them, "Emma? A word, if you please?"

Emma swallowed hard. "You go on ahead," she murmured to the others. "I'll catch up."

"Swan—" Killian started to say, but Emma shook her head.

"It's okay. Go."

Then she swallowed again, squared her shoulders, and turned back to face Rumple.

The baby was crying and Cruella was glowering as her fingers flew toward her earlobes.

"We can't," Lily said, already pulling the tab on a bottle of formula. "From what you were telling me, the sleeping curse makes its victims look dead. What if Regina's protection spell doesn't know the difference?"

"If you can't stop that brat from crying, dahling, I'll risk it," Cruella said. "Magic may be a good deal smarter than you think."

"Lily's right, though," Ursula said. "Protection spells are old magic, but sleeping curses—sleeping curses that don't wear off in a day or so, I mean—didn't exist until Mal made them. And that whole 'semblance of death' aspect is another thing she introduced." Her expression was serious. "The wizards who first fashioned the protection spells we all learn might not have anticipated those improvements. Enchanting the infant now might well be stabbing ourselves in the foot."

"Surely, you mean 'shooting'?
"

"Tridents don't use bullets." She shook her head. The child was wailing louder. Then she turned to the spell components she'd taken from the cellar and uncorked a sealed jar with a pale blue liquid.

"Here," she said to Lily. "Put a couple of drops of this in the formula. It's no sleeping curse, but it will keep her calm for about seven or eight hours."

"Are you sure it's safe for a newborn?" Lily asked, taking the jar from her.

"Not getting soft are we?" Ursula smirked.
Lily shook her head with some irritation. "No, I just want to make sure we don't kill her for real, okay?"

"Yes," Ursula nodded, hoping that Lily had caught onto what she'd been hinting. "A bit of pragmatism seldom goes amiss. And no, it won't kill her. Kelpie tears are an old mer-folk remedy for colic. Among other uses," she added with a shrug. "Our physiology isn't that different from yours, once you get past the externals like tails and tentacles. It's safe enough."

"Thanks," Lily nodded, filling a pot with boiling water and setting it on the stove. "Guess I ought to sterilize the thing first."

"Just... hurry," Cruella gritted. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

Ursula sighed. "Then go wait in the car until she's calm again. We'll call you."

"Finally!" Cruella huffed, reaching for her fur stole. "A good idea."

"We don't have to tell her right off when the baby's settled down, do we?" Lily asked, once the cabin door had safely closed behind Cruella.

Ursula shook her head. "Better wait until we're sure she's napping." She cast a long-suffering glance at the door. "Really, really sure."

Lily smiled.

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Emma squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and forced herself to meet Rumple's eyes. "I'm sorry—," she started to apologize, but Rumple held up a hand, cutting her off in mid-word.

"Don't," he said firmly. "I suppose it was on your advice that Poseidon came here with a plea about being reunited with a child lost to him, lo these many years."

The old Emma, the Emma who had come to Storybrooke at the plea of the son she'd surrendered for adoption at the moment of his birth, would have stammered out another apology, turned tail and fled. But while there was a part of her that still felt like doing so, she managed a shaky nod instead. "Yes."

Rumple's head was up, his shoulders were back, and his gaze hard and steely. "It would seem that you know me too well," he snapped.

"I—"

"I say 'seem','" he barreled on, "because as much as I sometimes do find it gratifying to be understood, your comprehension can be somewhat inconsistent at times." He shook his head.

"You've never lived through a war, have you?" he went on in a gentler tone. "I don't mean a conflict fought in some distant land on the other end of the earth." He fixed his eyes on hers once more. "You've never been in a war fought on your home soil."

"No."

"Well," Rumple said flatly, "I have." He looked away again, as he continued. "I shattered my own ankle so that I would be sent home from the front. I told myself it was to save my boy from growing up fatherless, but... that wasn't it." He'd told her as much before, in Manhattan, though not quite so openly. And it was with some trepidation that he met Emma's eyes once more, still half-expecting to see some of the same disdain—if not outright contempt—with which Milah had
greeted him on his return from said front. When, instead, Emma just nodded, he went on. "The Second Ogre War claimed our taxes, our crops, and our livestock for the army. I seized the opportunity to become the Dark One when it was poised to claim my son." He shook his head. And when he spoke again, his voice was bleak. "Were I still the Dark One now, even at the height of my power, I think I might hesitate to provoke an all-out war with the Sea King. I can scarcely blame you for seeking to avoid such."

Emma blinked. "Y-you're not angry?"

Rumple sighed. "I was," he admitted. "Not because I thought that you lied to me last night. And not because I thought that you were trying to go back on your word today." He shook his head. "I suppose I just dislike feeling as though I'm... being manipulated."

Emma winced. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know." He smiled for the first time. "That's why I'm not angry anymore. Though I would appreciate a more... well, a more forthright approach in future. Considering that you've requested as much from me on more than one occasion."

"You're right," Emma admitted, wincing for the second time in as many moments. "Uh... can I apologize now?"

"Now that you understand what it is you need to apologize for?" Rumple asked gently. "You may. Provided you aren't about to do something melodramatic like fall to your knees in tears, of course."

Emma made a face. "I've never been much for kneeling or crying," she pointed out. "But I'm sorry I tried to... to back you into a corner that way. I guess I was so caught up between feeling rotten about maybe having to go back on my word to you last night and not wanting to risk a war and..."

She sighed. "I guess I have a hard time with that whole 'opening up and asking for help when I'm in over my head' stuff, too."

"Don't beat yourself up too badly over it, Emma," Rumple smiled. "You've been improving. Apology accepted. Well. I'd say we've devoted enough time to this subject. I think we'd best join the others and get our business with the Apprentice out of the way before this afternoon's meeting."

"You want a lift?"

Rumple shook his head. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I do believe that my car delivers a smoother ride. You're welcome to accompany me, if you'd care to experience the difference for yourself."

Emma grinned. "Okay. And thanks."

Rumple smiled back. "You are quite welcome."

Having people attempt to renege on prior contracts was nothing new. Having people trying to work with him in good faith to find fair compromises—compromises that didn't involve exploiting loopholes (as Cora had once done), outright treachery (as Cinderella in collusion with Snow White and Prince David had once done) or blackmail (as Ursula, Maleficent, and Cruella had, at least, attempted)—was.

Nobody had disparaged his desire to see those who had wronged him properly punished. Nobody had dismissed last night's ordeal as though it was unimportant in the face of impending war. Nobody had presented him with a fait accompli without asking for his input.
And as for the new arrangement, well, there was a bit more to it than a cursory read might suggest. Oh, it sounded merciful enough, and to an extent, it was. That much was only fair. For one thing, Rumple knew full well that Ursula hadn't *had* to heal him. For all her talk about needing him, he had no illusions on that score. They hadn't even considered asking him to ally with them—which meant that they not only knew that he was no longer the Dark One, but that he had, in fact, turned over a new leaf. If their goal—as he rather suspected—had been to prevent him from foiling whatever plans they had, then surely it didn't really matter to them whether he lived or died. Oh, they might not have set out to kill him, but he doubted that Cruella cared one way or the other. He wasn't certain about Lily. Ursula though, whatever her reasons, had kept him alive when he might have succumbed to his injuries before Belle and Emma could find him. He owed her for that. And a gentleman always paid his debts.

And Poseidon's plea, coached though it had been, had achieved its hoped-for effect. And he was honest enough with himself to admit that if, when he and Emma had gone to New York in search of Bae, they'd found him in the clutches of some mobster or loan shark, he would have found some way of freeing his son and making those who sought to harm him pay dearly. Yes, he could put himself in Poseidon's place all too easily and he wasn't prepared to stand between an enraged, powerful father, and the estranged child with whom he hoped to reconcile.

All this, he would happily tell the heroes if they pressed him. And it was true enough that even Emma's superpower would be satisfied.

But it wasn't the whole truth.

The truth was that—as Zelena had gloated to him repeatedly during his months of captivity—frustration could be intoxicating… *on others*. Whatever scheme Ursula and her companions were cooking up, Rumple rather suspected that they'd tipped their hand too soon. The town was alert and aware now. The three newcomers *would* be thwarted. It was only a matter of time. And then, either Ursula would return to her underwater kingdom with her father, or to her life in New York. Either way, she'd be out of Storybrooke, no longer his problem. And wherever she was, she would have to live with the knowledge that her plans had been foiled, that she was now back where she started from—in either case, depending on how one defined a 'starting point', left to think about what she could have achieved and allowed to slip through her fingers.

Rumple knew from personal experience just how keenly such failure could cut.

In fact, Rumple suspected that, even were he to share his reasoning with the heroes, they wouldn't castigate him for it. And, he rather thought that, if he ever needed a favor from Poseidon, the sea king would be well-disposed toward granting it—not that Rumple would ever state outright that the king of the mer-folk was in his debt, of course. Such would almost certainly be understood implicitly.

Curious. While he might indeed be losing out on the vengeance he'd so been looking forward to, he was hard-put to consider his current situation anything other than a *win*. A broad smile creased his face.

In the passenger seat beside him, Emma saw it and replied with a grin of her own.

_Tia greeted them at the door with a strained smile. "What can I do for you?" she murmured._

_"We were wondering whether your uncle has returned yet," Rumple replied._

_Tia shifted her weight uneasily from one foot to the other. "Well, he… uh…"_
"Tia," Tony appeared in the doorway behind her. "Come on." He looked at the party assembled on the doorstep. "I... this might be something you know more about than we do," he admitted. "Please." He nudged his sister and she moved to one side reluctantly. "If you'll follow me," Tony went on. "Us." He looked to Tia. "Us?" he repeated questioningly. When she nodded, he smiled. "Us," he repeated emphatically.

"Well?" Lily demanded.

Ursula's frown eased. "I think that's the last seal. We should be able to get inside now, though Regina will know someone's been there. Once inside, though, I'm not sure I'll know where to look."

"Well, how big can it be in there?" Lily asked. "We know what we're looking for," she paused for a beat. "Even if I'm still trying to wrap my head around it. How many places could we need to search?"

Ursula regarded her for a moment. Then, speaking slowly, as though to a child, she said, "My spell just disabled Regina's burglar alarm and unlocked the door. It doesn't do a sea urchin's spine for any other booby traps she might have lying around."

"I thought we just needed to get Zelena's baby to touch the... protection field?" she asked.

"Okay," Ursula said. "But unless Rumple's heart is sitting out in the open in some sort of display case—and I can assure you that *that* wouldn't be Regina's style, we're going to have to go opening cabinets and pulling out drawers. And should we pull the wrong one, well, back in the Enchanted Forest, I know she used to keep an Agrabahn viper in there. The thing has two heads. Each carries its own supply of venom, either of which can kill an adult-sized human in less than five minutes. If they both sink their fangs into you, cut that time by about seventy-five per cent. Let's just say that I don't want to pull the wrong one, okay, kid?"

"Okay, okay," Lily breathed. "So what do you suggest?"

Ursula sighed. "Go back to the cabin, collect Cruella and the kid. Cruella's control over animals will neutralize any guard-reptiles or other animal sentries. And we can hope my magic is enough to counter any other defenses, but without knowing what other protections she has in play, well, we'll need to be careful. If I tell you not to touch anything, I mean, 'Do not touch anything'. All those cheesy kiddie cartoons where the character steps on the wrong stone and triggers a spike trap or falls thought a hidden trap door? That kind of stuff could actually happen. And since this isn't a kiddie cartoon, getting up and walking away after springing such a trap is by no means a given."

"Got it."

"Good. Let's get back to the cabin."

"I'm not crazy," Tia said levelly. "I know he's barely breathing, but he's in there."

"Interesting," Rumple said, his voice thoughtful. "It's been a long time since I've encountered this strain of it."

"You know what this is?" Tony asked.

"Strain?" Tia repeated. "You're saying it's some disease?"

Rumple shook his head. "Not a disease, a curse. A sleeping curse. A version somewhat more
"archaic than the one Regina used," he added.

"Wait, what?" David interrupted.

Rumple turned to him with a faint shrug. "Well, as I told you before you chose to place yourself under one, before such innovations as the apple, one required a more direct method to succumb to one."

"Blood, you told me," David remembered.

"Correct. But when the apple was introduced, so was one particular… enhancement. You see, so long as the sleeping curse was administered in its pure state—coating a spindle or the blade of a sword—victims simply fell into a deep slumber from which there was no awakening. But once it's added to a food, particularly one with some sugar content," he smiled, "ah, that's when the curse takes on the semblance of death. That didn't happen in your case, because you used a spindle. And here," he gestured to the Apprentice, "well, my guess is that while it wasn't added to a food before dosing him, he'd likely been eating something on the sugary side shortly beforehand. The result is an appearance that almost mimics death, but not quite."

"So, how do we wake him?" Tony asked, his tone mingling worry and hope in almost equal measures.

Rumple regarded the two siblings seriously. "True Love's Kiss," he said. "I'm afraid that's the only method known to be effective."

Tony and Tia exchanged a quick glance. "You," Tony said. "He always liked you best."

Tia shook her head with a long-suffering smile. "Tony, he did not. Does not," she amended. "He was just a better teacher for me than he was for you is all. That's got nothing to do with love." She rested a hand on her brother's shoulder for a moment. "So if this doesn't work, you get to try next."

She turned to Rumple. "I guess if I need to, I need to, but… it doesn't have to be on the lips, does it?"

"I'll field this one," Emma broke in. "To wake up my son, I kissed him on the forehead."

Rumple nodded. "Your lips on his skin, dearie. Where doesn't matter."

"I understand," Tia nodded. She bent down and brought her face toward the Apprentice's.

"Tony and I aren't ready to let you go yet, Uncle," she murmured. "We love you too much to say goodbye." Then she kissed his cheek.

A bright light seemed to emanate from the kiss sending a ripple of rainbow and gold across the room. The Apprentice gulped in a lungful of air and his eyes flew open. "Tia," he said warmly. "Tony." His smile broadened. "Your sister spoke correctly, you know." He struggled to sit up. "But then," he added teasingly, "she generally does."

"I hate to be the one to break up this reunion," Killian said diffidently, "but I do believe we've much to discuss."

The Apprentice fixed him with a solemn stare. "Yes," he nodded slowly. "You're quite right." He made a face. "I'm afraid my mouth feels like damp cotton. Give me a moment to change that state of affairs and we'll repair downstairs to the living room. We can talk there."
Lunch hadn't yet arrived when the door to Zelena's cell opened and the Blue Fairy walked in with her customary prim smile. "Good morning, dear," she said. "And how are we feeling today?"

Zelena frowned. This was virtually the same manner in which the pest greeted her at every visit. Surely, there should have been something a bit… warmer? Not that she wanted warmth, but something a bit… Whatever. If she wanted to see her daughter, then she was going to have to curb her tongue and play the game. So, she forced herself to smile, slid back into the 'nice' act she'd assumed in order for Snow White to hire her as her midwife, and replied, "I'm doing well enough, thank you. I'm just hoping I can see my baby today."

Blue's smile grew a touch warmer. "I believe I did see something in your chart about an ultrasound scheduled for a week from tomorrow. I can confirm that for you, if you'd like."

"An ultrasound?" Zelena repeated, hearing the words but not understanding what they had to do with her now. "Why would I need that?" She smiled uneasily. "I-I had the baby last night."

Blue's eyebrows rose. "That's not possible, dear," she replied.

"But it happened!" She heard the agitation in her own voice and fought to stay calm. "I mean, y-you were there!"

The fairy shook her head. "I wasn't on duty last night," she said slowly. "But from what you're telling me…” Her voice took on a new gentleness. "I think, perhaps, you might benefit from speaking with Doctor Hopper. I'll ask him if he can pop by this afternoon." She sighed. "I know it's difficult for you, shut away down here in isolation. While it is what you deserve, perhaps there's some way to—"

A bolt of magical force slammed her against the wall without warning and she stifled a cry as she slid to the floor. Zelena loomed over her, a furious expression on her face, and a glowing green globe of power in one hand. "You're going to take me to my daughter," she enunciated clearly. "Right… NOW." Then she plunged her free hand into the Blue Fairy's chest.
Chapter Thirty-Five

The Blue Fairy shrieked and tried to twist away, but Zelena was done with patience. She waved her free hand and the cell became soundproof. Another wave and the last few moments of camera footage altered to display a far more peaceful scene. She focused on the cameras for a second longer to ensure that they would continue to hide what was actually transpiring at the moment. "Now..." she smiled nastily, "let's just see what you're hiding—*What?*" Her eyes grew wide and she withdrew her hand with a howl of frustration. "NO!"

The Blue Fairy slumped trembling on the floor, her back to the wall, her eyes closed, her lips twitching feverishly, whether in prayer or plea, the witch didn't know. Then, almost fearfully, she opened her eyes and took in, both the dismayed expression on the witch's face, and her empty hand. "Thank you," she whispered.

Zelena's eyes widened. "You mean... you didn't...? Y-you don't...?"

The fairy regarded her with confusion. "Didn't what?" she managed.

Zelena backed away, still holding her hand upright, her fingers curved claw-like toward her own chest. "You don't know," she whispered, comprehending at last.

"Know what?" Blue demanded, struggling to her feet once more.

Zelena lunged for her. "*You don't know!*" she shrieked. "Well then! I suppose you can still be of use to me in another way..."

Several minutes later, the Blue Fairy emerged from Zelena's cell and headed for the nursing station, looking none the worse for wear. She left behind a frantic Zelena, tugging ineffectively at a leather bracelet displayed prominently on her left wrist.

"I just thought you might like to know," she told the on-duty nurse, "that the patient seems unduly agitated today." Her lips curled in a faint smile. "She was actually insisting that she was I and I was she."

"Huh," the nurse sniffed. "That doesn't sound good."

"No," Blue shook her head. "But I must say she did a good job of aping my mannerisms. Even I was impressed. I only mention it in case she tries to convince you."

"No worries on that score," the nurse said easily. "I'll make a note in her file."

"I'd appreciate that."

"And perhaps, we ought to send for Dr. Hopper?"

Blue smiled. "Exactly what I was thinking. I'll make the necessary arrangements."

The nurse smiled back. "Excellent."
"Wait," Emma said, leaning forward in her chair. "You told Lily to track down Ursula and Cruella? Why?"

The Apprentice sighed. "Guilt can be a powerful motivator. It was my fault that those three were brought to this realm. And, while I can open a portal back, even in a land where no magic exists, suffice to say that it's a far easier task when I need not."

Rumple raised an eyebrow. "By 'easier'," he asked, "would you mean that the magic in the air gives your talent a bit of a boost, or that your spell stands less chance of going awry?"

"Both, of course," the Apprentice replied. "But then, you guessed that already, going by your immediate reaction when you learned that Regina had contrived to use a sleeping curse in this place, well before you cast that potion into the well in the woods."

"Just how much of our activities have you been observing?" Rumple demanded testily. "And for how long?"

"I'm sorry," the Apprentice smiled. "I thought you might have guessed, particularly after meeting my protégés. I haven't been observing you at all, for the most part; it's only my master's domicile that possesses the necessary equipment and, not only was it not present in this town during the First Curse, but even now that it is, its range only extends to its property boundaries. Not all seers foresee the future alone. Not even all seers you met back in the realm of your birth." He shook his head. "Like you, I can't always visualize every twist and turn that must come to pass. I must glean among snippets and scraps and hope that when I lay them out, I'll see enough of the pattern to divine how the final tableau must look. My successes vary."

Rumple's eyes widened. And then, in his memory, he heard a child's singsong chant, "Rumpelstiltskin, the son of a coward. Raised by spinster. Scared of ending up just like his father. Did I overhear that? I told you. I see all, even what has yet to pass." Even. Not only. He shook his head slowly. "I was so caught up in finding Bae," he murmured, "I only occupied myself with looking into what would need to come to pass before the curse could be cast. I never thought to explore…"

"You never had a teacher, right?" Tony ventured. "I mean, I know you must have for Dark Magic." At Rumple's sharp look, he shrugged. "I'm not sure if Uncle Bené brought it up, but I work at the Conjuring Arts Research Center in Manhattan. I've read enough in the stacks there over the years to have a bit of understanding of how a Dark One learns to get a handle on his powers." He glanced at the others in the room. "It's a curse that comes with built-in instructors, right?"

Rumple nodded slowly, his expression still guarded. "Typically, one previous host serves as primary teacher—in my case, it was Zoso, my immediate predecessor—though the others do chime in from time to time. But while they were able to teach me how to wield magic, my ability to foresee the future came from another source. I had to master that on my own."

"And, like us," Tia nodded, "you probably went by trial and error, figuring out a lot over time, but not necessarily getting it all." She shook her head. "We picked up what we needed to know and built on that along the way, but once we found our own people, we realized how little we'd scratched the surface of what we could do."

"In your case," the Apprentice murmured, "your talents grew as you did. You found us at a point when you needed instruction before your power got away from you." He turned to Rumple.

"In yours, it's a wonder you managed to the extent you did; I've seen many who acquired the talent in adulthood and either lost their wits entirely or spent too much time gazing into the past or the
future to live in the present."

Rumple flinched. "I believe," he said dryly, "that I'm relieved to have only learned about those
dangers now."

"Getting back on track," David said, frowning at the Apprentice, "you don't think you could have
given us a heads-up that Ursula and Cruella were coming here? Or, at least, that you wanted them
here?"

The Apprentice raised an eyebrow. "Had you learned what I'd set in motion, even as recently as
three months ago, would you have helped or hindered my efforts?"

David lowered his eyes guiltily. Snow shifted uncomfortably in her chair. The Apprentice nodded.
"That's why."

"And within the last three months?" Snow asked.

The Apprentice shook his head. "I met Maleficent's daughter once, when she was barely seventeen.
At the time, I gave her instructions. It's only recently that she's chosen to act on them. And when
she did," he gave Rumple a penetrating look, "I was rather… indisposed. And then, I imagine
you'll recall that I had other matters that preoccupied me." He shook his head. "While I did try to
keep track of Lilith, it seems that my being absorbed by the hat severed whatever tenuous
connection I'd maintained with her until that juncture. I tried to renew it, but she was on the move
and hard to pinpoint."

"I thought you found her on a bus, in the middle of nowhere all those years ago," Emma said.

"Yes, before it had gone more than thirty miles from the city in which she'd been living for nearly
six months. Had it gone much farther, I'm not certain I could have found her again until she'd
settled down once more. At any rate, I was able to retain some initial connection with her because,
even while I was forced to cast the spell that sent her here, I was intent on finding some way to
right the wrong I was committing. I couldn't stop the spell, but I hoped that in time, something
might be done to get around it. Although I was compelled to send Maleficent's child here, even in
the sending, I was able to keep some portion of my awareness tethered to her. At least, for so long
as she remained settled in one place. Once she grew up and began to wander, it became more
difficult. At any rate, by then, I'd given her the roadmap she'd need; my oversight became
somewhat superfluous. As for Ursula and Cruella," he shook his head, "unfortunately the spell was
never meant for them and I had no opportunity to work a means of tracking them into my
enchantment. Otherwise, I would have approached them directly years ago, as I had Lilith."

"Where are these ladies now, mate?" Killian asked quietly. "We know that they're in town, but not
much more than that. Are you able to pinpoint their coordinates?"

The Apprentice frowned. "It's not as though I haven't been trying," he said, "but at the moment, I
cannot. It will come to me in time, but I think you'd be wise to rely on other means."

He smiled at Poseidon. "Now. As to the portal magic your majesty means to employ, well, that's
something else entirely. Something that the two of us shall need to discuss at greater length."

The sea king nodded, unsurprised. "Well then," he said, "the sooner we begin, the sooner we'll be
done."

The Apprentice looked at the others. "If you've no further questions for me…?"

A polite dismissal was still a dismissal and the others got to their feet and prepared to take their
leave, all but Poseidon and Ariel.

"I'll stay if that's all right," the mermaid stated. "I'd like to find out how many ways I'll have to come back here once you've sealed off the usual route."

The Apprentice shrugged. "Our discussion will wax technical," he cautioned. "You may find it tedious, but so long as you do not interrupt us, you may remain with your grandfather—assuming he doesn't object, of course."

Poseidon shook his head. "Let her stay if she wishes. But keep an eye to your… gadgets and gizmos? My niece has ever been curious about such things and I doubt that's changed any."

"Grandfather!" Ariel protested, her smile tinged with embarrassment, but there was no disapproval evident on the Apprentice's face.

"Nor should it," he smiled approvingly. "Come."

"What about us, Uncle?" Tia asked.

"Just as you like. There's no need for you to remain here, unless you wish it."

Tony rose to his feet then. "I could do with some air, then," he said. "I'll be back later."

"I'll stay," Tia replied, smiling at Ariel. "I'm always curious about magic."

Ariel smiled back.

"Henry? Henry! Is everything okay?"

Henry blinked, realizing that Cecily had been trying to get his attention for… well, he didn't actually know how long, but longer than she should have had to. "Sorry," he murmured.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You seem out of it."

Henry sighed. "I guess I just didn't get much sleep."

Cecily nodded. "I hear that. I was up late trying to get my head around the math homework; we didn't worry about negative exponents or, well, any exponents back home. And I didn't have a chance earlier; Aggie was getting in everyone's way and I had to get her settled and then the twins needed their baths and Benjie needed…" She broke off. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay," Henry reassured her. "Actually, it's kind of good hearing about that stuff. Regular stuff, I mean."

Cecily laughed. "Try living it."

Henry's face remained serious. "I almost wish I could. I," he took a breath. "A few years back, I wanted my life to be more exciting. Now that it is, I'd kind of like it to be more… normal."

"What do you mean?"

Henry didn't answer for a minute. Until recently, while he'd gotten along well with most of the other kids at school, he hadn't really had any close friends. Things were better on that front this year; somehow, during that fake life in New York, he'd learned a bit better how to manage on the social front. But sharing and confidences still didn't come easily. Maybe it was because both of his
mothers tended to keep things to themselves instead of talking them over. And it annoyed the heck out of him when they did. And then, realizing that Cecily probably didn't know which grandfather he was talking about, he added, "Grandpa Gold."

"What?" Cecily's eyes grew wide. "Henry, that's—"

"We found him. I mean, Roland saw him and…" Briefly, he relayed as much as he knew about that part.

Cecily shook her head in wonder. "Skippy was talking about that yesterday," she mused. "Not about your grandpa; about Roland leaving so quickly. He thought he might have done something to upset him. I'll tell him he didn't when I get home later. But your grandpa, how is he?"

Henry shook his head. "I don't know. Nobody ever tells me anything." He sighed heavily. Then he almost jumped out of his skin when he felt a reassuring pat on his hand.

"Sorry!" Cecily exclaimed, a stricken look on her face. "I thought—"

"It's okay!" Henry said quickly. He smiled for the first time. "I just wasn't expecting… It's okay," he repeated firmly. He smiled again, a bit more nervously. "Really, really okay."

When she patted his hand again, he covered it with his other one.

"Cruella and I will take it from here," Ursula said finally. "Unless there's something else you see?"

Lily shook her head. "That silent alarm was it," she said. "And it wasn't even on."

"It wouldn't have had to be," Ursula replied. "Remember how Zelena knew we were in her house? Sentry spells are a sight more effective. I'd wager Regina hasn't turned on the alarm since Rumple brought magic here after Emma broke the curse."

"And you're sure the magical defenses are all down now?"

Ursula shook her head. "No. That's why Cruella and I are going to search inside while you stand lookout. If you see anyone coming, signal."

Lily frowned for a moment. "I thought we were going to do this together."

"I know," Ursula admitted. But someone has to stand lookout. And, don't take this the wrong way, but you don't really know much about magic."

"I can learn."

"I know. But this isn't the right time or place. Regina's magic is powerful. Cruella and I have come in contact with it before; we know what to expect. Educating you will take time we might not have and if we forget something, or you do, we could all be pulled into the undertow before we recognize the danger." She shook her head. "And I'm just as glad you'll be topside," she added. "If anyone does happen by, we could use the heads-up."

"Fine," Lily sighed, resigned. "How am I supposed to sound the alarm, then? Whistle? Get in the car and honk the horn—I was just kidding!" she snapped, before Cruella could reply. "Sheesh, you're easy."

"In more ways than one," Ursula deadpanned, as Cruella feigned indifference. She thought for a
moment. Then, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a blue mussel shell. "I went for a walk on the beach last night," she said. "While Zelena's spell components have their uses, sometimes I prefer the tools I grew up using. This will do nicely, I believe." She separated the two halves of the shell with a light, but audible, snap. She held one piece in each hand and stared intently at them for a few seconds. A miasma of sea-green light hung over her hands for a moment, and then dissipated. "Here," Ursula held out her hands to Lily. "Take one. Put it in your pocket. And if anyone comes, press firmly down on the inside of the shell with your fingertips."

"My fingertips," Lily repeated, taking one half as directed.

Ursula nodded. "Touching the outside won't do anything. Taking it by the edges won't either. And even if your fingertips brush the inside—something I think you'd call a 'butt-dial' if I'd given you a cell phone instead, well, I might notice a faint buzzing, but I'll probably dismiss it as accidental. Firm pressure on the inside, though, will tell me it's time to leave—fight if it comes to it, but preferably get away before we're spotted. I just compared it to a phone, but it's actually more like a pager; we can signal each other with it, but we can't talk. So if you use it, I'll have no way to know whether we just need to leave quickly or whether we're in real trouble. I'll be ready for either."

"Got it," Lily nodded, pocketing the shell. "Good luck."

Ursula snorted. "Luck favors heroes," she said with a tinge of bitterness. "I'll rely on my magic. But thanks for the thought."

Lily watched as the two women stepped into the mausoleum and closed the door behind them. Then she sat down on the stoop, leaned back against the door, and settled in for a wait.

Regina seldom had the opportunity to sleep late. During the Curse, she'd always awakened precisely at 7:15AM—unless she set her alarm for earlier. She'd gone through a period when she had done so, just to prove to herself that she was one of the only people in town who was not Cursed, but getting up before sunrise in winter just to prove a point had eventually come to feel like a curse of its own. Besides, once she'd adopted Henry, she'd come to cherish every extra moment of slumber she could get; he hadn't slept through the night until he was nearly eleven months old. And then, she'd still had to get up early so that she could get dressed, have breakfast, get Henry dressed, and make him breakfast, before dropping him off at daycare on her way into the office. When he'd gotten older, it had been seeing to it that he was dressed and breakfasted before the school bus came, but by then she'd given up trying to fight it. She was a confirmed early riser, like it or not.

All the same, it had felt deliciously decadent to open her eyes and see the digital clock by her bedside read 10:42 and realize that she couldn't remember when she'd slept better. She'd been smiling as she languidly pushed back her coverlet and swung her bare feet onto her bedroom carpet. She reached for her phone, charging on her night table, to see whether anyone had been trying to reach her.

Fifteen minutes later, she was frantically trying to get her left arm into her suit jacket sleeve while she opened her fridge with her right hand and grabbed a bran muffin. Why, why didn't she have the Apprentice's phone number programmed? She frowned, wondering whether he actually had a phone. He hadn't been in Storybrooke when the Curse had created it; it wouldn't necessarily have provided him with the same trappings of modernity. It didn't matter. She couldn't call him, but she could call on him.

She took a moment to examine her reflection in the hall mirror. Adequate, she supposed. At least, good enough that nobody who saw her on the street would think she was letting herself go. And
who cared if they did? Right now, she had more important things to worry about—like if the Apprentice had been under a sleeping curse for the last few days, whether it had been he who had turned up at her office the other day, or…?

"Why the hell did I ever teach her how to cast that glamor spell?" she muttered under her breath as she made her way to the garage, where her Mercedes awaited.

The Apprentice's eyebrows shot up when he heard the sharp rap on his door. "If your majesty will excuse me for one moment," he murmured in a tone that, while polite, made it clear that he was not asking the sea king's permission. "My lady," he gave Ariel a slight bow, as he pushed his chair back from the table.

Poseidon gave a half-shrug, but once the older man had gone to the door, his face set in a deep frown. He was used to far more deference than this, and while this Bené had been unfailingly polite, the mer-king was hard-put to think of any one of his subjects who would have interrupted a serious conversation with him to respond to another's query, or who would have turned their back to him instead of swimming backwards out of his presence, facing him with deference until they'd left the throne room. "I suppose," he murmured to his granddaughter, one can't expect surface dwellers to know proper etiquette."

Ariel shrugged. "I wonder…" she mused.

"Ariel?"

"Forgive me grandfather," she smiled, "I was just wondering how certain we are that it's our etiquette that's the proper one and not theirs."

Poseidon blinked.

"Maybe," the young mermaid went on, "there's more than one proper etiquette."

Poseidon grunted something non-committal and leaned back in his chair with a scowl, as the Apprentice returned, leading a dark-haired woman into the living room.

"I can't really stay," she was saying to him. "I just need the answer to one question."

"Oh?" the old man asked with an air of disappointment. "I thought you might care for tea. I was just about to put a pot on."

The woman gave him a polite smile. "I guess that would depend on the answer," she replied. "I'm afraid that if it's not what I hope to hear, I won't have time."

"Ah," the Apprentice nodded. "Very well, then. Proceed. Oh. Have you met my other guests?"

Regina's eyes widened slightly when she saw who else was in the room. "King Poseidon I know by reputation only," she replied with a gracious smile. "But Ariel and I have had dealings in the past. Hello, again, dear."

Ariel gave the queen a guarded smile.

"Your question?" the Apprentice prompted.

Regina nodded. "I've been informed that you've been… indisposed for the last day or so," she began. "What I need to know is, before that happened, did you by any chance pay a call on me at
my office?"

The Apprentice shook his head. "I did not. Because you're asking, may I assume that someone else did?"

Regina nodded. "Yes," she murmured, "yes, I think you must. And no," she added, turning to go back the way she'd come. "I'm afraid I can't stay to tea."

"Is there any further way in which I can be of assistance?" the Apprentice probed, hurrying to catch up with her.

"I'll let you know," Regina said, still sounding distracted. "Lovely to meet you, your majesty. Ariel."

After the door closed behind her, the Apprentice sighed. "I suppose I'll hear more about the cause of her visit in due course," he said, coming back to the table. "Now, insofar as sealing off this realm from your brand of magic, I believe that if we were to…"

There were no clues left behind at the farmhouse. Zelena had been over every square inch of it with her eyes, her hands, and her magic. The car tracks drove out to the main road and she could follow it until it reached town, but then the trail disappeared. She should have thought to 'tag' the vehicle so she could find it no matter where it went. She should have thought about a lot of things. She always had before. And it wasn't as though she hadn't had plenty of time on her hands to review her options.

Where was her baby? What had they done with her? Why had they taken her?

She went down to the storm cellar again, trying to ignore the way the Light magic residue in the air made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Her eyes opened wide. This wasn't Emma's magic, nor Regina's. She'd felt both and this was different—a strange mingling of fresh, untried talent with age-old experience; she'd never encountered the like. She picked up a piece of wire from the floor. There had been a fair amount of raw power involved in this destruction, but while there had been some control there, it was less-focused, stiff, almost clumsy, as though it had gone untapped for far too long. There was no mistaking the primal emotion that had been behind its release, though. Whoever had done this had been furious. Something glinted on the floor and she stooped and picked up a long piece of pale yellow straw. Straw didn't glint, not like this. She tilted her head to look at it from a different angle and her breath caught. Spiraling through the straw was a ribbon of darker, glistening gold.

She nearly dropped the piece in her hand. She'd seen the results of Rumple's spinning before. It had never looked like this. But she didn't know any other than her dearly departed mother who could spin straw into gold. And she definitely couldn't think of another person with more reason to release their temper—a temper she'd spied all too many times while planning her vengeance—against the cage that had once sat here intact. "Light magic, Rumple?" she whispered. "I'd never have thought it of you. But then, I never would have believed that my sister could switch sides either." A wild hope darted into her mind. If Rumple was using Light magic, then…

Then maybe he'd be willing to help me find my daughter. After all, heroes forgive past wrongs all the time. And I did save his life back in New York. He owes me. He might not see it that way, she knew. But if she were to ask for his help while he was in the presence of some of the other heroes, say, the likes of the Charmings, and Emma, and—of course—Belle, well, they'd surely add their voices to hers, pressuring him to 'do the right thing'. And anyway, what did she have to lose? Her self-respect? That had already taken quite the pummeling after today's revelations. And what was
more important right now? Her pride? Or her daughter's life?

Zelena closed her eyes tightly for a moment and clenched her hands to fists at her sides. This wasn't going to be easy, but then her life seldom had been. She didn't know where her daughter was and Rumple might just be her best chance. She had to try.

She pressed her lips together tightly and nodded. Then she straightened her spine, squared her shoulders, and opened her eyes. She could do this. She would bargain, she would threaten, she would even plead if she had to. But with any luck, a bargain would suffice.

As much as Regina wanted to be wrong, she'd never been one to hide her head in the sand. After leaving the Apprentice's home, she drove directly to the cemetery. As she turned up the lane that led to her vault, she thought she saw a slight figure standing off to one side in the trees, but when she drew closer, she thought she'd been mistaken. Something about the angle of the trees or the way the interplay of sun and shadows had created an optical illusion. The crypt looked exactly as it always did, she thought, sighing with relief as she parked in front of it. When she got out of the car, though, her relief evaporated. All might have looked as it should, but magic told a different story. Someone had been here after she'd left last night. Someone who knew magic.

She sent a tendril of her power out to probe her defenses. They hadn't been breached; they'd been suspended. Someone had lifted them as though they'd been a curtain, held them aloft, and then lowered them again when they were done. And it had been done very recently. Her eyes narrowed and she lifted her hand in an imperious gesture and waved it before the doorway. She must have just missed them. That figure she'd thought she'd seen hadn't been an illusion, it had been a lookout!

She hurried down the stairs of the crypt to the subterranean vault where she worked her magic and it was a credit to her mother's training in deportment that she didn't utter half the profanities she wanted to. The vault had been ransacked. Drawers and cabinets were open. Spell components were in disarray. The bottles hadn't been broken or uncorked, but they'd been moved about, their storage boxes and shelves overturned. Her eyes flickered to the multi-drawer cabinets where she kept her hearts. A wave of her hand opened the one she knew she needed.

Her own heart plummeted. The drawer was empty. But that meant that... "No," she whispered. "No, she's not supposed to be due for another six months!"

With shaking hands she pulled out her phone and speed-dialed a number, but her voice was steady when she spoke. "Robin," she said, "I'm just at my vault now and there's something I think you ought to hear before I tell the others. In fact, I'm supposed to be meeting with them in about half an hour's time. I think you need to be there, too..."

The serenity and seclusion of the wishing well in the forest was abruptly breached by the hasty appearance of three agitated women and an empty Zimmer Golden Spirit. Their agitation dissipated rapidly when they realized that they were alone in the wood. "That was close," Ursula breathed. "Good thing you saw the car."

Lily shrugged. "It's not my first time standing lookout," she said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Did you get it?"

For answer, Ursula held up a small casket triumphantly. Its lid was open and reposing therein was a small dark chunk of something that might have been glass or a polished gemstone.

"Whoa," Lily breathed, stretching out her hand toward it. A moment later, there was a flash of
silver light and she flew backwards into the broad trunk of a hemlock tree. "Ow!" she yelped, trying to rub her lower back and nurse her fingers simultaneously. "What the hell—?"

"Protection spells," Ursula explained. She shook her head. "I didn't think we'd have to bother with those once we broke through the blood magic!" She considered for a moment. Then she waved her hand over the casket. Silver flames rose up briefly for a moment and the sea witch shook her head. "This is just speculation," she cautioned, "but I'm thinking that Regina must've thrown up these spells as soon as she took possession of the heart. The blood magic lock would have come afterwards. She just never took these early spells off."

"Can you?" Cruella asked.

Ursula sighed. "I think so. They're strong; Lily, you just found that out for yourself, but they aren't especially intricate. It'll take me a little while, but I believe I will be able to burn through them with a bit of effort."

"Well then," Cruella smiled, "let's go back to the relative warmth of the cabin and we'll let you putter undisturbed."

Ursula shook her head. "Not really the best idea," she said. "You know my magic is strongest in the water. Well," she gestured to the wishing well for emphasis, "I think I'll have better results if I set up shop right here." She glanced down at the plaque affixed to one of the stones and smiled. "For centuries," she read aloud "local legend has claimed that mystical waters run beneath this great land. It is said that these waters possess the power to return that which is lost to its rightful place. If you have lost something precious to you, drink from this well and bear witness to this miracle as what is missing shall be returned."

Lily rolled her eyes. "Sounds like superstitious drivel to me," she muttered.

"Outside this town, I'd agree with you," Ursula nodded. "But considering that we know that magic exists here, let's just say it might be prudent to take it at face value. We may not be seeking lost things, but if these waters are enchanted in any way, shape, or form, the power that emanates from them might serve to give my powers a boost."

"You believe that?" Lily asked, skepticism mingling with hope in her voice.

Ursula smiled. "I'd better. Magic is predicated on belief, after all. If I don't believe this can help me, then it definitely won't. Rumple knows we're here. It's just a matter of time before Zelena manages to reach out to someone. We're working against the clock, Lily. And magic or self-confidence, I'll use any advantage I can get my tentacles on to push up our timetable. Now, if you're staying here, I think the baby will be wanting another feeding soon, so better get the formula ready. Cruella, I know you're itching to spike it with sleeping curse, but just hold off a little longer; I don't think we'll need to get through any more blood magic defenses, but I could be wrong and if there's anything else we might need that would require another run at Regina's vault, there could be other items back there that we'll need our little key to unlock. Maybe she ought to stay conscious for now, just in case."

Cruella pouted, but didn't protest.

"Formula's in the car," Lily muttered. "Could you unlock it for me?"

"Spill a drop and I expect you to turtle wax the upholstery."

"Never been good at meeting expectations," Lily shot back. "I'll be careful."
The baby started fussing then, and Cruella bit back her retort as she watched the younger woman rock back and forth, from one foot to the other, trying to quiet the child before her fussing turned to full-blown wails.

"Regina's going to be a bit delayed," Snow announced, as she and David walked into the shop. Belle, Emma and Killian were there already.

"Yes," a new voice spoke up from the corner. "I rather thought she might be."

Rumple hid both his shock and his annoyance rather well, though Belle had caught his start of alarm. That corner had not been occupied a moment ago and there was no way that Poseidon and his imperious presence could have slipped in unnoticed without the aid of the Apprentice who stood with Ariel a half step behind the sea king. "I don't recall inviting any of you to this meeting," he remarked with a hard look in their direction.

"If you're discussing my daughter," Poseidon remarked, "I'd like to be present."

"Just so long as you understand that the discussion is bound to be far less diplomatic than it was earlier," Rumple cautioned. A faint smile tugged at his lip when, out the corner of his eye, he saw both Belle and Emma nodding grimly. He wasn't going to be standing alone against the town this time. There were people in his corner. And though there might be more compromising in store, he was going to have some input into what concessions would be made, instead of being tricked or browbeaten into upholding what everyone else determined.

The bell over the door jangled again and Rumple looked up expecting to see Regina. Instead, the Blue Fairy didn't stumble, so much as tumble into the shop. "I-I need your help, Rumple," she said hoarsely.

"Blue!" Snow exclaimed, taking in the fairy's distraught appearance and wrapping an arm about her trembling shoulders. "Wh-what's happened?"

Rumple, however, remained rigidly behind the counter, his shoulders tense, his eyes narrowed. "That's not the Blue Fairy," he snapped. "No matter how dire her circumstances, she'd never invade this sanctuary of mine, and even if she did, she'd never use so familiar an address with me."

The fairy flinched. Her eyes hardened and her chin lifted imperiously as she drew a harsh breath. Then her façade—together with the glamor spell—shattered. Her short hair lengthened and reddened. Her eyes shifted from brown to blue. Her blue and grey uniform became an olive-green sleeveless dress worn over a long-sleeved turtleneck of darker green.

"Zelena!" Rumple hissed, shock and fury mingling in his voice.

"You've got some nerve coming in here!" Belle snapped, starting forward angrily, as Snow quickly took a step away from the witch.

"I need your help! All of you! Please!"

"You need to leave," Emma said coldly.

"Wait," David ordered, holding up a hand for emphasis. "What have you done with Blue?"

"She's at the hospital," Zelena mumbled. "In my cell, with my face."

"Right," David said, reaching for the set of handcuffs that dangled from his belt. "Let's get you
"No, yes, please! Please, she took my baby!"

"Blue?" Killian asked blankly.

"No, not Blue, you idiot!"

Rumple raised an eyebrow. "Someone's stolen your infant? Well, how poetic," he snorted. "And just who might have done such a thing?"

"I think her name was 'Lily,'" Zelena said heavily. "She's working with two other women—Ursula the Sea Witch and Cruella De Vil. She… brought me some onion rings yesterday. A few hours later, I was in labor."

Emma's eyes widened at that. "Hang on," she said, trying to process what she was hearing and grasping at details as though they were handholds to keep her steady. "You weren't that far along in your pregnancy. I mean, even for a premature birth, isn't it a little early?" The bell over the door jangled again as two new people entered, but nobody noticed.

"Pregnancies can be accelerated," Rumple remarked, his tone measured. "It's not that difficult a trick, really." He sighed. "Let's say that we believe what you're saying, though I'm not sure we've any real reason to take you at your word. Let's also agree that there are a number of spells for which a newborn infant would be a key ingredient—in fact, I believe you intended to cast one yourself not so long ago." He didn't even try to suppress his smile when he saw Snow and David both stiffen at that. "Surely," he continued, "there are other infants in this town. And other pregnant women who would be easier to get to if one was bent on acquiring a newborn for their purposes and decided not to await nature's course. So, why would anyone go to the bother of seeking you out at the hospital, setting their sights on you and your child, and going to such lengths to acquire it, hmm? What did you do to this 'Lily'?"

Zelena shook her head. "Nothing, I swear!"

"You'll excuse my skepticism, I think."

"Gold," Emma said, drawing closer to the counter and speaking a bit more softly, "I-I think she's telling the truth. Or, at least, she thinks she is."

"I'm afraid that's correct," Regina spoke up and the others looked in her direction, startled to realize that she and Robin had come in while they'd been talking. "And I'm also afraid I have a fairly good idea why her child," she laid a hand on Robin's arm and nudged him slightly forward, "why their child has been taken. Especially since someone raided my vault at some point after I left it last night."

"Why?" Snow asked nervously. "D-do you know what they were looking for? Did they find it?"

Regina nodded, but she faced Rumple when she replied. "Your heart," she said steadily. "They took your heart."
"What does that mean?" Belle demanded, fear lending an angry note to her query. "For Rumple. C- can they use it to control him, o-or kill him?"

"No," Rumple answered before Regina could. "While evading the dagger's control was beyond my power until recently, there were steps that I was able to undertake to prevent my heart's being used in the same way, and I did so long ago. As for it being used to kill me, well, that would indeed be a concern."

He glanced at Regina. "Had your thieves acquired the entire heart, instead of the half you kept with you."

"What in the world has been going on while I've been shut away?" Zelena demanded.

Rumple gave her a hard look. "You didn't really expect time to stop just because you were trapped in a prison, did you dearie? There've been more than a few changes since then."

"Okay," Emma said, ignoring Zelena and looking at Rumple. "So, if they can't use the heart to kill or control you, is there a reason we need to be concerned?"

"I'm afraid so," Regina replied. "You'll recall that, when I split Rumple's heart, it was to give him his best chance at surviving his earlier… condition. First, the undarkened portion rested entirely in the half he kept, meaning that a greater proportion of that half was unblemished. And second, before we knew what the hat could do, my plan was to take the other half and compare it to the others in my vault to see whether a compatible… donor… might be possible."

"A transplant, you mean?" Snow asked.

"Something like that," Regina nodded. "However, when we used the hat to strip away the Darkness, it only worked on the part of Rumple's heart that was present for the spell, not the half I had in my possession. If that half were to be crushed now, it would unleash a new Dark One."

"What's that you're looking at, dahling?" Cruella asked, startling Lily out of her concentration. The younger woman jumped.

"Nothing," she shrugged, shifting the baby in her arms a bit, as she pocketed the ragged-edged pages. "Just some old article I found in my pocket."

"It looked interesting enough to share," Cruella remarked, a glint of suspicion glittering in her eyes.

"Nah, not your thing," Lily replied easily enough. "Here. See for yourself." She started to reach back into her pocket, but in the process, contrived to deliver a pinch to the infant's upper arm. It wasn't a hard one, but it accomplished what she meant it to: the baby woke up with a loud wail. Immediately, Lily began to rock her. "Sh, shh… it's okay. Don't cry. It's okay," she whispered. She looked over her shoulder at Cruella. "Can I show you later?" she asked apologetically.

Cruella clapped her hands to her ears with a wince. "Certainly, dahling," she said. "No rush. I… think I'll see how Ursula's progressing now."
Lily breathed a sigh of relief as she continued to soothe the baby. She'd gotten careless. She should have known better than to read those pages where the others could see. It wasn't as though she hadn't committed them to memory. But they were still a source of solace to her, and a reminder of just how badly the two women she was currently with had wronged her in the past.

She'd been planning this payback for a long time and she couldn't afford to let anticipation make her sloppy now. She just had to keep up her friendly act long enough to get her hands on that heart—and crush it. Once she became the Dark One, she would have her vengeance—and nobody would be able to prevent it.

Zelena sucked in her breath when Regina finished explaining how she'd protected the heart. "You made my unborn child the key to unraveling your spell?" she said angrily.

Regina shrugged. "It's not as though there's no precedent for such a thing," she remarked, her glance spanning from Rumple to Emma to her parents. "At any rate, I wasn't publicizing it." She sighed. "I didn't anticipate this."

"No," Robin said heavily, "but unfortunately, it's happened. So. Will the spell harm our daughter?"

Regina winced a bit at his choice of pronouns, but replied steadily, "The spell won't. I can't vouch for the women who took her though. Once they don't have any further use for her," she shook her head. "Best case scenario, they return her to the hospital or-or leave her by the roadside." She met her half-sister's eyes worriedly. "Given both of our pasts, I think you can imagine the worst as well as I can."

Rumple sighed heavily. "Well," he said, "I suppose we'll have to get her back then." He turned a cold gaze on the witch. "And don't think it's out of any pity for you. If any of those three succeed in becoming what I was lately, I think we'll all have a greater appreciation for just how restrained I've been in the past." He glanced at Robin. "Also, I'm not forgetting that the child has two parents and it's scarcely fair for the father to suffer because of the mother's misdeeds any more than he already has."

"We'd better get Blue out of that cell," Snow spoke up. "We might need her help."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Zelena replied.

"Oh come now, dearie," Rumple smirked, "I grant you she'll take every opportunity to remind you that you don't deserve her assistance, but that won't keep her from extending it. Surely a few petty jabs are a small price to pay?"

Zelena shook her head. "Do you think I care about that? No. When I gave birth last night, she was there. So, naturally, when she came to see me today, I demanded to see my child. And Blue denied everything. She claimed that I'd never gone into labor, that she hadn't been present, and that there was no newborn. Naturally, I thought that the two of you," she looked at Robin and Regina, "had contrived to spirit the baby away and keep me incarcerated, and that the Blue Fairy was in league with you. So I tried to rip out her heart to get some answers."

"We're going to have to discuss how you got that cuff off and soon," Regina remarked.

"Well, not now," Zelena snapped. "When I reached into her chest, there was nothing there."

Rumple's eyebrows shot up at that. "I don't know why that surprises me," he murmured.

"It surprised her, too," Zelena rejoined. She turned to her sister. "When we had our little tiff in the
"clock tower, I saw the look in your eyes when I tried to snatch your heart. You knew you'd beaten me, however temporarily. But Blue? She fully expected me to seize what I'd reached for. She actually thanked me for pulling away empty-handed."

"Wait," Emma said, frowning. "Are you saying that…?"

"The Blue Fairy didn't remove her heart before she came to visit me. But someone else did. And whoever it was, they didn't want her to know about it."

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How had Zelena gotten the cuff off? Blue wondered for the umpteenth time. She'd tried tugging at it. There wasn't anything sharp in the cell, but she had broken the clip off of her pen in desperation. She hadn't even scratched the leather.

At first, she'd been too embarrassed to call for help, but even when she'd swallowed the pride she hadn't realized she possessed, nobody had come in response.

She fixed nervous eyes on the chicken, which was pecking aimlessly at the feed that Zelena had scattered earlier. "Did you have anything to do with it?" she asked, extending her wrist toward Billina. "Would you try again for me?"

She stifled a yelp when Billina gave her hand an experimental peck, clucked with annoyance, and went back to her feed.

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For a moment after Zelena's revelation, nobody spoke. Then Snow ventured hesitantly, "A-are you sure? I mean, if she protected her heart so it couldn't be stolen, then—"

"Don't presume to discuss matters you don't understand," Zelena snapped. "I still would have felt it there instead of that empty space where it should have been."

"So, Ursula—?" David started to say, but Regina was already shaking her head.

"I'm having a hard time picturing that," the mayor said. "Ursula knows how to rip out hearts, yes. I was watching when Mal taught her. But she shouldn't be a match for Blue, even with those tentacles."

She raised an eyebrow. "Actually, I'm not sure you could have done it either, Sis," she added, turning to Zelena.

"Why not?" Zelena demanded. "Because you tried and failed once?"

"Hang on," Emma said. "Back when Mom and I landed in the Enchanted Forest, Cora tried to grab my heart, right before we leaped back. And somehow, something in me… repelled her. Are you saying…?" She let her voice trail off, wondering whether she was about to be told, like her mother just had been, not to talk about subjects beyond her comprehension.

Regina, though, nodded. "Yes, something along those lines. You may be 'the most powerful purveyor of Light magic,’ savior," she explained without irony, "but that meant that you were able to fend off my mother's attack despite your not having had any magical training, nor even any inkling that you possessed innate talent for the craft. Blue might not be able to quite match your raw potential, but what she lacks there, she more than makes up for in experience and knowledge."

She turned back to her sister.

"If Blue'd had her heart in her," she continued, "you shouldn't have been able to take it from her."
"You'd never have guessed that from her reaction," Zelena sniffed.

Regina gave a half-shrug. "Maybe she was expecting that when you attacked, her magic would toss you into the opposite wall and when it didn't happen, she panicked. At any rate," she sighed, "I suppose someone had best contact the hospital and let them know to release her."

Rumple cleared his throat. "Are you certain that's wise, dearie?" he asked. "And no," he went on, holding up a hand as though to stave off further questions. "This has nothing to do with the history between her and me." He took another breath. "If someone has, indeed, taken her heart, then they did so for a reason. At the moment, she's confined, powerless, and yes," a faint smile tugged at his lips, "I'll not pretend that part of me isn't rejoicing in that state of affairs. But," he added, serious once more, "if you free her from that cell, then you also free her to carry out the bidding of whoever currently possesses her heart. Speaking objectively, it's difficult to deem that a good idea."

"Wait," Belle spoke up. "If Ursula didn't take her heart, a-and Zelena didn't… then who did?"

Rumple gave Belle an approving glance. "That is an excellent question," he nodded. "Another one would be 'When?' How long has she been controlled? And… to what purpose?"

"Look," Robin, silent until now, broke in, "I'm not denying that this is a serious matter, but can we get back to our original subject? Specifically the abduction of my newborn daughter?"

"Our daughter!" Zelena retorted. "Whom your lover endangered when she used her as the main ingredient in her protection spell!"

"To be fair," Regina countered, "it wasn't specifically your child. Anyone of my blood who was totally innocent would do."

"And just how long a list is that?" Zelena demanded. "There's our daughter," she jerked her head in Robin's direction, "and then there's… there's… Help me out, Sis, because I'm coming up short here."

"I'll admit that was the point," Regina nodded. "I couldn't very well use a normal blood magic lock; not when you had motive enough to go after Rumple's heart if you were to escape. And you made short work of my other protection spells in the hospital. I had to come up with something harder to break. And it wasn't like I went about telling people how to bypass it."

"Except for the people who took my daughter."

"Yes, well, I thought I was telling the Apprentice."

"And that makes everything better?"

"ENOUGH!" Rumple snapped in a voice loud enough to startle everyone to silence. "Enough. I agreed to this meeting when it had a different agenda. Yes, circumstances have changed, and we need to resolve them. But that won't happen so long as you lot are more invested in determining where to assign the blame than in how to find the solution. If you aren't willing to do that…"

He didn't finish his sentence, choosing instead to retreat behind the curtain that covered the doorway to the back office.

"Rumple…?" Belle called softly after him. Then, giving the others an unapologetic glance, she turned on her heel and followed her husband.

"He's got a point," Emma admitted.
Nobody disagreed.

Snow took a deep breath. "Let's… How about if we all take turns sharing what we know about what happened—just lay out the facts and build from there?"

Regina nodded. "That's actually a good idea. All right." She looked to the corner, meaning to invite the Apprentice and the mer-folk to draw closer, but found the area empty. Well, she couldn't blame them for having left, any more than she could Rumple. She took in a breath and let it out. "Zelena? You go first."

The office didn't afford many places to hide. Rumple might have ducked out the back way, but he hadn't gotten around to removing the shelving unit that Emma and her father had used to barricade it the night before. He needed to be alone. He needed to think. He needed—

"Rumple?"

He didn't turn around. "Go away, Belle," he said, fighting for control. "Please."

There was a moment's silence. Then, hesitantly, "I-is that truly what you want?"

It was his turn for silence now. He couldn't trust his voice. He wasn't certain he could move without trembling or displaying some other form of weakness and he couldn't appear weak now. And, at any rate, he'd promised Belle honesty and, whatever else had befallen him, he was still a man of his word. And then he heard the tapping of her heels on the wooden floor as she came up behind him, and he caught the scent of her jasmine perfume just before she placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned closer. "Hey, you're not alone," she whispered, and suddenly he realized he didn't want to be. "It's all right. I'm here. Whatever it is, you don't have to deal with it alone. Unless…" And he could hear the faint note of uncertainty in her voice. "Unless you want to?"

He shook his head, and her hands pulled him toward her and he let them. "You won't understand," he mumbled.

"I'll try to," she said, and he noted that she wasn't challenging his words or denying their validity outright. He took a shaky breath.

"The Blue Fairy and I have a… complicated history."

"Because she raised you for almost three years and then abandoned you," Belle nodded, not even trying to hide the undercurrent of anger in her words.

Rumple shook his head. "That's part of it," he admitted, "but it's a rather… new part. I suppose it added a bit of fuel to my feelings toward her, but that hatred has been blazing away for a very long time. You see," he said haltingly, "after I first became the Dark One, Bae sought her help in freeing me from that influence. And she took him from me."

"Took him?" Belle repeated.

Rumple sighed. "She gave him a bean and told him that if he could bring me to a Land without Magic, my power would be neutralized." He gave her a mirthless smile. "I'm certain you can imagine how well I reacted to that proposal."

Belle's eyes widened and Rumple knew she was remembering her own experience with trying to free him from his curse. "Wh-what happened?" she asked, almost fearfully.
He shook his head at once. "Not what you're probably imagining," he said. "Bae struck a deal with me: if he could find a way to free me from my curse without using the dagger, then I would freely go along with it. That… was the only deal I ever broke." He closed his eyes. "When the portal opened, I couldn't take that leap. Go to another realm where I'd be powerless? Penniless? Crippled?" He heard Belle's sob and his eyes flew open. "I'm sorry," he said at once, and meaning it. "I wasn't thinking about—"

Belle was already pulling him closer. "I know," she murmured. "And I did ask. I'm sorry, too."

"I gave you cause enough," he admitted, hugging her back. "As I did Bae. At any rate," he said heavily, "I couldn't hold onto Bae and keep my power—not with that portal gaping open beneath us, pulling at us both. I let him go. And I blamed her for turning him against me."

"She didn't turn him," Belle said, her voice hard. Then she saw the hurt in Rumple's eyes and realized that he thought she was blaming him for what had happened. "She did worse," Belle continued angrily. "She took his love for you and used it to manipulate him, hoping that he'd get you to follow him out of our land. We both know that sending you to another realm was never the only option."

Rumple's eyes widened. True Love's Kiss—as Emma had pointed out that morning—wasn't necessarily predicated on romantic love. Had Bae learned about that method, it would have worked—and the Blue Fairy should have known it. He gave Belle a startled nod and took another breath. "All this time," he said slowly, "I blamed her for losing Bae. And, well, recently, some of her other deeds have come to… light, as it were. But if the witch's words are true, then the Blue Fairy's actions may not have been entirely her own." He shook his head. "Which would mean that the… enmity I've held toward her could have been misdirected." His brow furrowed as much in puzzlement as in anger. "How long has her heart been missing?" he asked, even though he knew that Belle couldn't answer him. "Who took it? And why?"

Belle was still holding him, hugging him as tightly as he'd hugged Bae in that snowy forest where he'd emerged from the vault, as though she was trying to pull him in even closer. "Do you have any ideas?" she asked, her murmur scarcely louder than a whisper.

He nodded bleakly. "I'm afraid I do."

The others looked up when they returned to the shop floor with varying expressions of relief and curiosity. Rumple shook his head. "It would appear that there's more than one mystery at work here," he said, his voice as calm and measured as if he hadn't just spent the last ten minutes fighting for emotional control. "But I suppose we'd best deal with the most pressing matter first."

His gaze flickered from Regina and Robin to Zelena and hardened. "You came here seeking my help," he said evenly.

Zelena's response was a tight-lipped nod.

There was no warmth in the smile that sprang to his own lips. "Well," he said slowly, "I'll presume that you've guessed that such assistance, should it be forthcoming, won't come cheap."

"Now, just hang on—!" David started angrily.

"You can't be serious," Regina snapped.

Emma was silent, but Rumple could read her disapproval as plainly as if she'd voiced it. He shook his head. 
"You misunderstand me," he said smoothly. "I'm not asking for payment; I'm simply alerting you to consequences."

"Explain," Robin demanded, and Rumple couldn't help but notice the outlaw's hand straying reflexively to his belt, as though he expected to find a sword there.

Rumple's smile broadened. "Of course," he replied. "Well, it shouldn't come as a shock to anyone when I say that I have no desire to do anything that would benefit Zelena. Not given our recent history," he added, and though his smile didn't fade, his voice was cold and hard. "But her child has two parents," he noted. "And I'll grant," he added more softly, "that I know something of the unfairness that comes from being condemned to suffering through no fault of one's own, simply because one had the misfortune to be born into the wrong family. Well. 'Family' of a sort, in this case." He sighed. "In any event, I am willing to put matters of lineage aside for now and act in the child's best interest."

Emma started to smile, but David spoke up again. "You said your help wouldn't come cheap," he reminded them. "What's the price?"

"Oh, nothing too drastic," Rumple chuckled. "At least, not depending on how you choose to look at it. You see, your highness, our actions can be habit-forming. In other words," he tilted his head to one side and gave the prince a knowing look, "We are what we repeatedly do. If I choose to help the witch recover her child, it will only be because I've elected to put the child's welfare ahead of any other considerations, including accidents of birth, blood ties, and the like. And once I start down that path, one might expect that, in time, I'll find it easier to continue traveling it. Which means," he fixed Zelena with an unpleasant smile, "that should I believe that at any point in future, your child's best interests are not being served, you may expect me to intervene on those occasions as well. And it goes without saying that were you, for example, to attempt to mold her into an instrument of vengeance, say… teaching her that it is her task to seek retribution on those who thwarted your past endeavors, well, that would hardly be in her best interests, now would it?" His tone was mild, but his next words sent a chill down the witch's spine. "I'd be rather concerned about the outcome of any potential custody fight as well, were I standing in your shoes. Because laws, contracts, and the loopholes contained therein? Those are my strong suits, dearie. Not yours."

He broke eye contact with Zelena to scan the other faces in the room. And while some wore expressions of wariness, he was gratified to also see surprise and even slight nods of approval.

"Well?" he asked, looking back at Zelena with a faint smirk. "Do we have a deal?"

Zelena swallowed hard. Then she pressed her lips together and nodded. "We do," she gritted. "Find her." She swallowed again and forced out another syllable. "Please."

Belle listened to Rumple's speech with wide eyes. It had been weeks since that night at the clock tower, and she still wasn't fully clear on which parts of Rumple were his own and which the Dark One's. She'd always assumed that his penchant for striking deals and finding loopholes fell into the latter category, but now she was beginning to think otherwise.

Or was it just another habit that was hard for him to break?

It didn't matter. Not when this deal was plainly Rumple attempting to do the right thing, even though it was Zelena asking for his help. Yes, he was clearly enjoying the witch's discomfiture, but truthfully, Belle could scarcely blame him.

Her thoughts flew back to their conversation in the back room. Rumple hadn't yet divulged the name of the person he suspected had taken the Blue Fairy's heart, though he'd promised to do so
later. She didn't want to badger him, though she was curious. And concerned. After all, there were already three villains endangering the town and, while they were formidable, whoever had the power to overcome the Blue Fairy was clearly more so. In fact, Belle realized with a chill, given Rumple's enmity for Blue, if he could have taken and crushed her heart, he would have done so long ago. *Did that mean that whoever was responsible was more powerful than the Dark One had been?* If so, it was no wonder that Rumple didn't even want to speak their name; back in the Enchanted Forest, he'd always heard when someone had spoken *his*.

She tried to calm her worry, making an effort to turn her attention back to the conversation going on about her.

"I can't believe you haven't got anything of Ursula's or Cruella's here in the shop!" she was exclaiming.

Rumple shrugged. "If I did, Your Majesty, rest assured that I wouldn't be keeping its existence from you now. I can only think that the items that have turned up here are those that once belonged to those denizens of the Enchanted Forest who were brought here by the curse. Those two traveled to this land by other means."

"At any rate," Regina said with a curt nod of acknowledgement, "if anything does somehow turn up," she reached into her purse and pulled out a cork-stoppered clay jug, perhaps twice the size of an average sugar bowl, "there should be enough locator potion in here to power at least a dozen or so searches."

Rumple's eyebrows shot up, but he took the jug with a smile and murmured his thanks.

"I'll pour it out," Belle volunteered, stepping forward. "There should be some vials in the back." She had nothing else to contribute, and if anyone needed her to look something up, they could just as easily tell her later. Right now, she wanted to be alone with her thoughts and the potion needed to be portioned out into single doses anyway.

They didn't need her to look anything up. She finished filling the vials and set about tidying up the office. Rumple must have made a start of it this morning; it was a good deal less of a disaster area than it had been the evening before. Still not perfect, though, and she could do something about that.

"Belle?"

She gave a start. She hadn't heard Rumple enter the office. He gave her a quick smile. "We're off to have another look about the farmhouse," he said. "Zelena's certain that there was nothing left behind in the house itself, but there might yet be clues remaining in the storm cellar or elsewhere on the premises."

Belle nodded her understanding. "Are you… okay?" she asked. "I mean, with all of this?"

Rumple sighed. "I'd prefer not to aid the witch, of course, but her offspring is an innocent in this—in every sense of the word. And," he continued, "in the message that I left you that brought you to New York, I neglected to mention that my heart attack transpired in Bae's apartment. Where Robin and Zelena were residing. You know better than anyone the… pain I inflicted upon him when he invaded my castle. Many in his position would have allowed nature to take its course at that point. And, while I'll grant you that his code of honor might have compelled him to choose a kinder path, I would yet have expired, had he not consented to procure a potion that gave me a bit more time. He saved my life," he continued, "when I'd meant to take his at that earlier meeting. There's no real
Belle nodded, as she felt a smile spread across her face. He was still looking for loopholes, but now, it was as though he needed them in order to justify to himself his reasons for doing the right thing. And after having been the Dark One for centuries, perhaps he needed those loopholes in order to convince himself that he could change old habits for new. "I understand," she replied.

"Perhaps, you'd care to come with us?"

She looked at the office regretfully. "No, I've started straightening up in here; I might as well finish." She wanted to think about the revelations that had just been disclosed and she knew she always thought better alone.

Rumple smiled. "I can't disapprove. Well. If we do find anything of note," he embraced her, "I'll be sure to tell you."

A kiss on her cheek and he was gone. Belle smiled after him and went back to work. She cleared a spot on one of the shelves for the locator potions and shook her head. If only they'd had something, anything of Cruella's or Ursula's here. If Emma had possessed some old keepsake of Lily's, or… or…

Belle's eyes grew wide. Maybe there was something she could use to find them. If her hunch was right…

…She needed to get home now.

Belle unlocked her front door and didn't bother shedding her coat. Instead, she headed for the basement. Her hands were sweating as she made her way to the row of shelves and cabinets lining the wall opposite the stairs. Rumple had shown her where he'd put it, but she still sighed her relief when she opened the drawer and the dagger gleamed up at her.

As expected, the blade was covered in black scrollwork on both sides. There was no name inscribed upon it now. Belle hesitated for the barest instant before she pulled out the vial of locator potion she'd brought with her and poured it over the weapon.

The dagger rose into the air to dangle at her eye level. Slowly, it floated toward the stairs and Belle followed. She still didn't know if this would work. Rumple wasn't the Dark One now, it was true, but the dagger was still his possession. It might just lead her to the farmhouse after all.

It paused at the front door, and Belle paused only a moment before she pulled it open and the blade flew out. It wavered at the end of the walk for a moment, as though it was unsure of its destination. And then it turned sharply to the left, and began moving down the street. When it turned left again at the corner, Belle suppressed a cheer. The farmhouse was in the opposite direction. The dagger—like so many items Rumple had in the shop—wasn't his; it belonged to the Dark One! And even if the Dark One was currently lacking a human host, it was still here in Storybrooke—in the heart that Ursula and the others had taken from Regina's vault!

She reached into her pocket for her phone to call the others, but then she reconsidered. She didn't really know where the dagger was going, or if it would even wait for her if she didn't follow it now. She might be pulling the other heroes away from an important discovery, and there was no way of knowing whether one of their quarries might return to the farmhouse in the interim and remove any remaining clues. No, it was better that she follow the dagger for now, at least, until she knew where Ursula and her companions were hiding. There'd be plenty of time to call the heroes...
then.

She reached into her handbag and felt the comforting weight of the pistol. Maybe… maybe that would be enough protection. Maybe she didn't need backup for this. Maybe she could actually settle this matter without calling the heroes in.

Maybe she could finally become a hero in her own right.
Poseidon was not a patient man. When Ursula had turned up in his treasury, it had been the first time he’d clapped eyes on his daughter in over four decades. Four decades spent mourning her loss and trying to forget how much he’d loved her, all wiped away in the space of one brief and—admittedly—painful visit. She'd rebuffed him, turned her back on him, ignored his plea for reconciliation, and it hadn't mattered. Those few moments in the treasury had more than sufficed to reawaken his love for her, to say nothing of his regret and remorse for what had gone before.

He reached for the pouch at his side and gave it a squeeze to reassure himself that the shell was there. Just let him see her again; let him restore what once had been taken—a free gift, regardless of whether she accepted his apologies now. He hoped she would, though. There had been too much lost time and too many wasted years. He missed her.

He walked along the shore with his granddaughter, the only two souls in the vicinity. Pity. He'd hoped that Ursula still loved the sea enough to stay close to it, no matter which realm she made her home in. Had she still lived in its depths, he could have found her in hours, days at most. He could have had every mer-person and every aquatic creature in every realm scouring the waters for her. Distance was of no moment there.

And here? A hammerhead shark could likely cover the distance from shore to wooded boundary in half an hour. (He dimly recalled that humans used different measurements for distance, but he couldn't be bothered to keep track of the units nor their conversion. He understood fathoms well enough. The rest was usually irrelevant.) It frustrated him that in an expanse so tiny, he couldn't begin to know where his daughter might be found.

"Maybe we shouldn't have left the shop so abruptly," he murmured, more to himself than to the red-haired young woman at his side.

"We could go back," Ariel reminded him.

Poseidon shook his head. "I think I've humbled myself enough for one day without going crawling back there. I don't suppose you have any ideas?"

Ariel frowned. "I would have guessed the beach myself. But, well, there is a freshwater lake near the center of town. Maybe, if the ocean holds too many memories for her, but she still likes the water…"

Poseidon's eyebrows shot up and he smiled for the first time since that morning. "You may have something there, granddaughter. Can you tell the way to that lake from here?"
"I think so," Ariel replied, smiling back. "I mean, it's probably iced over and I can't always find water when it's frozen solid. But if it's just surface ice, yes, I think I can get there." She sighed apologetically. "I've only been here once before, so I'm not completely certain I remember where everything is. But, well, it's water," she pointed out.

"Indeed," the sea king nodded. "Well then. Lead onward."

Zelena dragged the toe of her boot through the clear grooves of the concentric circles Rumple had dug out months ago in the barn's dirt floor, smearing the crisp lines. "Nothing," she snarled with dismay. "They cleaned out everything. I should have put tracking spells on my components ages ago; at least when Ursula and the others took them, we'd have some means of following!"

"We still do," Regina said sharply. "Come outside."

Zelena looked at where her half-sister was pointing and frowned. "Lovely," she said. "We know that they left here by car. We can follow the tire treads to the highway, and even into town, but then, they just merge with the other traffic."

"Not necessarily," Rumple said slowly. He looked at Regina. "You remember how, I trust?"

"I wouldn't have brought it up if I didn't," the mayor replied. She lifted her hand, thumb, index and middle fingers nearly touching, and made a quick graceful gesture.

"I tried that!" Zelena snapped.

For answer, Regina put the index finger of her other hand to her lips. "You tried something similar," she corrected. "This is a variation Rumple developed some time ago. After he sent you packing," she added with a smirk. "It'll get the job done." An incandescent puff of light appeared in the space above her fingertips. She regarded it for a moment, then stooped slightly and lobbed it toward the paved road. The puff flared upwards to a height of nearly three feet. Then it collapsed once more and hurtled forward, blazing a fiery white path toward town.

"Back to the cars," Regina ordered. "That trail will only last about half an hour or so before it fades again."

The dagger wasn't moving quickly, and Belle had no trouble keeping up with it. When it left the road and turned off into the wood, though, she suppressed a groan. Why, why hadn't she exchanged her heels for boots? Although the snow had been thawing over the last few days, and patches of ground showed plainly on the forest floor, there was no mistaking the wet dead leaves and exposed tree roots. Navigating a stumble-free path, especially in the shoes she was wearing, was going to be a challenge.

The dagger moved ahead. Then, when she didn't hurry after it, it stopped in mid-air and seemed to hover impatiently before her.

"I'm coming," she mumbled, irritation and apology in her voice in equal parts. "I'm coming. Just… slow down, okay?"

She didn't know whether it understood her, or whether the spell simply instructed it to keep a certain distance ahead of its tracker, but as she drew nearer, it veered off once more, with markedly less haste.

Belle followed, wincing as her heel came down on an exposed root. She expelled an annoyed
breath that might or might not have concealed a muttered expletive as she pushed onward behind the dagger.

The baby was whimpering again and Lily rocked her more quickly. The infant had just finished her formula a mere ten minutes ago; she didn't need a diaper change; Lily didn't think she was too hot or too cold. Why wouldn't the little thing settle down? "Come on," Lily murmured, well aware of the irritated looks directed in her direction. She didn't much care whether Cruella was annoyed, but Ursula's magical lock-picking was a delicate operation and the sea witch had already let fly a few sharp remarks when the baby's fussing had, apparently, shattered her focus at the worst time.

"Come on," she repeated. "What's the matter? You're warm, you're dry, you're fed… Uh… I'm not much of a singer, but do you want a story?" She heard Ursula groan and winced. "Later," she whispered, "if you're good. Why can't you be good? What do you need, what am I…?" Her eyes widened. "I forgot to burp you!" she exclaimed, immediately positioning the infant over her shoulder and patting the baby girl's back. After a few moments, she was rewarded with a familiar noise. The baby's whimpers stilled and Lily breathed a sigh of relief. A premature sigh, as it turned out, for after about thirty seconds of blessed silence, the baby began to wail. "No, no!" Lily moaned, stifling a wild urge to join in. "No, that should have worked! Sh, shhh—"

"Lily." Cruella's voice was firm. "Ursula needs your help."

Lily sucked in a breath. "I'm kind of busy, here," she managed.

"I can see that, dahling, but we need those spells lifted. You…" the other woman pressed her lips together for a moment. Then she continued steadily, "You'd better give her to me."

Lily tilted her head and her raised eyebrow spoke volumes.

"It's not something I want," Cruella snapped. "But Ursula's having enough trouble without that sniveling witch-spawn piercing her eardrums. I suppose sacrifices must be made."

Lily nodded. "You're right. Here," she passed the baby over. "Support her head; don't let her dangle. Here," she gently maneuvered Cruella's hands into the proper positions and managed not to smirk at the panicked expression on the older woman's face. "Rock her a bit," she added. "It helps."

Then she started walking in Ursula's direction, feeling slightly ashamed at the relief that washed over her as she left the baby behind.

The dagger seemed to know when Belle was having trouble navigating the woods and slowed down accordingly. She recognized the area now and felt a slight pang. She hadn't been in this part of the woods in months. Not since her wedding, she realized, though the dagger was choosing the shortest path to the well, rather than the marked and somewhat decently-maintained trail.

She could hear women's voices now and the discussion sounded like a heated one. They were close by and Belle realized that if the dagger broke through the tree cover to the clearing where the well was situated, her presence would be discovered. Instinct and desperation made her lift up her hand and jerk it backward. "Come back?" she whispered hesitantly to the dagger. "Please?"

Amazingly, while the weapon didn't precisely obey, it stopped its advance to hover in midair until Belle could close the distance and take it by its hilt. With a relieved sigh, she tucked the dagger into her purse. After a moment's thought, she unzipped the compartment that concealed the gun holster and pulled out the weapon. Then she stepped out of her shoes, wincing a bit as her
stockinged feet came down on the forest undergrowth. She should have expected the damp, she supposed. Cautiously, she inched forward, bent almost double as she tried to keep to the cover of the trees and bushes. She wondered nervously whether the gun was even loaded. She knew she'd watched Rumple show her how to fit the cartridges in the magazine, but for the life of her, she couldn't recall whether anyone had removed them afterwards.

She couldn't risk checking now and she didn't have any ammunition with her. She wasn't especially good at bluffing or deceiving and if she knew for a fact that the gun wasn't loaded, she'd never be able to convince those women that it was. She had to at least believe that it was possibly loaded.

Hopefully, she wouldn't need it. She was in over her head, she realized. And the gun wasn't going to be much use against Ursula's magic. If she could even bring herself to fire it. She didn't actually want to kill anyone. Belle's shoulders slumped. She couldn't confront them. But she also couldn't leave until she knew what they were up to. And if leaving meant blowing her cover, then not even then. Calm down, she told herself firmly. You can do this. Just listen. Find out what they're doing. Then call the others...

...If there was time to. Because if they meant to crush the heart now, then they had to be stopped.

And if the others were too far away, then she'd have to see this through, second thoughts aside. The three newcomers had to be stopped. Belle swallowed hard. She didn't have Rumple watching over her this time. Mulan wasn't poised to spring to her aid. If these women were to be stopped, Belle realized, then she was going to have to stop them.

She swallowed again, looked at the gun, and tried to steel herself to what she might need to do. Alone.

"What am I doing here?" Lily asked with some bewilderment.

Ursula looked up from the miasma of light and smoke to which she was subjecting the blackened heart. "I'm having a little trouble lowering these last defenses," she admitted. "I think you mentioned that you were good at unlocking state-of-the-art security devices?"

"Uh, yeah," Lily said, her confusion only deepening. "I mean, not really 'state-of-the-art'; more like I know a few good hacks. And with the old-style ones, it's mainly about the tumblers. But what has that got to do with magic?"

The sea witch shrugged. "I thought there might be enough commonality that you'd have some insights." She lifted her eyes higher, looking at a point past Lily's shoulder. For a moment, her face seemed sadder. Then she shrugged. "I guess you can go back," she said. "It was only a thought."

"Sure," Lily said, smiling wryly. "Better put Cruella out of her misery." Her eyebrows shot up. "Hey, the baby's not crying anymore. Maybe she's actually got a maternal bone in her, after all." Something about Ursula's expression checked her. "Wait," she said. "Tell me, the two of you didn't just set me…" She turned on her heel, poised to run back the way she'd come.

"We had to," Ursula called after her, and when Lily whirled back with blazing eyes, the sea witch continued. "We're not equipped to look after a newborn. And if Zelena doesn't know what we did yet, it's just a matter of time. She has magic; she was only in that cell because she wanted to be. Once she figures out that her daughter's gone, she'll be looking for us and I think I can predict some unpleasantness if she finds us. A baby is a liability when you're lying low. They cry. They fuss. They need to be fed and changed. I'm sorry, Lily, but Cruella was right. The kid's going to be more trouble then she's worth, now that we've gotten what we needed from her. And villain though I
might be, infanticide is something I'm just as happy to avoid. Trust me, Lily. It's better this way."

Lily was practically trembling with rage. "No," she said tightly. "It's not. We aren't done," she added, as she turned once more and stalked off in Cruella's direction.

Ursula went back to the spells and tried to put Lily's reaction out of her mind. The young woman was nothing if not pragmatic. She'd come around.

And Ursula was certain that it had just been her imagination or some trick of the light that had made Lily's brown eyes appear an almost reptilian green.

Almost certain, at any rate. Ursula intensified her focus and smiled as she felt some part of the spell yield to her probing. She couldn't break off from her work at this critical juncture unless she wanted to start over from scratch. She'd deal with Lily once the heart was accessible, if the girl hadn't already come around by then. It shouldn't be too much longer.

"I guess it makes sense," Emma said dubiously, as they walked up the gravel path to the cabin. "They've been lying low until now; they're still trying to stay out sight. But how did they even know about this place?"

Her mother shrugged. "David and I just... stumbled over it in the woods one day." She cast an apologetic look in Rumple's direction. "We got caught in a storm; the door was unlocked and we needed shelter. Neither of us knew it belonged to anyone; it didn't look as though anybody had been there in ages. I... guess Ursula and the others could have been hiding out in the woods and come across it themselves."

"You... really don't know Cruella very well, do you?" Regina smirked. "The only way she'd hide out in the woods would be in a luxury hunting lodge." They were at the door now and Regina sent a wave of magic before her. "It's clear," she said. "And unprotected." She turned to Rumple.

"Gold, it's your cabin. You want to do the honors?"

Rumple snorted at that, but he took a step forward and pushed the door open. The front room showed signs of recent use, though at first glance, there was nothing there that looked as though it didn't belong. "Try not to make too much of a mess," he murmured. "We're looking for some clue as to their current whereabouts or, barring that, some personal effect that will be suitable for a locator spell to track." He remembered something and winced. "I'm afraid you'll likely find the bedroom in a state of disarray from my last visit here. Had I known to expect company, I would have tidied up."

Emma realized what he had to be referring to and gave him a sympathetic smile. Then she and the others fanned out to search the rest of the place.

"No baby effects," Zelena said, her voice almost too calm. "They didn't prepare for her."

"Or," Snow said gently, "they had everything they needed with them." She took an involuntary step closer to the witch. "I don't know how things are in Oz, but in the Enchanted Forest—at least, in our kingdom—baby furniture was a lot... heavier. Fancier, too," she added, "but I don't think anybody ever came up with the idea of a baby carriage that could be turned into a stroller, or an infant seat that becomes a cradle when you tip it back and adjust the stand. So much can be folded up, disassembled at a touch... they might not need much in the way of equipment. Not more than could fit into a car trunk, I mean."

Zelena pressed her lips together tightly. Then she opened her mouth to say something, but a shout
from David had them both hastening toward the kitchen.

"You found something?" Zelena asked eagerly.

David had an uncomfortable look on his face. "I'm sorry," he said. He jerked his head toward the metal canister in his hands. "It's... not what we were looking for. But maybe we should have been."

"What is it, mate?" Killian asked.

For answer, David reached inside and pulled out a glowing red heart.

"Tia?" Tony wasn't generally alarmed when his sister 'zoned out'. Her talents as a seer overshadowed his, and while her control had improved over the years, it was far from perfect. The look of terror on her face now, however, made his heart skip a beat. "Tia, what's wrong?"

Tia blinked. Then recognition sparked in her eyes and she exhaled a shuddering breath. "You remember when we saw Star Wars?" she asked tightly.

"Which time?" Tony asked, trying to hide his concern behind a smart aleck act. He wasn't wrong, though. They'd watched the movie together at least a dozen times, picking it apart, comparing Lucas's ideas of space flight with the truth according to Trimble—as they recalled, he'd experienced near-physical pain when Han Solo had referred to a parsec as though it was a unit of time, rather than distance.

Tia gave him a faint smile. "Sorry. I just felt... well, remember when Obi-wan said he sensed a great disturbance in the Force?"

Tony gulped. He knew exactly the scene she meant. "Okay. Now you're scaring me. What... did you see?"

"The woods," Tia said quickly. "A well. Tony... we have to get there fast. Otherwise, I-I think this town might become the new Alderaan!"

_Calm_. He had to stay calm. Remember his training. Fear kept you alert. Panic got you killed. He took a breath and tried to keep his voice level. "Let's hope that well's marked on the map Uncle Bené gave us," he said. "My harmonica sketches might take too long."

Tia nodded and pulled out the map. "Here."

Tony frowned. "I was hoping for closer. Can we teleport?"

"Not when we don't know the area. Not with all those trees." She took a breath. "At least, not in one jump..."

From her hiding place, it was hard for Belle to make out the conversation by the well, but there was no mistaking the fury in the youngest woman's—Belle surmised it was Lily—posture and stance as she stomped over to Cruella. Cruella was holding a small swaddled bundle in the crook of one arm.

Belle's heart began to pound. The bundle might well be Zelena's child, but she was too far away to be certain, and she didn't dare risk drawing closer.
She closed her eyes. Her hunch about how to track the women had proven correct, but now she was trapped as securely as if she'd been seen and captured. She couldn't get closer without being seen. She couldn't back away without being heard. She had the gun, but among the few lessons Rumple had given her, one was uppermost in her head now: Never draw your weapon unless you're prepared to pull the trigger. Never pull your trigger unless you're prepared to kill.

She was no killer. And with a baby's life at stake, she could finally face the bitter truth: she could not take these women alone. Still keeping her eyes on the figures by the well, she reached into her purse for her phone.

Her hand froze in the act of pulling it out. Before her horrified gaze, Lily was changing. Her skin turned scaly gray. Her body swelled and began to grow, face elongating, eyes growing colder, limbs stretching and knobbing as fingers stiffened to wickedly-pointed claws. Leathery wings sprouted from her back and Belle wasn't certain whether her clothes fell away, or simply disappeared.

In less than a moment, the young woman had vanished, replaced by a creature Belle had never seen in the flesh but recognized at once. A dragon. Belle realized that she still had her hand clamped about her phone and drew it out. She was about to call Rumple, when she remembered one salient point about dragons. Their ears were almost as sharp as those of an ogre and, unlike ogres, their eyes were nearly as keen. She couldn't call anyone.

She took several slow breaths. She couldn't call… but she could text. Carefully. Once. One text to let Rumple know she was in trouble. And then, she was going to mute her ringer and wait.

Snow looked at the glowing heart in her husband's hand and swallowed. "I guess we'd better get this back to Blue," she murmured.

"Once we've ascertained that it's hers, of course," Rumple nodded.

Emma blinked. "How many other hearts have gone missing recently?" she demanded.

"No," Regina said firmly. "Rumple's right. This isn't like last night," she went on. "Then, it didn't matter who Roland saw being taken to the storm cellar," here she glanced at Rumple. Rumple lowered his eyes and said nothing, his lips set in a thin, tight line. Behind him, Regina saw Zelena's eyebrows shoot upwards and a surprised smile flash across her face. Regina winced, as she realized that Rumple probably hadn't wanted that piece of information shared with the woman who'd thrust him there in the first place. Well. There was no help for it now. She took another breath. "Whoever it was that they were holding, we were going to get them out; unless they'd somehow managed to nab a gorgon and were using it to bait a trap, freeing the 'wrong' person wouldn't have had any repercussions—beyond our having to extend our search for Rumple a bit longer, of course." She risked another glance in his direction, just in time to catch the slight start of surprise, and the even slighter curve of his lips as he gave her a quick nod of approval.

"Hearts," Regina went on, giving him a swift answering smile before turning serious once more, "are another matter. "If we put that heart into Blue, and it turns out not to be hers, then the instant it goes into her chest, its true owner will immediately be killed."

Killian made a slight choking noise. "Locator spell on the heart, then? So it could show us the party to whom it belongs?"

"That would be wise," Rumple agreed calmly. "I'll call Belle once we're certain that potion is the only thing we'll require of her. For now, I'd suggest we continue searching." He turned and noticed
Zelena standing several steps behind, her expression unreadable.

"Well, dearie?" he demanded somewhat waspishly.

Whatever the witch might have wanted to say, evidently she thought better of it. Instead, she only shook her head with a faint smirk. "Nothing."

Lily had spent much of her life angry. Angry at her adoptive parents. Angry at her birth parents. Angry at the world and Emma and the Apprentice and everyone who'd ever had a hand in screwing up her life. But she had never felt this sort of blinding rage before. It seemed too vast for her to contain, and yet, her body seemed to swell and expand as if to accommodate it.

She could feel it coursing through her like fire, like fuel, feeding her with its power, sharpening her senses, expanding her awareness as she felt herself reborn. No more scuttling about, grasping for straws and crumbs, clawing for what she'd always felt she deserved, too long denied. No, finally she had the power to take what she needed. She—

She felt something wrap itself about her consciousness like a veil or a blindfold, muffling her own thoughts and imposing those of another. And in her mind, she heard a triumphant laugh.

*Oh, dahling! I was so hoping you'd be able to do that. People always underestimate the floozy in fur, don't they? I mean, you never suspected I was deliberately getting under your skin all this time, did you? Needling you, pushing your buttons, hoping that eventually, you'd be angry enough to, well, play into my talons. Now be a good little girl and wait here. I rather think I'll need you in a moment.*

She fought to break free, but Cruella's hold didn't weaken. Helpless, the young woman turned dragon seethed as she watched Cruella cross back to where Ursula sat cross-legged by the well, deep in concentration as she focused on the heart.

"Any progress, dahling?" Cruella asked languidly.

Ursula didn't look up. "Just… about… got it," she murmured. A silver nimbus flared about the heart. For a moment, its glare was so intense that both women had to shield their eyes. Then it fell away. "There," Ursula said with satisfaction. "It's down."

"Then give it here," Cruella said eagerly, reaching for it.

Ursula closed her hand around it and pulled it away. "Hang on, whoever said you were going to use it?"

Cruella blinked. "But dahling, I'm the most qualified of the lot. Of course I'm going to be the next Dark One."

"And just how do you figure that?"

Cruella gave her a nonchalant shrug. "Well, I do have you outnumbered and outflanked," she replied with a smirk. Then, without taking her eyes off of Ursula, she called, "Lily… *She's yours!*"

Ursula hadn't been at the lake, but Poseidon had noticed something: the lake was fed by an underground spring with its source deep in the woods. And in the water, he could detect the faintest trace of magic. "We'll follow it to its source," he stated. "I still think that my daughter will try to draw on its power, if she can."
Ariel frowned. "I see the magic now, Grandfather," she admitted, "but it's so light that I missed it until you pointed it out to me. Why would it be any stronger at the source? I mean, there's so much water here," she pointed to the lake. "Wouldn't the power be strongest where there's the greatest accumulation?"

Poseidon smiled. "It's a fair question," he admitted. "Water magic in the sea tends to spread out more evenly. The salt may play a role," he added, almost as an afterthought. "I think I recall one of our wise folk putting that hypothesis forward. Truthfully, it was enough for me to know that our magic behaved thusly; the whys and wherefores of it were never concerning. However, I do know that inland waters can sometimes behave differently. Greater magic can often be concentrated at the source—tied to it, in fact—with only the tiniest part washing out and trickling downward." He concentrated on the lake and smiled. "And this one is fed by three underground streams, as well as by rain and snow. Only one of those streams shows magic. The headwaters aren't far from here; two knots, perhaps three."


Poseidon chuckled. "Well, whatever they are, it doesn't alter the fact that we haven't far to go. Come."

As they reached the boundary between cleared land and forest, Poseidon said with a straight face, "So, how many kilosomethings are there to the fathom?"

Ariel shook her head. "That's not what they're—" Then she saw the twinkle in his eye and realized that he was teasing her. "Oh!" She shook her head with a rueful smile. "Very funny, grandfather. I mean," she genuflected with exaggerated respect, "Very funny, my liege."

"If I'd wanted a fawning courtier, I'd have brought one with me, child," Poseidon rumbled. "There's no need for that."

"Okay," Ariel said. "In that case, it wasn't funny at all; I was just being nice. Begging your majesty's pardon," she added.

Poseidon chuckled. "I suppose I asked for that."

"You did—"

Just then, a mighty roar shook the trees, and both mer-folk heard a woman cry out in shock. Something winged and scaly broke the cover of the forest and a sea-green bolt of magic flew upwards to strike its midsection.

The dragon shrugged off the attack and roared again.

"Grandfather…?" Ariel said hesitantly, taking a step backwards.

Poseidon, however, was hastening toward the altercation. "That was Ursula's magic!" he exclaimed. "I'd recognize it anywhere. Come on!" He didn't wait to see whether his order would be obeyed.

Ariel looked about wide-eyed, hoping for reinforcements. When she didn't spy any, she hesitated only another moment before following her grandfather deeper into the woods.
"It would appear that they never bothered unpacking," Rumple admitted, after further investigation of the cabin yielded disappointing results. "It looks to me as though our newcomers chose to pass the night here, rather than disclose anything to the sentry spells at your farmhouse, but I don't believe that they necessarily planned on returning here afterwards."

His tone was polite enough, but Emma noticed that Gold faced Zelena as little as possible when addressing her. "So, what now?" the witch asked.

Gold met her eyes with a smile. "Now? Now, we repair to the shop and determine whose heart it is we've rescued from the coffee tin."

"Don't you think we have something a bit more pressing than that?" Zelena demanded. "What about my baby?"

Now Gold did turn to her, his expression quizzical. "Do you have any idea where she might be?" he asked evenly. "Do you have any item of hers to which we might apply a locator spell? A drop of her blood from which we could track her a different way? Oh, that's right. You haven't anything of the sort. Even magic needs a bit more to work with, dearie."

"Are you telling me you're useless, then?"

Rumple chortled at that. "Oh, I'd never tell you that," he returned jovially. "But while we can't be certain of your daughter's whereabouts, we are certain of one thing: Ursula took a heart from someone. If it was from the Blue Fairy, well, I suppose we'll need to return it and we'll be right back to where we started with regard to your daughter's whereabouts. But if it belongs to someone else, well, I'll admit it's something of a reach, but perhaps once we locate the owner, we'll also locate our ladies. And your daughter." He took a breath and locked his eyes to Zelena's. "If you can recollect any tidbit of information that might assist, anything that's slipped your mind until now, I'm ready to hear it. Otherwise…"

Zelena looked away, her shoulders slumping again. "No."

"If the heart is here," Killian spoke up, "then it really is a reach to think its owner would be in the company of those who removed it."

"I don't think that at all, dearie," Rumple replied with a chuckle. "But consider. The person to whom that heart belongs has spent some amount of time with Ursula, at least, if not the other two. That person might have information pertaining to their current whereabouts. It can't hurt to ask, at any rate. Just a few civil questions?" He paused for a beat before adding, "Before we put their heart back where it belongs."

Snow and David were frowning a bit as they took his meaning. Emma wasn't overly enthusiastic at his suggestion either. But they didn't protest and the others were nodding slowly. He smiled. "Well then. I'll just call Belle and ask her to meet us with a locator spell." He pulled out his phone and raised an eyebrow. She'd already sent a text. As he read it, he felt his heart begin to pound.

"Rumple?" Regina asked. "What's wrong?"

He looked up. "How many people can you safely teleport, Your Majesty?" he asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Regina tilted her head to one side. "How great a distance are we talking about?"

Rumple swallowed hard. "The well…"
Cruella was nearly beside herself with glee. She'd had her suspicions back when Lily had first shown her the book. Of all the pages to be missing, for it to have been the ones placed just after the bit that told of how the three of them had crossed over to this realm was just a *tad* too coincidental. She'd guessed then that the pages had been ripped out deliberately, and it hadn't been too difficult to deduce the reason: Once they'd fallen into this realm, the first thing that she and Ursula had done was leave little infant Lily behind and make their own way in the world—after salvaging some pieces of dragon egg shell for a youth and beauty regimen, of course. And if Lily knew that much, *and* hadn't brought the subject up, then it followed that Maleficent's daughter wanted vengeance on other people besides Snow White and her charming family. Cruella could respect that; it was the sort of thing she would have planned. If she still had the power to harm others. Her instruction to Lily had been a test, both of the limits that Isaac had placed on her power, and of Lily's true desire. She couldn't have ordered the dragon to *attack*, any more than she had been able to set those cobras on the royals that Maleficent had wanted killed. But a directive that basically told Lily to do whatever she wanted? Oh, yes, there was some absolutely delicious repressed anger and hostility going on in that girl's heart.

"Give me the heart, dahling, and I'll be happy to call her off," she called, as Ursula dove behind the well, using it to shield herself from another flaming barrage.

"That's a load of chum!" Ursula snapped, sending a bolt of magic skyward. "Once you've got what you want, you'll just have her finish the job!"

"Please, I'm not making her do anything she doesn't already want to." She laughed aloud when Lily sent down another jet of fire—one Ursula barely managed to dodge in time.

The sea witch prepared another ball of magic. "We'll just see about that!" she snapped, lobbing it in Cruella's direction instead.

Cruella shrieked, dropped to the forest floor and rolled.

Ursula smiled grimly. And then, another jet of flame came down, right at her feet and Ursula shrieked and leaped away. This time, her foot came down awkardly and she fell on her back. "No!" she gasped, as the polished Dark heart fell from her hand. She scrabbled for it, but then a stiletto heel came down lightly on her hand, as Cruella stooped down to retrieve it.

"Thanks for keeping it safe, dahling," she laughed, as she stepped away, "but you really have gone soft. I'm the one most suited to use this. And use it I shall…"

"Ursula!" Poseidon broke into the clearing at a run, Ariel a pace behind. He gestured at the well almost casually, and a geyser of water rose up to counter Lily's flames, dousing them and buffeting her back as the sea king knelt by his daughter. "Ursula," he whispered, gathering her into his arms.

Ursula looked up at him, disbelieving and half-dazed. "Father?"

As Belle watched the scene unfold from her hiding place, she breathed a sigh of relief, even as she felt a twinge of disappointment. It didn't look as though she was going to be of much use after all. Not that she'd been able to do anything but cower safely out of sight. Poseidon had the matter well in hand. He would attend to Ursula. Lily had flown off… somewhere. And Cruella was… was… *Oh, no!*

Cruella was, in fact, standing at the edge of the clearing, holding a small Dark object in her hand.
and hissing with frustration. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair! In her mind's eye, she saw the page again with her horrible sentence penned in ghastly black ink.

*Cruella De Vil can no longer take away the life of another.*

Clearly, whatever magic Isaac's quill had been spelled with couldn't distinguish between crushing a whole heart and crushing half of one. "It won't kill him," she muttered. "I should be able to do this." She tried again. And then, she saw the man whom Ursula had just called 'Father' looking at her balefully.

*Lily!* She sent the thought skyward. *Help me!*

For a moment, nothing happened. Then came the screech of wings and an angry roar as Lily returned.

But she wasn't alone in the sky.

Looking absolutely ordinary in a ski jacket and jeans, Tia hovered several yards away from her, a strange probing look on her face. The dragon wavered and writhed, torn between two sets of commands. Finally, with a shriek that might have been rage, pain, triumph, or some bizarre combination of the three, she streaked off once more.

"NO!" Cruella screamed, rushing forward. Brandishing the heart in her clenched fist, she came to a stop in front of the well and gazed furiously up at Tia. "Curse you!" she yelled, waving her fist upward. "What have you done? How did you—?"

Someone tapped her shoulder and she whirled to find Belle standing before her. "I'll take that, thank you!" the librarian snapped, delivering a left jab and a right hook to Cruella's jaw. Caught totally off-guard, Cruella reeled back, struggling to both keep her balance and hold onto the heart.

It was a losing fight. The back of her head hit one of the well's stone roof supports with a muted crack. Her clenched fist went slack and released the heart… into the still, silent waters of the well behind her.

When Rumple and Regina arrived on the scene moments later, it was to find Tia huddled beside Belle, one arm across the librarian's shaking shoulders, Poseidon attending to Ursula, murmuring gentle words of comfort…

…And Cruella lying silent and unmoving beside the well, a pool of dark blood surrounding her head and seeping into the octagonal stone base.
Chapter Thirty-Eight

The half-heart in Rumple's chest seemed to thunder with every step he took as he approached. He could hear Belle whimpering softly now, and Tia's soft soothing noises. Leaning heavily on his cane, he dropped down to her level and whispered, "Belle?"

She looked up then, her blue eyes wide and filled with a deep desolation. "Rumple," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. Y-your heart fell in." She lifted an arm and gestured awkwardly to the well behind her. "Down there."

Regina was beside him now. Rumple heard her intake of breath. "Tia," she said in a voice that was almost too calm. "What happened here?"

Tia hesitated. "I wasn't here for all of it," she admitted. "But from what I did see," she jerked her chin toward Cruella, "it was an accident."

"From what you… saw?" Regina repeated. "I think you need to be a bit more specific, dear."

Tia nodded, even though she privately disagreed. Her telepathy told her plainly that the queen had guessed what she was hinting at, but sometimes people wanted to hear things spelled out clearly in hope that they were misunderstanding the evidence. She took another breath. "There was a dragon," she began quietly. "It was under that woman's control…"

As she continued talking, Rumple drew closer still and, when Belle reached for him, gathered her gently into his arms.

Even as she melted into Rumple's embrace, part of Belle wanted to break free and run. Oh, he was holding her now, trying to comfort her now, but as soon as Tia was done with her explanation, Rumple would be done with her. Of what use was she, anyway? She'd struck out on her own to try to be a hero, but she hadn't been able to stop the dragon. She hadn't been able to save Rumple's heart. She'd endangered herself, pulled everyone away from trying to save an innocent baby, and if that bit of self-centered thoughtlessness hadn't been enough to darken her heart, then what she'd done next surely had.

She hadn't meant to. She'd just wanted to get the heart back. And yes, okay, she'd wanted to put her recent training to good use. But she hadn't wanted to kill anyone!

Hadin't she? Not even after what Cruella and the others had done to Rumple less than a day ago?

Well, okay, she wouldn't have been sorry if something unfortunate had happened to any of them, but she still hadn't wanted to kill anyone. If she had, she would have used the gun, for pity's sake!

…Not that she hadn't considered it.

Rumple was still holding her, pressing her cheek to his shoulder with one hand, rubbing circles on her back with his other. That wouldn't last long, she knew. She remembered what he'd told her in their marriage vows.

You brought light into my life, and chased away all the darkness.
Well, now she was bringing the Darkness back in spades. She'd wanted to save him. Instead, she was going to drag him down with her. Why hadn't he pushed her away, yet? Surely, Tia must be done talking by now. Surely, he had to understand the danger. He'd been given a second chance to do right and she was only going to steer him wrong. He had to let her go. And if he wouldn't, then she had to break free.

He was still holding her as though his life—and hers—depended on it. And she'd broken free too many times, hurt him too many times. She couldn't do it again. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she clutched at him and he hugged her back. She couldn't leave him now, not even for his own good. She couldn't do the right thing this time.

She didn't have the courage.

Tia was just finishing up her account when feet crunching on the leaves behind her told Regina that the others had arrived. "If you'll excuse me," she said with a polite smile that was immediately followed by a heavy sigh, "I'll spare you the trouble of telling this over again."

Tia nodded. Then she turned slightly toward the couple beside her. Belle was still weeping quietly, and she could see tears leaking past Rumple's closed eyes as well. She shook her head, wishing that she knew these people a bit better, knowing that her presence now was almost certainly unwelcome. "I'm sorry," she murmured, trying to get to her feet. "I…" She hesitated for only the barest instant before putting her hand on Rumple's shoulder, ostensibly to brace herself better as she arose. But she kept her hand there a moment longer than was strictly necessary, and she gave the shoulder a quick squeeze before she released it. Rumple said nothing to acknowledge the gesture, but Tia caught his tight-lipped nod and heard him draw a shuddering breath, as she moved off to join the others.

"I'm confident in saying," Regina was telling Emma, "that the DA's office isn't going to be interested in pursuing the matter at this time. Going by Tia's account, Cruella was controlling Lily and using her, both to attack Poseidon and his daughter, and to help her get Rumple's heart. Under the circumstances, I don't think Belle's actions were unwarranted." She spared a quick glance at the merfolk before adding wryly, "The way I see it, her actions today might have averted a messy diplomatic incident."

Emma nodded her understanding. Killing someone who was in the middle of attacking—or controlling a dragon and directing it to attack—someone else sounded a lot like justifiable homicide to her. "Yeah," she agreed. "I'll get a statement from her later," she looked up as Tia approached, "and I should probably get an official one from you at some point," she added, "but both can wait." She turned back to Regina. "What about Poseidon and Ursula?"

Regina glanced back toward the well. "I'll talk to them," she sighed.

"And my baby?" Zelena asked, and there was no mistaking the worry in the witch's voice.

Tia shook her head. "I didn't see any—" She stopped abruptly and pointed. A red-haired young woman, severely underdressed for the cold, rose from behind the well, her face somber. In her arms was a blanket-wrapped bundle.

Snow took a step forward. "Ariel?" she asked, nervously.

Ariel continued moving toward them. "The dragon dropped this," she said dully. "There was a man here a few minutes ago, some kind of wizard, I guess. He flew up and caught it in the air before it could fall far and he gave it to me. Then he went after the dragon. I…" Her breath caught. "I'm
Zelena bolted forward with a strangled shriek to pluck the bundle from the young mermaid's arms.

I lost her. Tony flung his thought back Tia's way, not bothering to hide his frustration. How the hell could I just lose a dragon the size of a farmhouse?

Tia's reply took a minute, a sure sign that she was asking someone with her. They say her mother had magic, she said finally. If she has it, too, she might have teleported. Then, more worriedly, Tony, they say she probably didn't know she had magic. Or that she was a dragon, or anything.

Tony sighed aloud. I guess that would explain the panic, he thought. We had a hard enough time figuring out our gifts when we were kids, and we didn't almost roast anybody! He hesitated. You wouldn't know how much of that was her, and how much was that woman you broke her free of, right?

This time, Tia's response was quicker, if tinged with a bit of frustration on her own part. Sorry. She was scared and angry, but she wasn't sorry for what she almost did. There was a mental sigh. Then, You'd better come back. Chasing after her when she doesn't want to be found isn't a good idea. Maybe she'll change back on her own once she calms down. And, she added apologetically, everyone wants answers and their thoughts are...

Their thoughts were overwhelming, Tony finished the sentence in his own head. Tia's telepathic powers were stronger than his, but that strength was often a weakness, particularly when people around her were feeling agitated. On my way, he confirmed. Um, the dragon tried to get me off her tail by throwing a baby at me. I handed it to a woman who was nearby. Did you find her? Is the baby okay?

Tia couldn't lie telepathically, but Tony could tell that she wanted to. Come back, she said firmly. I'll tell you when you get here.

Tony swallowed hard. Then he took to the air again and started drifting back in the direction from which he'd arrived.

"She's not breathing!" Zelena gasped. She thrust the baby at Emma. "You knew how to get him breathing after the Dark One nearly drowned him!" She jerked her head in Killian's direction. "Do it again!"

Emma regarded Zelena with something approaching sympathy. Then she turned to Regina. "You tell me," she said. "Is it a...?"

"Sleeping curse?" Regina finished. "I think so." She looked at her sister. "There's no wound on her, is there? No evidence of foul play?"

Zelena hastily unswaddled the unmoving infant. A moment later, she looked up angrily. "There's a bruise on her arm!" she snapped.

"Let me see," Regina hastened over. She shook her head. "That wouldn't have put her in this state, but," she added with a touch of anger, "I could be convinced to leave you alone for a few minutes with whoever did this. You've never seen a sleeping curse in action, have you, Sis?" she asked.

"Please," Zelena made a scoffing sound. "I've cast one or two in my time." Her eyes widened. "Wait." For the first time a spark of hope lit her voice. "You think that... But is there a way to
know whether your suspicions are true, or… or…?"

Regina nodded. "Outwardly, the sleeping curse mimics death. Inwardly, though, it's another story. And we're fortunate enough to have someone here with a talent for looking inward." She looked up. "Tia?"

Tia came forward at once. "I'll need a minute," she said apologetically. She hesitated. "May I?" She reached out for the child and Zelena passed her over. "Thank you. I might need longer," she said apologetically. "Babies' thoughts aren't always easy to pick up. Tony thinks it's because they haven't yet grasped the concept of language. It's not that they don't think, mind you," she added. "It's that the way they think isn't one that I'm generally attuned to…"

It took nearly five minutes, but it felt like an eternity. Finally, Tia opened her eyes. "She's alive," she pronounced. "I can't talk to her. I don't think she knew I was there. But she's alive."

Zelena took her daughter back and held her close.

"Zelena," Regina said, "you know there's only one way to wake her, right?"

Emma gave Regina a puzzled frown. "Why are you sounding like that's going to be a problem?"

Zelena, however, took her meaning at once. "Breaking a curse," she said, her voice thick with misery, "is light magic."

"Actually," Regina said, "that's not what has me worried. Not as much, anyway," she amended. "You need to believe that change is possible," she continued calmly, "but it's not as though there aren't a few living examples standing around in front of you. But for True Love's Kiss to work, both parties need to love one other."

Zelena's eyes were very wide in her pale face. "And she doesn't even know me," she choked out.

Regina hesitated. "I'm not sure how accurate that is. Studies have shown that a fetus can recognize its mother's voice in the womb. And I believe it can clue into things like the mother's emotional state. That might be enough."

"Then…?" Emma asked.

Regina sighed. "It also might not be. Zelena was barely out of her first trimester. If she'd been carrying the baby for nine months, eight, maybe even seven, there'd be less concern. But three months? The pregnancy might have been accelerated, but I don't know about prenatal bonding."

Emma looked from Regina to Zelena. "I guess there's only one way to find out," she said nervously.

Regina nodded. She turned back to her sister. "You created a time-travel spell. In order to do that, you had to banish every shred of doubt in your mind about whether you could crack a code that had eluded the greatest wizards of all time." She paused for a moment. When she spoke next, the seriousness of her expression belied the flippancy of her tone. "Since all magic is predicated on belief, do you think you can pull that trick off again?"
a narrow precipice, trying to navigate a safe path between being a support and being an interloper.

Poseidon didn't need help. He and Ursula seemed to be talking. And as for Zelena, well, maybe it was that Dark patch on her heart talking, but she was just as happy letting Regina handle her. She tried to tell herself that Zelena had been going through a horrific time, that she knew what it was like to have a child ripped from her arms for some nefarious purpose... But she couldn't quite get away from the thought that the reason she could empathize was because it had been Zelena who had ripped her child from her arms.

Good wasn't supposed to exact vengeance or keep grudges, and she didn't like facing up to the realization that, perhaps, she wasn't nearly so good as she thought. Heroes didn't do what was easy. They did what was right. But she couldn't make herself go over to Zelena. Not now.

David turned to her. "Are you okay?"

She forced herself to smile. "Of course."

"Good," David said. "Because I think we need to revisit something."

Snow tilted her head quizzically up toward her husband.

David was frowning the way he usually did when he was hunting for the right words. "Lily's still out there," he said finally.

She nodded. "I know. We'll have to send out search parties, I guess, though I'm not sure how we can arm and protect them. And we're talking about a fire-breathing monster loose in a forest."

"We're also talking about a young woman who changed herself into a dragon for the first time today. As dangerous as she is, as angry as she is, she's just as likely to strike out from fear and confusion as from malice. Maybe moreso." He took another breath. "You remember how we decided not long ago that it was safer to leave Maleficent where she was? I'm... not so sure that's still the case."

"But if we raise her," Snow said slowly, "then she might lay this town to waste."

"And if we don't, then Lily might do the same. Snow, as... angry as Maleficent is going to be, I think we'll have a better chance at reasoning with her. And if we can do that, then if anyone can help Lily control her powers, I'd say her mother can."

"Maybe," Snow admitted. "But will she?"

David hesitated. "According to Rumpelstiltskin, she can only survive so long as this town exists. It's in her own best interests not to have Lily destroy it."

"The town, yes. But what about us?"

"I know," David admitted. "If we raise Maleficent, she might kill us. But if we don't, do you really think Lily's going to be more merciful?"

Snow swallowed hard. "I think we need to talk to Regina."

Zelena pulled the tiny bundle closer. Her heart was thundering in her chest, her hands were icy, and there was a pounding in her head, a pressure building behind her eyes. Her world seemed to shrink down to a bubble, just big enough to contain the two of them.
"I don't know if you know who I am," she murmured. "Or if you can hear me now. But even if you can't, that's going to change in a moment." Her voice trembled and she gripped her trepidation and shook it furiously. No doubts. No doubts or this wouldn't work. It had to work. She took a deep breath. "It's all right, little one. Mummy's here. Mummy's here." The pressure was making her head ache now and she closed her eyes as she felt hot moisture welling up. "I never realized it was possible to love someone before you even met them," she whispered. "But it must be. Because I do love you. With all my heart."

With her eyes still shut tightly, she bent her head toward her chest and pressed her lips to her daughter's soft brow. Then she lifted her head again and opened her eyes.

The child lay still and unmoving in her arms.

Zelena shook her head. "No!" she whispered. "No, that was supposed to work!"

"Maybe if you tried again…?" Robin suggested.

"It didn't work the first time," Zelena said frantically. "That was when I had my best chance. Now… every time I try, I'm going to doubt. Every time I fail, that doubt will grow."

"Zelena—" Regina started to say, but her sister kept talking.

"This isn't like the time travel spell," she went on. "I knew that there were pieces to that puzzle that had eluded my predecessors, but even though I didn't know for certain what I needed, I had trial and error to fall back on until I had a working hypothesis. Here… I know exactly what's needed."

"Zelena."

Zelena wasn't listening. "I can't make her love me, don't you see? I can't even talk to her so she can learn to love me." She wasn't bothering to wipe away the tears that now coursed freely down her cheeks. "She's trapped where I can't reach her and even if one of you lot could get into that realm and see her, you wouldn't be able to bring her out! She's gone!"

"Zelena!"

Regina's sharp voice startled her and she looked up furiously. Her sister was smiling. "What's so amusing?" she snarled, pain lending a ragged edge to her voice.

Regina shook her head. "Look down," she ordered, still with that soft smile.

"What?"

Regina inclined her head toward the baby. "Look down."

Automatically, Zelena's eyes moved in the direction bidden. Then they widened. The baby's head was twitching slightly from side to side.

"L-little one?" Zelena whispered.

The baby smacked her lips, making a faint sucking sound. Then her eyes flew open and a lusty wail escaped her throat.

Zelena lifted her daughter with a glad cry and hugged her tightly.

Regina exhaled with a sound that hovered between a laugh and a sob. "You know how to conjure a bottle, Sis, or should I do it?"
Killian Jones didn't like inactivity, but he was blessed if he could think of anything requiring his attention. He found himself peering down into the well, even though he knew that spying a Dark heart in murky depths was a losing endeavor. He'd already raised and lowered the bucket several times, to no avail.

His gaze fell upon the plaque at the base and a wry smile quirked his lips as he read its inscription:

*For centuries, local legend has claimed*
that mystical waters run beneath this great land. It is said that these waters possess the power to return that which is lost to its rightful place. If you have lost something precious to you, drink from this well and bear witness to this miracle as what is missing shall be returned.

"It would be enlightening to know whether this plate was embossed before or after magic arrived here," he muttered under his breath.

A throat cleared behind him and he turned to see the mer-folk standing there. "We," Ursula's eyes widened at the sound of her own voice. She took another breath. "We'll be taking our leave now. I'll tell the others, but," she looked down for a moment and Killian was reminded more forcefully of the innocent young woman he'd heard singing in that tavern all those years ago, "I just wanted to apologize for what I put you through when I got here. And thank you for keeping my voice safe all this time."

Killian gave her a roguish smirk. "I try not to destroy that which is priceless, love. And, you're hardly the only one of your kind who seems to think that drenching a man in saltwater is a reasonable way to commence negotiations."

Poseidon harrumphed at that, and Ariel giggled.

"Well, at any rate," Ursula said, "I'm grateful." She took a step toward the others, but then stopped and turned back. "By the way," she added, "we spent last night in a cabin some four miles from here in the woods."

"Aye," Killian nodded. "We tracked you there earlier."

"Yes, well," Ursula took another breath. "I borrowed something from Doctor… Whale, was it? At the hospital? I left it in one of those metal canisters in the kitchen there. Perhaps you could see that it's returned?"

Killian's eyes widened. "So, that's whose it was," he exclaimed. "We almost returned it to—" He stopped. "You wouldn't have taken any more of those items, love, would you?"

Ursula shook her head blankly. "No, I just needed a doctor on-hand to deliver the witch's child while I impersonated the Blue Fairy. I had no reason or need to take anyone else's."

"I see," Killian murmured. So, she hadn't taken Blue's heart. But then, who had?

He thought of something else. "Forgive me, lass, but if I might ask one favor of you, we're told that Cruella dropped the former Dark One's heart in the well. Are you able to retrieve it?"

Ursula frowned. "That should be easy enough, I think." She turned toward the well and leaned in.
A moment later, she looked up. "Maybe, not that easy, after all. Father?"

Poseidon joined her, Ariel a step behind. After a moment, all three turned back to face Killian. "Are you certain she dropped it in here?" Ursula asked.

Killian hesitated. "Tia said she saw it happen. As yet, I've no reason to doubt her."

"Well, it's not in there now," Ursula said. "Mind you, I'm not saying that your friend's wrong or lying about it. While this well channels a great magic, I'm sensing another power at work here. Something..." Her expression grew troubled, as she looked to her relatives. "You feel it too, don't you?"

Poseidon and Ariel both nodded slowly. "A portal," Poseidon said gravely. "Someone opened a portal inside this well. It wasn't large and it didn't stay open long, but... it could well have captured what you're seeking."

"It has to do with our ability to cross realms," Ariel explained. "We're more sensitive to other magics that breach the barriers between worlds. That one gave me the shivers, though."

"Dark magic," Ursula nodded. "And lots of it." She shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't suggest any leads for you, but I wish you luck in divining the truth on your own." She leaned against Poseidon. "My father and I have years of catching up to do. And while I daresay I'll be mending my past ways... this really isn't something that involves us."

"No," Poseidon agreed. "It's not."

"Well, I'll stay," Ariel proclaimed.

"Child," Poseidon said, "you know I'll be sealing this realm off from our crossing over once we return."

Ariel shrugged. "So, I'll find a bean or a hat or something. These people are my friends." Her eyes happened to fall on Killian and she looked away again. "Well, most of them are. I can't just leave and not help."

Poseidon sighed heavily. "The choice is yours, granddaughter. But I shall miss you."

"And I you," she replied, impulsively clasping her arms about his neck. She frowned. "You'll give me enough time to go back and get Eric, right?"

"Well," Poseidon managed, after she released him, "it will take me a few days to prepare. One week?" When his granddaughter nodded, he smiled and took a step forward. "Very well. I suppose we ought to get our farewells to the rest out of the way before we return home, then." He nodded to Killian. "Captain."

"Your Majesty," Killian nodded back as they swept past him. As they moved on, his gallant smile fell away, replaced by a worried frown. Ursula hadn't taken Blue's heart. Some unknown force had taken Rumpelstiltskin's. Was the same power behind both thefts? And... just whose power was it?

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting on the stone base that surrounded the well, holding his wife in his arms and wishing he could do more than utter soothing noises and let her weep. He was out of his depth and starting to cramp up from sitting in one spot for so long. The cold of the stone and the damp of the forest floor were seeping into his trousers and he shivered despite his woolen overcoat as he kissed the top of Belle's head.
When he raised his eyes again, Regina was standing before him. Somehow, he wasn't surprised. The Heroes had a penchant for needing his help right when his priorities lay elsewhere. His expression hardened as he greeted her coldly. "Your Majesty."

Regina inclined her head regally. And then, astonishingly, she stooped down to make eye contact and rested her hand on his shoulder. "I think," she said softly, her characteristic poise yielding to something that might almost have been empathy, "that we're going to have to revisit something we discussed earlier. Snow and David believe that at this point, the risk of raising Maleficent is somewhat smaller than the risk of not raising her. I'm inclined to agree. And," she added, cutting Rumple off when he opened his mouth to speak, "since I'm not entirely familiar with the necessary spells and, since it's obvious that you have other things to contend with at the moment, I was wondering whether you knew where I could track down the proper literature."

Rumple blinked. "The proper literature?" he repeated. "You... you aren't...?" His voice trailed off as the queen shook her head with a sad smile.

"I won't deny that we could use your help," she said with a bit of her usual tartness, "but we're not the only ones who do. With Zelena and Emma pitching in, I think we'll manage. If you can point us in the right direction."

Belle shifted position in his arms then, and he stroked her back once more. When he spoke again, the edge had gone out of his voice. She wasn't asking him to put his own troubles aside to help save a town that had—until very recently—barely tolerated his presence. And the assistance that she was requesting was eminently reasonable under the circumstances. "The shop," he said quietly. "I daresay it's locked, but there are no magical barriers to entry at the moment. Go into the office. There was a shelving unit blocking off the back door this morning; I imagine it's still there. You'll find a collection of spell books on the bottom shelves behind the sliding panels. The volume you want is the *Collected Workings of Erreth-Akbe*. It will be bound in gray wyvern-hide and it bears the stamp of the kingdom of Earthsea on its spine. I hope you can read it," he added dryly, "because if you're hoping for a translation from me, dearie, you'll have a long wait."

Regina sighed. "I'll figure something out." She took another breath. "I'd ask if there was anything I could do, but—"

"There isn't." Rumple turned his attention back to the woman in his arms. "Go. Save the town. It's what you heroes do, isn't it?" A keening whimper escaped from Belle and Rumple hastily pulled her closer, as Regina rose to her feet still smiling sadly.

"Yes," she agreed with a nod. "Yes," she sighed again, "I suppose that is what we heroes do. Rumple, thank you."

Rumple barely nodded in acknowledgment, as he brushed back a lock of his wife's hair.

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When the Cadillac and the Mercedes materialized in the clearing, Regina half-stumbled and might have fallen had Snow and Emma not caught her.

Zelena let out an exasperated sigh. "Was that really necessary?" she demanded.

"I teleported here with him," Regina reminded her. "And Belle walked. It's a ways back to town and this saves both of us the trouble of going back to the cabin later."

"I can't believe you just let the sea witch leave with her father after what she did to me!"

"It was a political decision," Regina returned, though it must be owned that she winced slightly.
"Think of it as banishment, if it helps. If she ever shows her face here again, she won't be getting off nearly so easily."

Zelena didn't look at all mollified, but the baby's twitching distracted her and she conjured up another bottle of formula.

"Might be a little soon for that," Regina murmured.

"She didn't finish the last one. And I don't need mothering advice from you."

Regina shrugged. "You know best, I'm sure." She walked back to Rumple and Belle.

"We're going back to town now," she said, when he acknowledged her presence. "I'll get that book and then, we'll return Whale's heart. I suppose I ought to talk to Blue, as well. Maybe whoever's puppet-mastering her will come out to gloat."

Rumple snorted. "I sense your step-daughter's optimism has rubbed off on you."

"Perhaps." She noted that Belle seemed to be dozing now, apparently having cried herself out. "Are you going to be able to get her into the car all right?"

Rumple frowned. "Are you offering your assistance?"

"Would you accept it if I were?"

Rumple hesitated, seeming to be weighing out the consequences of what he was about to say next. Finally, he gave her pained smile. "Well, if you are," he said softly, "a-and if you're certain it's no trouble, Your Majesty, then I would be grateful." He winced. "Cold and damp have never been good for my old injury."

She could guess what it was costing him to admit as much, even if he was only confirming what she'd suspected when she'd volunteered her suggestion. "Okay, then," she said, narrowing her eyes in concentration. A second later, Rumple materialized in the driver's seat of his car, Belle beside him.

Regina debated with herself whether to approach the car, but before she reached her decision, Rumple had already gunned the motor and started driving. With a mental shrug, she made her way back to the others.

"Are we ready?" she asked, not really expecting any negative response.

But then Emma drew closer with an apologetic smile. "I'll have to catch up," she said in a voice not meant to carry past Regina's ears. "There's something I have to do first."

"It can't wait?"

Emma shook her head. "I don't think so." She turned her head slightly to watch as Rumple's car vanished down the forest path. "Maybe if the last twenty-four hours hadn't happened, but... I've got the phone. And if he were to call it now, I wouldn't be able to drop everything and go running. I'm going to swing by the convent. I just spoke to Merryweather," she added with a shrug. "I thought I ought to tell her what was going on with Blue. Anyway, she's at the hospital, but she told me that both Tink and Flora are on the evening shift tonight so they should be at the convent right now. I'll pass the phone to one of them and meet you after."

Regina sighed. "I wanted to question Blue, and I was hoping that your talent might help to discern
how truthful her responses might be. I don't doubt she'll tell us the truth as she knows it," she continued, "but if whoever took her heart is listening in and decides to speak through her, I think you'd know if they were lying."

Emma winced. "Yeah, I would. But we promised Gold, that if he called, anytime day or night, someone would pick up and that someone would be there for him."

"Has he ever called before?"

"I don't know, but after everything that's been happening lately, I don't want to gamble that he won't."

"Swan." Both Emma and Regina turned, startled to see Killian standing close by. "Forgive me, loves, I couldn't help hearing the last of your conversation." He held out his hand. "Unless I'm much mistaken, my presence at the hospital will be superfluous. I can run that device to the convent for you."

Emma hesitated. "We can drop you off in town, but you'll still have to cover a lot of ground on foot."

Hook smiled. "I think I've a better notion, love." He raised his voice slightly, so that Robin—who was only a short distance away—could hear him. "We aren't far from the Merry Men's camp. I'm sure I can borrow a horse from there."

On cue, the outlaw drew closer with a faint answering smile. "I think that can be arranged..."

Killian kicked the horse into a canter as he passed Zelena's farmhouse. He expected he'd be at the convent in perhaps another thirty minutes, if not sooner. And then his own cell phone rang. He thought about letting whoever was calling leave him a message, but he'd already forgotten and had to reset his password half a dozen times, and given all the recent excitement in town, the matter might well be urgent.

"Whoa," he sighed reluctantly and, when the horse obeyed, pulled out his phone. "Aye?"

"Killian!" Leroy sounded a good deal more agitated than usual. "Terrible news! There's been a dragon sighted flying over town and Rowan Hill Park is burning as we speak!"

"What, mate?"

"Look," the dwarf snapped, "I have your name down on the list of volunteer firefighters. Is that a mistake?"

No, it was something he'd signed up for, hoping to impress Emma—or, more accurately, her father. "No, mate, it's no mistake," he confirmed.

"That's what I thought, bucko. Now get your... acht to the park, pronto. I gotta call the next name on the list!" The dwarf ended the call.

Killian winced. Then he took a breath, settled more securely into the saddle, and kicked the horse. "Gee'up, he commanded.

It appeared as though the convent would have to wait.
Belle was silent on the drive back to the mansion. The few times that Rumple took his eyes briefly from the road to glance over at her, she still seemed to be sleeping. She'd barely moved when he'd reached over to fasten her seatbelt before leaving the clearing. There were still tear-tracks on her cheeks, even now, though her tears and sobs had finally ceased.

When he pulled into the carriage house behind the mansion and parked, he wondered at first whether he'd be able to get her out of the car and into the house. If not… If not, he supposed he'd have to call someone. He couldn't just leave her here. "Belle," he murmured gently. "Belle, we're home."

She stirred then. Her eyelids fluttered and she straightened up in the seat and released her belt. Rumple got out and made his way around the front of the car to open her door, but she was already stepping out by the time he reached it. "Well," he smiled, "shall we…?"

She walked dully past him, moving like an automaton toward the passage that connected the carriage house to the mansion. After a moment, Rumple followed, hitting the light switches along the way when she failed to do so.

She moved on leaden feet into the cellar and then up the stairs to the main floor. Without stopping, she continued up to the second floor and then into the room that Rumple had given her when she'd first walked out of the asylum—the room she'd been occupying since she'd moved back with him, save for last night.

Rumple watched as she sat on the edge of the bed, slid off her high-heeled shoes and swung her legs up to lie, fully-dressed, atop the satin coverlet. "Belle?"

She turned her face toward him and he was struck by the desolation in her limpid blue eyes. "I… c-could I be alone for now?" she asked him, almost pleading.

Rumple found himself nodding automatically. "Yes, yes, of course," he murmured. "I'll be here when you're ready."

Belle gave him a wan smile. Then she turned her face toward the window. "Would you… pull the shade before you go?" she beseeched. "Please?"

He did so to murmured thanks. "I'll be here," he repeated as he left.

Then he made his way down to the living room and sank down in his favorite armchair. One hand balled into a fist while the other gripped the chair's arm with all its wiry strength. He had to stay
strong now. Belle was going to need him and he couldn't afford to give free rein to his temper as he might have in the past. She had enough to contend with without his penchant for laying into breakables with his cane. Instead he sat in the chair, shuddering and shaking, as he wondered what he was going to do when Belle came downstairs again.

Blue heard them out in silence, and while her prim expression didn't waver, something flickered nervously behind her eyes. "And you don't know how long my heart has been absent," she said evenly, phrasing it as a statement, not a question.

Zelena shook her head emphatically. "I just know it wasn't in your chest earlier." She sighed and looked at her sister. "I suppose you want me to take the glamor spell off her, too."

"If you wouldn't mind," Regina nodded. "One of you is more than enough."

Zelena gave her sister a hard look. Then she waved her hand once in the air and Blue's customary features reasserted themselves. "Hardly much of an improvement," the witch sniffed.

"I beg to differ," Blue said mildly.

Merryweather cleared her throat a bit nervously. "You do know what this means, Blue, if what they're saying is true."

Blue nodded slowly. "Well then," she said, "you'd better check, hadn't you?"

Merryweather sucked in a breath. "I'm sorry about this," she murmured, extending her hand toward her superior's torso. She hesitated only another moment before plunging it in. Her shoulders slumped and she shook her head sadly as she withdrew. "I'm afraid they do have the right of it," she admitted.

Blue absorbed the news with near-total equanimity, the slight widening of her eyes her only sign of distress. "Look at me," she ordered Merryweather. And when the other fairy did so, she continued calmly, "Until further notice, you will oversee the other fairies. Tell them as much as you believe they need to know. And I think it wise that you keep your visits with me brief. Say nothing that you would not say were a hostile party present, because evidently, there is considerable reason to believe that one will be."

"You can't tell when…?"

"When I'm being monitored? Or worse, controlled?" Blue shook her head with a gentle smile. "If I could, I would have found some way to alert you before this. No, Merryweather, I'm afraid that I've been as oblivious to all of this as the rest of you. And, for all our safeties, you'll need to keep me as ignorant as possible of your plans until the matter is resolved."

Merryweather nodded. "But for this to have been going on under our noses, it seems almost…"

"Impossible?"

Merryweather forced herself to smile. "Well. Yes. But then everything is possible, even the impossible. I will check in with you as I'm able. We'll discuss the weather and the best refining tools for pixie dust and how to best store blackberry cordial so it won't sour," she said brightly.

Blue nodded. "That sounds lovely. Well," she went on, a brisker note slipping into her voice, "if you could manage to provide me with some reading material to pass the time, I'd appreciate it. I'll leave the subjects to you."
"Mothering Magazine not your style?" Zelena broke in with a smirk.

The fairy took no offense. "It's nowhere near as relevant to me as it was to you, dear. Perhaps some of the issues still would be. If you'd care to borrow them."

Zelena's gaze flickered down to the infant in her arms. And then, rather stiffly, she replied, "Well. If you're sure you've no use for them, I suppose I could take a few off your hands."

Regina was discreet enough to make certain that Whale was alone when she went to return his heart. As he took in both the red glowing object in her hand, and her brief explanation, his eyes widened.

"What did they make me do?" he whispered, a sick look falling over his face. "I didn't… murder anyone?"

Regina shook her head. "Actually, it was the opposite. With my sister going into labor a few months ahead of schedule and none of our ladies being midwives, much less obstetricians—"

"Come to think of it, those were never my specialties either," Whale mused. He looked at her sharply. "The Curse's doing?"

Regina nodded. "You saw for yourself what our medical knowledge was, back in the Enchanted Forest. I… recalled that you were a man of science, and that you were committed in saving lives. And, while I won't pretend that I was overly concerned about everyone else's health at that time, I was planning on being alive for a good long while. Since I didn't know anything about the realm to which the Curse would bring us, and I wasn't entirely clear on how illness and injury would be handled in a world with no healing spells, or how the Curse would compensate for such things," her smile contained more than a hint of an apology, "I took matters into my own hands and brought along the one person I could be reasonably sure would know how to cure the sick and tend to infected wounds without resorting to spells, charms, or incantations. The Curse simply made you more of a generalist."

"Specialist in several branches, you mean," Whale corrected, his eyebrows rising. "So, my coming here wasn't some kind of payback for our earlier meeting."

"Payback?" Regina repeated. "So far as I know, you never did anything to warrant any. No, I needed a physician and I wasn't about to take 'no' for an answer." She shook her head and wondered whether she'd only imagined the fleeting expression of guilt that vanished from Whale's face almost as soon as she thought she'd seen it. "If you still want to go home," she continued, "well, see Tiny about a bean, I suppose. I'd prefer you wait another couple of years until Storybrooke College graduates its first medical class, but I've kept you long enough."

"No," Whale shook his head. "I was there during that missing year. And now that I have my memories back of how that went," he sighed, "there's nothing there for me now. I suppose I had to see for myself in order to realize it, but… This is where I belong."

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head again. "Don't be. Back in my land, I… wanted my name to stand for life. When I returned there, I had to use an alias or I imagine I'd have been torn apart by the local villagers." He winced. My name has been painted darker than any curse you'd ever think to cast. It's the name of a monster—and not the one I," he coughed, "ended up creating shortly before you cast that curse. At least in this town… there's a chance for me to be more."
Regina nodded. "I understand." She took deep breath. "This is going to hurt for a moment."

Whale nodded and clenched his hands tightly around the edge of his desk. "Go ahead." Then he gasped and doubled over as Regina shoved his heart back where it belonged.

"Better?" she asked when he straightened again.

"Yeah," he nodded. Then he squared his shoulders. "Well. I suppose I ought to check over Storybrooke's newest arrival and make sure that she's suffered no ill effects after weathering an early birth, an abduction, and a sleeping curse, all within her first twenty-four hours. Where's the patient?"

Regina smiled. "Just follow me…"

Hesitant footfalls descending the staircase made Rumple look up. The smile froze on his face when he realized that Belle was carrying an overnight bag. She gave him a nervous smile.

"I…” She took another breath. "I just need some time away."

He was out of the chair and halfway across the distance that separated them before she'd finished speaking. "Belle!" he exclaimed. "I-I don't understand."

She gulped. "I know. This time, it…” Rumple noticed that she was actually trembling. "I'm sorry, Rumple. It's not you o-or anything you did. I ju-just need to try to deal with what I did. And right now, I can't do that here." She closed her eyes. "I can't do that with you. You're too close to me to…." She shook her head. "All the books I've read, and I still don't think I know the right words."

He put his hand on her shoulder and was relieved when she reciprocated the gesture. "But where are you going?"

For the briefest moment, her lips quirked upwards, though the half-smile was gone almost before it registered. "Well, not to my father's; don't worry about that," she said with a hint of her usual determination, and Rumple felt a wave of relief wash over him. "I called Astrid," she continued. "She'll be here in a few minutes. I," she took another breath, "I feel like I need to get my head together, and I don't know how long that'll take. But I think maybe it'll be better if I talk with someone who… who doesn't matter as much to me; does that make sense?"

Of course it did; it was one of the reasons that he had so much to talk over with Emma these days. There was a safety in bringing up difficult subjects with someone whose rejection wouldn't cut nearly as deeply if he'd miscalculated and shared too much of what went on in his head. Seeing Archie was an option, of course, but somehow seeing someone in a professional capacity was more unnerving than discussing the same topics with another. With a friend, his mind supplied the word, even as he realized that even six months ago, he wouldn't have been able to name a single soul who fit that description. All this went through his head in the moment it took him to nod, force himself to smile, and reply, "Of course it does, Belle. I…” He tried to find something to say that wouldn't make her feel worse or make her feel like he was trying to control her or make her feel any guiltier over her decision than she clearly already did. "I shall miss you."

She nodded, set her bag down on the stair beside her, and pulled him into a hug. "And I you," she murmured.

"Then don't go!" he wanted to cry out, but he held his tongue. Perhaps she was right. Maybe she did need some time away. This wasn't like her earlier departures, meant to reject him or punish him in some way. As much as her leaving was paining him now, it was clear to him that she was being
honest in saying it had nothing to do with him. Whatever help she needed, or thought she needed, it wasn't something she felt she could get from him. And while it hurt him to realize that she didn't think he could help her, he'd stood in her place on more than one occasion. "Come home when you're ready," he managed. "I'll be here."

She nodded. "This is home," she reassured him, "and I do love you."

The doorbell rang then and Belle picked up her bag with an apologetic smile. "That'll be Astrid," she murmured. "I need to go."

"Yeah," he nodded, drawing her into one more embrace. Then she walked past him to the front door, opened it, murmured something to Astrid, and left without a backward glance.

Rumple almost called after her, but then the door shut and the opportunity was lost.

He made his way into the kitchen and slammed his fist down on the counter with an anguished cry, before he slid into one of the spindle-backed wooden chairs at his table and buried his head in the crook of his arm.

Once the baby received a clean bill of health from Dr. Whale (and an assurance that the bruise on her arm would likely clear up in a week or so), Regina drove to Gold's shop to retrieve the book he'd described. Then, volume in hand, she headed for the cemetery.

Emma and her parents were already in front of the mausoleum, waiting for her. She didn't see any sign of her sister.

"She said she'd be along soon," Snow murmured. "The baby was crying."

Regina nodded. "I suppose that was to be expected."

"We're here," Zelena announced from behind her, and Regina turned to discover that 'we' included Robin, now carrying his daughter in a sling. "Tell me again what we're doing and why I should care?"

For answer, Regina opened the vault door with a wave of her hand and motioned to the others to follow. "We're going to raise Maleficent as safely as possible," she explained, as they trooped down the stone stairs, "and hope that she can calm down her daughter before she wreaks further havoc. As to why you should care, well, most buildings in Storybrooke—including that farmhouse of yours—appear to be comprised primarily of wood and the dragon breathes fire. I'd say it's in your best interest to help resolve this problem, wouldn't you?"

Zelena sniffed. "I could just go back to Oz and leave you to deal with the mess on your own."

"Nobody's stopping you, Sis. But I'm presuming that if you really wanted to leave, you'd be gone already. Since you aren't," she opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and winced. The disarray she'd observed earlier hadn't miraculously tidied itself up, "I'm guessing you have your reasons for staying. Sorry about the mess."

"Ursula?" Zelena guessed. "Or was Rumple having another tantrum?"

Regina gave her sister a hard look. "My guess would be Cruella, actually. Ursula was usually a bit more considerate when rifling through other people's things. At any rate," she went on briskly, "bringing Maleficent back isn't the issue. We have the necessary parties right here." She motioned to Snow and David. "A few drops of blood over her resting place and she'll arise. No, what we're
trying to do is slow down that resurrection by a few minutes or so. We want her mind alert enough to understand what we're going to tell her, while her body remains asleep. In theory," she feigned nonchalance, "it will increase the odds that Maleficent's first act upon being revived won't be to take dragon form herself and save Lily the trouble of roasting us all alive."

Zelena looked from Regina to the baby and her eyes grew slightly wider. "Maybe going back to Oz isn't such a bad idea."

"If that's what you want..." Regina let her voice trail off.

Zelena smirked. "You really think you can shove me off that easily, do you? First you send me into the outside world, then you lock me up in the hospital basement, and now you're thinking to ship me to another realm? Sorry, Sis, but if I'm that much of a threat to you, I think I'll just stick around."

Regina's eyes narrowed, but all she did was shrug. "Fine." She turned to her right and gestured at a large mirror hanging on the wall. The mirror—and the wall behind it—vanished, disclosing what seemed to be a storage room, containing such dresses, mirrors, and jewels as she'd worn during her time as queen. With another wave of her hand, these items vanished, to be replaced with a wooden cradle, a changing table, a padded couch long and wide enough to stretch out upon, and a shelf bearing an assortment of baby bottles, canned formula, disposable diapers, a baby monitor, and other useful items. "As of right now, this room is soundproof," she said. "But if the baby starts crying, you can turn that on." She pointed at a baby monitor that had just materialized beside the changing table. "I've put another one in the main room; I'm not sure about the cell phone reception down here."

The witch's smirk gave way to a surprised smile. "Why, yes," she said slowly. "Yes, this ought to do quite nicely."

Robin smiled as well. "Why don't I just wait in here with the wee one? Since I can't see how I'll be of much help to you with magic."

Zelena wavered. "I don't want to let her out of my sight," she protested.

"She'll be fine. And it's not as though you can't go check on her," Regina reminded her. Now was not the time to remind her sister that she'd agreed to give Robin full custody of their daughter as one of the terms for her return to Storybrooke. They could address that matter once Lily no longer posed a threat. And there was her stepdaughter's unfailing optimism rubbing off again, though Regina had to admit that she didn't particularly mind. "Besides, Robin has experience with babies. They'll be okay."

Zelena sighed. "I suppose you're right," she admitted with a reluctant nod. A stray lock of hair tumbled forward and the witch frowned in sudden irritation, gathered up her tumbled curls and began twisting them into a tight braid. "Well. Soonest started soonest done, I suppose. Let's get to work."

Rumple slowly lifted his head from the table. His tears had stopped, but his mind refused to settle. He'd had too many shocks and stresses in too short a time. He needed to calm his nerves and grip his emotions, or he would surely fly apart.

As though in a fog, he made his way down to the cellar, where the drop spindle awaited. The wooden shaft was smooth in his hand as he attached the whorl and prepared the leader thread. At first, it was easy to lose himself in the twirl, as he fed new fiber into the thread. This way of
spinning was still relatively new to him, after all. At least, it was new enough that he needed to focus more of his concentration on keeping the thread even and not allowing the spindle to reverse its spin and unravel his work. By and by, though, as he fell into the rhythm, his mind began to wander, revisiting all that had befallen him recently. He felt his shoulders tense up as his heart began to pound.

They'd come for him. The wife he'd deceived, the savior he'd nearly tricked into the hat, the town leaders he'd manipulated so many times, who would have had every reason to leave him to rot once more… They'd come for him without demanding assistance or advice, without thinking about how they could best take advantage of his sorry state… They'd come for him.

His eyes burned and he swiped at them frantically. He'd thought he was done with tears. And then the spindle reversed and he hurried to correct matters, but it was too late and a cloud of short woolen fibers flew through the air about him before settling on his clothes, his hair, and the floor and furnishings about him in a cloud of glitter. He groaned. It would take forever to clean this up. In the greater scheme of matters, it was only a petty annoyance, it was true, but it was one petty annoyance too many.

It was suddenly hard to breathe down here, and he staggered up the stairs once more. He made his way to the bedroom, wondering whether Belle might have left something behind. Some note or memento, he didn't care; he just wanted some hint that would prove her earlier assertion that she meant to come back.

There was nothing visible, but perhaps, in one of the drawers…

His hand was on the knob of his night-table drawer, when it stopped short. With a trembling hand, he unplugged the cell phone from the charger and lifted it off the night-table. He'd programmed a number into it some weeks ago, not because he'd ever intended to call it, but simply for what it represented: tangible proof that he had people in his corner who were offering their support should he require it.

He held it for a moment and started to slip it into his pocket. His hand froze in mid-motion and he frowned at it. He didn't require their support. He could manage on his own. He always had before. He didn't need—

No, but he wanted it.

They were doubtless busy with trying to save the town. As usual. They wouldn't have time for his minor complaints.

...Call it any time you want to talk. Or if you need some help, or you just... think you'd like someone around. Even if it's because you want to vent and you're not looking for any real answers.

Well, it sounded explicit enough, but Emma had uttered that directive absent a dragon attack.

Usually, when the town's under attack, it's the same people who have to fight it off. Most of whom are right here. But not all of us. And of course, you can always phone any of us directly anytime. Just, if there's a crisis, whoever you call might not be able to drop everything and be there for you right when you need them. Whoever's got the phone connected to the number on that piece of paper will.

He appreciated the thought, but...

But he didn't want to be alone with his thoughts right now. Emma might be busy. Booth might be
out of town. But someone was currently holding the phone connected to that number in his directory. And the way he was feeling right now…

He definitely needed to talk to 'someone'.

He closed his eyes and gulped in a fresh breath of air. Then he opened them, exhaled, and stabbed his finger down on the touch screen before he could think better of it.

He held the phone to his ear and listened to the first ring.

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Interlude

A jet of water erupted from a black basalt fountain, a long steady column that appeared almost solid, but for a slight rippling at its edges. Its rushing roar nearly drowned out the distant wails coming from the children in the dungeons below. A black-gloved hand reached into the column and delicately extracted a small object that might have been a polished coal to an untrained eye. Its owner held it up, examining the object from several angles with a broad smile. Satisfied with her prize, she deposited her newest treasure in an onyx casket beside a heart that glowed with the same red hue as the flesh of a pomegranate. As she closed the lid, a merry giggle escaped her.

"Another piece in place," she whispered. "It shan't be long until you're at my side again. And then? Mother and son, reunited at last, shall fight side by side in the final battle."

Her eyes gleamed and her smile took on a feral cast. "I can hardly wait."

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By the time Killian had reached the park, the blaze had appeared to be mostly under control. Mostly. "You wouldn't have thought much would burn at this time of year," another responder exclaimed, as he and Killian aimed a fire hose at a smoldering pile of dead leaves. "Those should've been too wet."

"Aye," Killian nodded, bracing himself as the hose bucked and twisted. "But dragon flame burns hot."

"It's the smoke that's killer," Leroy broke in, lending a third pair of hands. "When this is over and done with, nobody leaves until the EMTs check you over. Sometimes you don't realize what it's doing to your lungs until hours later."

A pickup truck rolled up to the curb, piles of sandbags lying on its bed. "Keep using the hose," Leroy ordered. "I'll see that someone else puts those to good use."

Happy snorted from behind. "Who died and made him Bossy?"


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It was hot work and Killian was sweating by the end of it. He'd shed his coat early on, but by the time that the medical staff looked him over and assured him that his lungs had escaped damage, he'd cooled down enough to be shivering. Between repeated ocean baths, he reflected glumly as he pulled on his coat once more, and unseasonable wildfires, he was in as much danger of being flash-roasted as flash-frozen.

There was a vibration in his pocket and he pulled out his phone. At least, he thought he had, until he got a good look at it. No, this wasn't his. But it was vibrating.
"Oh, bloody hell," he muttered, staring at the device with a sensation rather close to horror. This wasn't fair. He hadn't signed onto that blasted list. He wasn't part of the deal. This wasn't his responsibility. Yes, he'd agreed to carry the phone to the convent, but circumstances had prevented his doing so. That didn't mean that comforting the former Dark One had to fall to him now!

The phone vibrated in his hand once more. Killian sucked in his breath. No, this wasn't fair and it wasn't right. But it wasn't right to tell a man that he had the right to expect assistance and then fail to deliver it either. Maybe he'd never agreed to be part of the roster, but when Emma had told him what she and the others were about, he'd agreed to the notion in principle. And based on everything he knew of his erstwhile adversary, if Rumpelstiltskin was actually availing himself of this avenue, then… Killian flipped open the phone and stabbed his thumb down on the touch screen to answer it. "Hello?"

He recognized the voice at once and almost ended the call. "You?" he gasped.

There was a pause. And Rumple could hear a rueful note in the captain's voice when he replied, "Aye. Me."

Why hadn't Emma warned him that this was a possibility? Surely she would have guessed that he'd want to know if another name had been added to the roster, particularly that of Killian Jones! "I'm sorry," he said tightly. "This was a mistake." He pulled the phone away from his ear and was about to hit the disconnect button, but he waited a fraction of a second too long and the captain spoke once more.

"Now, hang on, mate," he said. "Actually, it's good you called. I recollect I've something on hand I've been meaning to give to you."

A year ago, Rumple would have had a fair idea what that thing might be. And almost automatically, he replied, "You know I've crafted an antidote for dreamshade since our last encounter."

The captain chuckled. "I'm aware," he answered. "But in all seriousness, I do have something and I suppose that this is as good a time as any to deliver it. You're at home now?"

"Yes," he said without thinking. Then, hastily, "B-but there's no need for you to—"

"I'd rather get it off my hands now then worry about forgetting to later. I'll be at your door shortly." "Yes," he said without thinking. Then, hastily, "B-but there's no need for you to—"

"I'd rather get it off my hands now then worry about forgetting to later. I'll be at your door shortly."

"I…” Couldn't the man take a hint? On the other hand, perhaps even Jones's company might be preferable to that of the doubts and fears that had already reared their heads. "I…” His eyes widened as memory struck. And then he coaxed a note of jocularity into his tone and replied calmly, "Come to think of it, I've just recalled that I've something here for you as well. I suppose it's just as well you're on your way."

There was a pause on the other end. Then the captain said, "Oh? In that case, I shan't be long."

The call ended and Rumple stared at his phone, trying to parse the conversation that had just transpired. The truth was, despite his history with the former pirate, Rumple found that he was actually looking forward to the impending visit. He frowned for a moment, deliberating. The front room was presentable enough, but the captain might prefer some sort of refreshment a bit more civilized than rum. And as host, it would be Rumple's duty to offer it. As he went into the kitchen to brew a pot of tea, it occurred to him that perhaps the captain could take a hint after all. Even if it hadn't been the one that Rumple had consciously intended to convey.
Fate, Killian reflected as he cantered down Main Street, had a peculiar sense of humor. It wasn't the first time he'd thought along those lines. On the voyage to Neverland to rescue Henry, he'd commented to Regina on the irony of his having spent immeasurable time trying to leave that land to kill Rumpelstiltskin, only to be sailing back to its heart with the Dark One as his guest of honor.

And now? It had him not only riding to Rumpelstiltskin's domicile to lend a supporting arm and a listening ear, it had even caused him to insist upon doing so. Though perhaps it was time to be honest with himself and admit that Fate had less to do with the latter circumstance then his own free will. Which begged the question: why?

A truce was one thing; Storybrooke wasn't a large enough port to preclude the two of them running into one another, particularly not when the woman whom he loved was the mother of the former Dark One's grandson. If they didn't both agree to suspend hostilities, the repercussions were likely to extend far beyond their old feud. But just answering that bloody call had been above and beyond. When Rumple… when Rumpelstiltskin had told him that his help wasn't required, why had he pushed?

He put a hand behind him to ensure that the leather cantle bag behind the saddle was still securely fastened. He couldn't risk losing his cargo now, especially since the only reason that Rumpelstiltskin had finally consented to allow him to come had been his promise to deliver it. He was still asking himself why this was so bloody important to him as his destination came into view.

He couldn't stop himself from looking furtively up and down the street as he dismounted. Then, sure that nobody he knew was watching, he opened the cantle bag, ensured that the two hinged wooden cases were still within, fastened it shut once more, and strode resolutely up the walk to the former Dark One's abode.

Belle accepted the steaming mug with murmured thanks. She blew on it and waited a moment before taking a tentative sip. Her eyes widened and a peculiar expression appeared on her face.

"Oh no!" Astrid exclaimed. "Did I do it wrong?"

Belle held up her index finger and shook her head, as she swallowed. "No," she said, unconvincingly. "It's just… a little… sweeter than I'm used to." She made anismelk with two tablespoons of honey in three cups of whole milk. Despite the white color of the liquid in her mug, Belle found herself wondering whether Astrid hadn't reversed the proportions.

"I tipped the honey jar a bit too far," Astrid admitted guiltily. "I sort of overflowed the spoon each time. And Merryweather was always on about how expensive honey is and how bees are going extinct and I didn't want to waste it." She gulped. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice."

Belle forced herself to smile. "It's okay," she managed. "Is there any more milk in the fridge?"

"I think there's another cup in the carton," Astrid said. "And there's two per cent."

"That'll do in a pinch," Belle said. "Use the rest of the whole milk and maybe a cup of the other. And another two teaspoons of aniseed," she added. "Just put it all in the pot and heat it up again."
"That's a good idea," Astrid smiled. "I really am sorry."

"It's okay," Belle said again. "Maybe I should just… drink this the way it is."

"Why would you do that if you don't like it?" Astrid asked.

"Maybe I shouldn't have things the way I like them."

Astrid blinked. "Come again?"

Belle took another sip. Now that she knew what to expect, it wasn't nearly as bad. "Maybe if I had to pay for my actions, fate wouldn't exact its own fee."

Astrid made a scoffing sound. "Fate didn't make me free-pour the honey," she retorted. "I've always been a klutz."

Belle didn't smile. "I'm serious. Every time I try to be a hero, someone gets hurt and it's never me. I let a friend fall off a cliff because I decided I'd rather hold onto a memory rock and years later, when I'm finally ready to tell people what I did, they all… p-pat me on the back and say it's all right. Well. Rumple did anyway."

"But it was years later," Astrid repeated. "What good would it have done to—?"

"I could have killed her!" Belle exclaimed. "It doesn't matter how long ago it was. I was silly a-and selfish and petty and—"

"And you didn't kill her," Astrid interrupted. "You were young and you made a mistake."

"The mistake I made was in not finding her sister and confessing to her what I'd done! Instead, I slunk back to Avonlea with neither friend nor rock to finally learn from my father what I should have figured out for myself. I couldn't recall how my mother had died." A shuddering breath escaped her and she buried her face in her hands. "She died protecting me because I was dithering in the library looking for books to take with when we needed to flee the ogres. If I'd just grabbed my cloak and run, we would have gotten away. She'd still be alive!"

"Belle…"

Belle lifted her head once more. "She died because of me, and all anyone ever did was line up to comfort me!" Her lip curled sarcastically. "Poor dear. So sad. Such a tragedy."

"It was," Astrid insisted.

"It could have been avoided!"

"That doesn't make it any less a tragedy," the fairy pointed out. "And anyway, what does any of that have to do with what's happening now?"

"It wasn't just then," Belle mumbled. "Rumple trusted me with his dagger. I know now it was a fake, but I didn't then. And when I learned where the Snow Queen's lair was, well, she captured Anna, th-that friend I mentioned, all those years ago. I thought I could finally make amends. So, I… I used the dagger to force Rumple to help me."

Astrid tilted her head to one side. "But if the dagger was fake…?"

"He couldn't let me know it was," Belle explained. "So he played along. But he'd given it to me because he trusted me with it, when I just proved to him that I couldn't be trusted with it. And
when I finally got my hands on the real one, I banished him!" Her chair scraped on the floor as she sprang up and paced toward the fridge, then back to the counter along the opposite wall, hands clenching and unclenching in agitation. "And everyone just patted me on the back and congratulated me. Not one person suggested that maybe I'd had other options or pointed out that he was my husband o-or…" She took another breath. "I punched the Blue Fairy and all Emma did was give me a pamphlet for kickboxing lessons. And now? Now, I've finally killed someone and I'm still walking about free when I'm probably more of a danger to this town than Rumple ever was and…"

Astrid was suddenly in front of her, taking her gently by the shoulders and pulling her close. "Belle."

Belle's face crumpled. "It's true! I just murdered someone and nobody seems to care! I spent so many years locked up o-on a whim and now that I finally deserve to be…"

"You killed a woman who was controlling a dragon and was using her to murder another woman while she crushed your husband's heart. Maybe this is just more proof that I'm a bad fairy and a poor prospect for godmotherhood, but honestly? I'd have done the same thing if I were you. Well," Astrid winced, "actually, I'd probably had tripped and fallen in the well because I really am a klutz, but I'd have tried!"

"You're just saying that."

"I'm not. Listen to me, Belle," Astrid's eyes were deadly serious. "Ogres killed your mother. Not you. Ogres."

"But if I'd been faster…"

"You don't know that. Maybe you would've gotten out of your home just in time to get stepped on," the fairy said flatly. "Maybe your delaying bought her an extra minute or two. You don't know," the fairy repeated.

She took another breath. "What happened to your friend…" She sighed. "If it makes you feel better to have someone else tell you you were wrong, then fine. You were and you've done everything you can to make up for it. Blue… Well, after I found out what she did to break up me and Leroy, I sort of wished I had the gumption to punch her myself. I know you think it was a bad thing," she added hastily. "And maybe you shouldn't have, but that doesn't mean she didn't deserve it. And, well, at the time you banished your husband, he'd just gotten the pirate to trap me and the other fairies in that hat, so I'll admit that when I got out and Regina and the others told us what we'd missed, I wasn't that sorry to hear he was gone. But," she added, "he's been so different since he came back. At least, from what Flora and Fauna and Tink have told me; it's not like I've really spoken with him much myself. He got a second chance and he took it. And he's given you one, too."

"I didn't deserve it."

"Everyone deserves a second chance," Astrid smiled. "It's in the fairy code. Fifth paragraph. Or was that eighth?" She frowned. "Third, maybe?" She groaned. "I never could keep all the tenets ordered."

"Astrid…"

"Belle, he forgave you. Now comes the harder part."
Belle winced. "There's something harder?"

"Well, yes," Astrid said smiling once more. "You've got to forgive yourself."

Belle shook her head. "I don't know that I'll ever be able to do that," she said hollowly. Then she veered back to the table, picked up her mug and gulped down the over-sweetened drink to the dregs.

Rumple stood in the foyer, one eye pressed to the keyhole as he watched the captain stride up to his front door. The knock, when it came, was polite enough and Rumple waited nearly a full minute before responding to it, both to steel himself for whatever might come next, and to obscure the fact that he'd literally been standing on the other side of the door all this time. Finally, he squared his shoulders, adjusted his tie, hid his emotional turmoil behind a serene expression, and, smiling thinly, pulled the door open. "So," he greeted his guest affably, "you've come after all. And on a horse."

The captain shrugged. "Not coming here under a dark curse, I'm afraid I've not the expertise to pilot one of these combustion land-vessels one uses for transportation in this realm. At least I had some opportunity to master horsemanship during the year back home."

"Ah." Rumple fought with himself for a moment, wrestling discomfort against courtesy. Courtesy won. "Well. I suppose you'd best come inside," he murmured, stepping back slightly and holding the door open just a bit wider."

Jones did, murmuring his thanks. Once the door shut again, though, the two men stood eyeing one another somewhat awkwardly. The captain blinked first. "I… uh…" he brought forward a leather cantle bag. "I brought this for you. There wasn't time to wrap it."

Rumple nodded automatically. "I'll overlook the discourtesy this time," he said, reaching down for the paper shopping bag with rope handles that he'd set down by his umbrella stand. "As it happens, I didn't have much in the way of paper or bows on hand myself. Here."

There was another awkward moment. Then each reached for the proffered gift at the same time with near-identical self-conscious smiles.

Rumple worked the buckled strap fastening the cantle bag easily enough. The item inside was, in fact, wrapped, but only in a piece of sailcloth, not even knotted, much less tied down with anything. He unrolled the canvas slowly. Meanwhile, Killian peered into the paper bag, pushing aside a few pieces of tissue paper with a rustle. He drew out the two elaborately-carved wooden boxes with a thunderstruck expression. When he cautiously looked up again, he saw that Rumpelstiltskin was staring at him with much the same look.

"Booth?" Rumple breathed.

Killian nodded slowly. "Aye. Booth." His eyes narrowed. "You didn't know?"

Rumple shook his head. "I had no idea. He never said a word."

"Nor to me," Killian declared. "But I rather think I'll want words with him when he returns to town."

"I'm afraid you'll need to wait your turn," Rumple murmured ominously. "But since you're here, and as we've currently two painstakingly handcrafted Battleship sets at hand…" Despite his best efforts, a chuckle escaped him. "Would you care for a game?"
The captain smiled. "Well, just in the interest of making sure that all the pieces fit the way they're meant to."

"Yes, I'll confess I had that thought as well."

"Best of five then?" Killian's smile broadened.

Rumple's lips twitched before settling into a faint smile of their own. "Indeed."

Zelena dipped her quill back into the ink pot and scratched a few more lines on the parchment before her. "Well," she said decisively, "this will bind her long enough to hear what you have to tell her, but there's no guarantee she'll be in a forgiving mood once she does. Here." She handed the sheet to Emma.

Emma started to reach for the parchment, but Regina plucked it up first. "Not that I don't trust you," she said to her sister. "Well. Actually, I don't trust you, but that's another point. Emma can't read Elvish."

Zelena blinked. "She hasn't exactly been looking at the pictures up to this point," she said.

Emma's eyes widened. "Wait," she said, gesturing toward the book in front of her. "This isn't English?"

One of Regina's eyebrows shot up. "No," she said slowly. "It's not. Are you saying you can read it?"

"Yeah," Emma murmured with more than a little confusion. "How… wait." She raised her eyes ceiling-wards and carefully brought her left index finger to her left eye.

"What in the world are you doing?" Zelena demanded.

"Taking out one of my contact lenses," Emma replied, sounding a little distracted. "Weeks ago, Tink spelled them so that I could read Fairy. I thought that was all she did. But if her spell was more of a… a universal translator-type thing…" She extracted the lens and glanced at the open book before her. "No way," she breathed. She closed her left eye and looked at the page. It still looked like English. The style was a bit old-fashioned, reminding her of Dickens or maybe one of the Brontë sisters, but still easily comprehensible. "…Now take one dram of the blood of a water naga and mix with half a copper spoons-worth of hens tooth root." She opened both eyes and looked up. "Okay. That's the eye that still has the contact. But if I use the other eye…" She peered down at the page again, this time closing her right eye. The crisp English script was gone, replaced by fine spidery lines in an alphabet she couldn't recognize. "Wow."

"May I?" Regina held out her hand.

Emma hesitated for a moment. "Just don't drop it; this is the only pair I've got." She handed over the lens and reached into her pocket for her cleaning solution.

"You won't need that," Regina said absently, as she examined the clear concave disc with interest. "It's impressive work. I wouldn't mind learning this trick myself." A small puff of white light flared about the lens for a moment. When it faded, a fine gauze cloth surrounded it. "Here you go," Regina said, handing it back. "Cleaner than it was. And if you're really worried about losing it, we can go over tracking spells at some future date. As for this," she gestured toward the parchment, "it does look as though it'll get the job done."
"Well, really," Zelena snapped, "I don't want another dragon rampaging through this town any more than you lot do. If I was going to double cross you, it would be when I was well away from her."

"I'll keep that in mind," Regina deadpanned. Then she looked at Emma again. "Now that we have the delaying spell, it won't take more than another half hour to ready the potion. While I'm doing that, call your parents and tell them to meet us at the library in about forty minutes. Let's get this over with before Lily emerges from wherever she's hiding."

Lily tried to burrow deeper into the muddy lake bottom and trembled, whether from fear or cold she couldn't say. She hadn't been thinking clearly since she'd taken on this new form. She still didn't know how she'd done it. She'd been angry, she remembered that much. Well, she wasn't angry anymore, but she hadn't been able to change back. After that strange woman had broken Cruella's control, Lily had panicked and tried to put as much distance between herself and the two newcomers. The man had persisted and she'd finally had to throw the baby at him to get him to leave off pursuit.

She hoped that the baby was okay. Probably not, though; not if it was under a sleeping curse. She hadn't wanted it. She'd wanted revenge, sure. Against Emma and Snow White and Prince Charming and Ursula and Cruella and Rumple… But she'd read the old man's storybook cover to cover and backwards and forwards. She knew her own story. She knew that she'd been torn away from her mother and flung into another realm, not because of anything she'd done, not even because of anything her mother had done, but because Emma's parents had needed a "vessel" for their daughter's Darkness. So, they'd stolen her away from her mother's nest, used her, and once she'd served her purpose, gotten rid of her.

In other words? More or less what she and the others had done to Zelena's kid. She hadn't wanted that.

But then, when had anyone ever cared about what she wanted?

She'd wanted a family who loved and accepted her for who she was. She'd wanted a friend who'd stand by her and support her, even when she messed up. She'd wanted the universe to finally let her catch a break and stop having everything she tried to do right blow up in her face. So far, she thought sarcastically, she was batting a thousand.

She couldn't do anything right. She couldn't have her family, or her friend. She couldn't even save an innocent baby from falling under a curse. Well, she could still have her revenge. And she would. She would!

Once she could shake loose from this… torpor.

She dimly recalled a middle school science class. They'd been learning about reptiles, about how cold-blooded animals couldn't regulate their body temperatures. Larger ones burrowed into the earth, or into the mud beneath streams or pools, where it was warmer. Then, as temperatures fell, they became sleepy and sluggish. Kind of like hibernation, she'd thought at the time. She remembered now that she'd been surprised to learn that reptiles could survive in winter—as long as it didn't get too cold or last too long. But if it did…

She couldn't stay in the mud under the lake, not even if she was, somehow, breathing under water without any trouble. No, she had to get up. She had to get out. She had to change back. She couldn't stay here looking like Maine's answer to the Loch Ness Monster for the rest of her life! She was going to get back on her feet and fly out of this lake. She was… she was…
Her eyelids drooped shut and her wings, already beginning to unfurl, folded against her sides once more. She was going to have a nap before she did anything else.

Battleship had been a good idea, Rumple reflected, as he set up his pieces for their fourth game. It obviated the need for conversation, while still affording him the companionship he could finally admit to himself he needed right now. After everything that had happened, he wasn't sure he had the energy to engage in small talk, but for all that the captain had been acting friendlier of late, it wasn't as though Rumple was ready to let his walls down in the man's company.

"If you want to check on Belle," the captain said, "I can wait." And when Rumple looked up sharply from his game case, the captain merely shrugged. "Take the box up with you if you don't trust me not to look." Something about the expression on his face must have given Jones pause, for he blinked and added, "She is upstairs, isn't she?"

That was none of Jones's business. But instead of snapping something to that effect, Rumple felt his shoulders slump. "No. She… isn't here now."

"Mate?"

Rumple shook his head. "I'd rather we just got on with the game," he murmured. Then he fixed Jones with a penetrating look. "Unless you want to tell me why it is you're actually here."

Killian's eyebrows shot up. "You called," he said simply.

"Yes," Rumple nodded. "I did. And while I was waiting for you to arrive, I found myself trying to puzzle out why it was that nobody mentioned that your name had been added to the list of townspeople awaiting my call. It seems to me that it's something you might have, at the very least, discussed with Emma. And had you done so, she would have said something to me, and almost certainly not in passing. But then," a faint smile sprang to his face, "I suppose it can be difficult for a proud man to turn over a new leaf, particularly when one isn't certain how his declarations might be met by one who… matters to him. So, I suppose you might have asked one of her parents, or perhaps Regina, how to go about setting your name to the roster. But the prince would also have come to me, if not to Emma with that information. As Regina would have, for that matter. And Snow White?" His smile became a smirk. "She would have made an announcement at Granny's if she didn't have Leroy do it for her." His smile faded and he fixed the captain with a hard stare.

"I don't believe your name is on that roster, Captain. Is it?"

Jones shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "No," he admitted. "Not yet, anyway." He explained briefly how the phone had come into his possession. When he was done, Rumple nodded slowly.

"You might have explained at the outset," he murmured. "I-I would have understood."

"I know."

"Then why?" Rumple asked, not belligerently, but curiously. "Why come here? Why insist on doing so, even after I tried to dissuade you?"

Killian shifted in his chair again. "I suppose that's a fair question," he admitted finally. "One I was hoping you wouldn't ask, but since you have…"

Rumple's lips twitched. "Tick-tock, dearie," he prompted, but this time, unlike on previous occasions, there was no mockery in his voice.
"Yes, well," Killian smiled, "I'll admit that's part of it. As I told you not all that long ago, I've hunted you a long time, and I know you better than most. And one thing that I've learned about you is… well, a moment ago, you implied that I was a proud man. And, while I'll not deny you're right about that, I must confess to feeling the need to point out that it takes one to know one."

"Oh?"

"Men like you," Killian hesitated, "Well. Men like us, I should say… Well. We don't find asking for help a pleasant undertaking under the best of circumstances. It means admitting we can't manage the thing we mean to do on our own. And in my previous vocation—and yours as well, I daresay—such an admission often proved costly. Perhaps even fatal." He met Rumple's quick involuntary nod with a faint smile and a nod of his own. "Old habits die hard. A moment ago, you explained how you deduced that I wasn't a new addition to your… support crew. When you made your call, I made a deduction of my own."

Rumple's face was an impassive mask, making it almost impossible for Killian to gauge his thoughts, but his voice was even when he prompted, "Do tell."

"I know that, if you were in the habit of calling that number, few of the others would share that information with me. Nor would they even discuss it amongst themselves if anyone else were in earshot. So, perhaps my suspicions are somewhat awry. But what I suspect is that this is the first time you've made such a call." He waited for Rumple's denial and, when it didn't come, he continued. "Knowing what I know of you, I've… some notion of what it must have taken for you to avail yourself of such an option. And," he ducked his head a bit, not sure he wanted to see how Rumple would react to what he was about to say next, "well, when a man's hanging on by his fingernails, it's rather bad form to dance on his hands." When he looked up again, he saw that Rumple was now staring down at the floor. "Maybe I'm not the person you expected to happen along when you were asking for help, but I'm the one who heard your call. And since I did, well, I was in the area and, as I was, I rather thought I ought to attempt to pull you back up instead of galloping off in search of someone you… liked better."

Rumple's eyebrows nearly reached his hairline and he didn't say a word for a long moment. Finally, he nodded and said in an almost-normal tone of voice, "Before you arrived, I'd put some water on to boil. Would you… would you care for tea?" A mocking note crept into his voice, but it was absent a certain bite when he added, "Or do you just prefer rum?"

"If you've any lime juice on hand," the captain said slowly, "we might combine them. Are you familiar with planter's punch?"

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Rumple's mouth, one that the captain immediately returned when he answered, "Indeed I am. And, as a matter of fact, I believe I should have several limes in the crisper…"

Interlude

It took a great deal to startle the lord of the Underworld, but the woman's sudden appearance in his private chamber accomplished it. He managed to conceal his shock, though. After all, he was a god and she was merely immortal. He certainly wasn't about to show her that he was in any way discomfited by her presence. With a languid wave of his hand, the violin concerto that had been playing in the background stopped, and he graced his invader with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Well, well," he greeted her. "It's been a long time since anyone's ventured here alive. To what do I owe the pleasure?"
The woman laughed. "Oh, this isn't a pleasure for either of us, Hades, so please, let's not pretend."

Hades nodded, conceding her point, as his smile grew colder. "What is it you want, Fiona?"

"I haven't much time," the fairy said, "so if you don't mind, I'll skip the fawning and flattery at this time. One of your souls is in possession of a certain item that I'd like to obtain. And since I haven't the leisure to go knocking on doors in this little sham village you've constructed—"

"Careful, my dear," Hades interrupted. "I might just decide to snap that tether of yours and give you leisure to appreciate its charms."

Fiona laughed again, but this time there was a slightly nervous edge to it. "When I'm on the verge of sending you more souls than you'll know what to do with? If you did that," she purred, "I think you might just come to regret it in the end. Care to lay odds that before too long, it would be me sitting here, listening to Brahms' Violin Concerto in D Major? Opus 77, isn't it?"

Hades snorted. "Oh, is that event in the wind, now? I'm sorry; I don't usually bother much with current events. In these parts, most people are too busy dealing with… old, unfinished business."

Fiona tilted her head in a way that might have been coquettish, were it not for the deadly purpose in her eyes. "Yes, Hades," she returned, "the time of the Final Battle looms near. And I'm currently occupied with my preparations. Which is why I've come to this depressing stage set of yours. One of your denizens possesses a particular contract. I've some passing interest in acquiring it."

"What… contract?" Hades asked evenly. "And what is the name of the soul who possesses it? And, more to the point, why should I help you?"

"Because in doing so," Fiona replied simply, "you help yourself. You see, you have your heart's desire and I have mine. And if you should help me to acquire that which my heart desires most, well I'll do the same for you."

"What would you know of my heart's desire?" Hades demanded testily. "Contrary to popular belief, it's not more hopeless souls, you know."

Fiona beamed. "Of course not," she said easily. "Much like the children I carry off in the night, those are simply a means to an end. But as for your heart's true desire?" She turned her head slightly and gave him a knowing smirk. "Well, I know she's currently in Storybrooke."

For a long moment, Hades' eyes bored into hers. Then he rose from his throne and Fiona took an involuntary step backwards, her smile giving way to an expression of trepidation.

The lord of the Underworld chuckled. "Well, then. Why don't we discuss this over some Rémy Martin XO, hmm? Oh, you've time enough; your realm isn't the only one where its flow can be unpredictable. I'll send you back when you're ready."

"If it's all the same to you," Fiona returned, "I'd prefer to leave under my own power. But, in the interests of civility and of the celebration of a new alliance, I suppose I can spare a few moments for a good cognac."

"Excellent. And," Hades continued, crossing over to a credenza with a number of liquor bottles and assorted glassware gracing its top, "perhaps you can tell me more of this contract?"

Fiona smiled. "It was last known to be in the possession of a man named Fendrake…"
Astrid stood on the library steps, her hand daringly in Leroy's. "You're not… upset, are you? That we're not going out tonight?"

The dwarf shook his head. "Of course not, sister. Just worried. I've seen this before."

"You have?"

Leroy nodded. "Well, not exactly the same thing. Snow was dealing with heartbreak. It sounds like Belle's issue is more like conscience. But either way, Snow was about as miserable then as Belle is now. Miserable enough to take a potion to make her forget her pain."

"Did it work?"

Leroy tightened his grip on her hand. "It made her forget her pain," he admitted, "but it also made her forget herself. You see, sister, a lot of what makes us who we are is knowing who we were." He snorted. "If I knew anything about magic, I'd probably say that was why most of us were so… different under the Curse. Once we lost what made us… us, it was easy to make us anyone it wanted to. Not that I think that kind of thing's likely to happen to Belle."

"You haven't seen her, Leroy," Astrid fretted. "She's really… upset."

"I don't have to see her," Leroy answered. "No matter how upset she might be, there are two good reasons that we don't have to be worried about her turning to magic to get through this." He smiled at Astrid's questioning look. "First, she's got you."

"But Snow White had you," Astrid pointed out. "That didn't help."

Leroy smiled sadly. "We'd only just met," he explained. "And… maybe I wasn't as supportive as I could have been. I'd just lost my brother. Maybe I couldn't help her work through her pain until I'd worked through mine. And meanwhile…"

"She drank it," Astrid said heavily. "You said that there were two good reasons?"

Leroy snorted. "Yeah, I did. That potion? Snow got it from Rumpelstiltskin. And whether or not he still has enough magic to make another one like it, there is no way he'd do it for Belle. Not when he saw firsthand what she was like after she fell over the town line after the first curse broke."

The lower level of the library hadn't improved any since Regina had seen it last. It was still a cavern, one that would have connected to the network of dwarf mines, had not some earlier landslide—perhaps even the one that Henry and Archie had narrowly escaped nearly three years earlier—sealed it off.

"There." Regina pointed to a small pile of ashes, its pale color stark against the darker stone that was the cavern floor.

"That's her?" Zelena sniffed. "Somehow, I was expecting something more impressive."

"Yeah, well she was pretty impressive when I slayed her," Emma muttered. "Kind of not looking forward to doing it again."

"Well, let's hope you don't have to," Regina said. "But if it comes to it, you won't face her alone." She looked to Snow and David.

"You're sure about this?" she asked for what felt like the hundredth time. "Emma's got a point: once
Maleficent comes back, even with the delay we're working into the resurrection spell, there's no guarantee she's going to be interested in anything we might have to say. Even if the town survives its encounter with a pair of dragons, that doesn't mean we will."

Snow flinched. "David and I have to do this," she said. "But if you'd rather leave first…?"

"Finally!" Zelena beamed. "A good idea! The baby's probably due her feeding by now and—"

"And Robin is certainly capable of giving her a bottle if she is," Regina said tartly. "Nobody's leaving. If she's angry, it's going to take all of us to deal with her."

"What does that have to do with me?"

Regina sighed. "Dragons have a heightened sense of smell. They can identify members of the same family by it. And, seeing as Maleficent has almost as much reason to be mad at me as she does those three," she jerked her head toward Snow, David, and Emma, "if we can't stop her, she might just decide to go after the rest of the bloodline."

Zelena's eyes widened. "And you're going to let them go ahead with this imbecilic idea?"

"Need I remind you that Lily is in dragon form and bent on revenge? And thanks to the Apprentice," she added grimly, "she knows exactly how and why she came to be in this land. She might be focusing on the Charmings for the moment, but if my past experience is anything to go on, she won't stop there. Once someone lets the Darkness in, it starts to consume them. Lily will recognize that if I hadn't planned to cast the curse, Snow and David never would have stolen her egg. She'll come for me," Regina said flatly. "Maybe she'll stop there, but I wouldn't bet on it. Nobody will be safe," she stated. "Not Henry, not Robin, not your daughter."

"Wait," Emma said. "I beat Maleficent once; I—we—can do it again."

"If I didn't believe that to be true, we wouldn't be here right now," Regina said. "But if it comes down to a battle with an angry dragon, it's going to take all of us." On the whole, she reflected, it was a convincing argument. And although she privately thought that she was exaggerating the danger just a little, she was gratified by her sister's slow nod. If the town was facing a new threat, Regina wanted her at her side, and not off scheming and causing more trouble. Maybe the suggestion of a common threat would even allow some family bonding. She gave herself a mental shake. Although her stepdaughter might disagree, there was such a thing as being too hopeful.

She took a breath. "Did anyone think to bring something with a blade?"

For answer, David pulled a Swiss army knife out of his pocket. Regina nodded approval. "Zelena?"

Her sister held up a clear flask that held a rosy peach liquid that shimmered with silver flecks in the dim light of her torch. Regina nodded again. "I'll need a drop of blood from each of you two," she said. "Make sure that it all goes into the flask or on the ground away from her ashes. If a drop lands on them now, before I can pour out the potion, she'll wake up at once."

"Got it," David murmured, taking a quick step back from the pile. He nicked his palm lightly and held the incision over the flask until a single red drop fell in. "Couldn't we have done this back in the vault?"

"I'm afraid it has to be as fresh as possible," Regina explained. "Snow?"

David winced. "I should have brought something to sterilize the blade," he said.
Snow gave her husband a weak smile, as she took the knife. "We already share a heart, David. What's a few drops of blood?" Even so, she winced a bit when she made the cut. She started to hand the flask back to Regina, but the queen shook her head.

"Just pour it on the ashes," Regina instructed, and Snow obeyed. The potion hissed as it made contact. The silver flecks in the liquid whirled brighter as the rosy peach liquid spread over the ashes like a dome. Before their eyes, the dome widened and elongated until it resembled an oval roughly six feet long and four feet wide.

"Now what?" Emma whispered a bit nervously.

"Now," Regina said, "well, under that shield, Maleficent is slowly reviving. I say we give it a minute or two before we start explaining ourselves."

"And after that?" Snow asked, whispering as well.

Regina smiled and hoped that none of her unease showed. "Well, after that, I suppose we do that thing you're so annoyingly good at," she replied. "We hope."
Chapter Forty-One

Henry read the texts from his mothers on his way to the school bus and stifled a groan.

"Trouble?" Cecily asked.

Henry nodded. "I think so."

"You think?"

Henry sighed. "They told me to go hang out at Granny's and they'll explain later. That means it's dangerous and they don't want me to worry."

Cecily shook her head. "So, of course, you're worrying more."

"Yeah. Uh… you need any help at your place? Maybe it'll help me stop imagining what could be wrong."

Cecily hesitated. "I don't mind," she said, "but do you really think it'll work?"

"No," Henry sighed. "And I still haven't heard from Grandpa."

Cecily thought for a moment. "You know," she said, "Skippy has a birthday coming up. Maybe instead of going home with him on the bus, I could take him by your grandfather's shop and see if there's anything he'd like that I can afford. And, I mean," she smiled, "you ought to come too; you probably know the stock better than I do. And," she added, "the shop's not far from Granny's, so you're probably heading that way anyhow."

Henry grinned. "That's right. And, uh, does your mom need you at home right away?"

Cecily considered. "She needs me to help a bit with the little ones, but Skippy's the real handful. I think if I told her we were going to stay in town a bit later, she'd be okay, so long as we're home for supper. Why?"

"Because your place is kinda noisy and Granny's is quiet at this time of day. Maybe we could study together there?"

"Sure," Cecily said quickly. "I-I mean, I do need to keep an eye on Skippy, too, but he'll have his own homework to get done. And unless he needs my help with it—which he probably won't, as long as we make sure he doesn't go wandering off on his own, that should be fine."
"Fine," Henry grinned. "Awesome, even! Come on!" Unthinkingly, he grabbed hold of her hand. It was warm and only slightly sweaty. Or was that his hand? Wait. Was he... holding a girl's hand? He glanced at Cecily nervously. Yep. His hand was definitely sweaty now.

And then Cecily smiled shyly and gave his hand a squeeze and he gave a little laugh, more from relief that he hadn't just made a fool of himself than anything else, and squeezed back.

Tia finally slumped against a tree and slid slowly to the ground. "I can't do this anymore," she murmured. "I can't get a read on her."

Tony slumped next to her, feeling nearly as drained. "Do you suppose she flew over the town line?" he asked. "She'd revert to human then, right?"

Tia nodded. "I think that's how magic works here. I'll have to ask Uncle Bené about why ours doesn't."

Tony rolled his eyes. "He'll just go into a fifteen minute lecture that you'll kind of get a little and I won't get at all, and in the end, it'll all boil down to, 'That's just the way it is and knowing the why of it won't make the slightest difference, since you can't change it.' Right?"

Tia flashed her brother a quick smile, but her expression turned serious once more. "Tony? When I confronted Lily, we were what? About fifty feet in the air?"

"Something like that. If I'm remembering right, the average tree in a forest grows to about sixty and I don't think you'd cleared their tops." He frowned. "I mean, the ones around the well could've been a little smaller, I guess."

"Okay, but for Lily to fly safely, she'd have to clear them. So she'd be over the trees, maybe seventy, eighty feet in the air?"

Tony's eyes widened as he realized what his sister was asking. "If she flew over the town line eighty feet up..." He sucked in his breath. "Even if she survived a fall from that height, even if the trees broke her fall, she's got to be in," he swallowed hard, "pretty bad shape," he finished.

"We don't know that she's left," Tia murmured. "But we can't rule it out either."

Tony pulled out his phone. "I'm calling Uncle Bené," he said. "The old-fashioned way. We're both running on fumes right now, and it's starting to get dark. If Lily's out there, he's probably the best chance she has of being found. And if she's in here, we're not the only ones searching."

Tia nodded slowly. "I think we've done all we can for now," she admitted reluctantly. "Make the call and then, I guess we'll head back into town. Maybe things will look better after we've had a chance to rest."

"...And I know it doesn't help much now, but we never realized that the Apprentice was going to open the portal and we-we're so sorry," Snow finished miserably. She got up from the gravel and moved away from the translucent shield that was covering (or was that restoring?) Maleficent's remains.

Regina rolled her eyes as Snow rejoined the group. "It's a good thing she was never in league with another colleague of mine, or she'd be asking if you'd prefer to be roasted in gravy or butter after a speech like that," she remarked.
"I just wanted her to know how much we regret—"

"By blaming the Apprentice?" Regina demanded. "Maybe it's a good thing we didn't have barbecue sauce back home." She glared at Emma. "Your turn."

Emma swallowed hard. "Uh, right," she said, squaring her shoulders and walking the few steps to the shield.

"Um… Hi. I'm Emma. We… kind of met a couple of years ago. Actually, I," she sighed. "Well, I'm the one who killed you. If I hadn't, I guess we wouldn't all be in this mess, but, well, you were trying to do the same thing to me and it didn't look like we could sit down and talk things over at the time." She took a breath. "And I probably would've been too freaked out to listen anyway. So, maybe we can, now. Maybe we can help each other. You want to find your daughter, I bet. We do, too. Before she hurts anyone else. See, like me, she grew up in a world without magic. She didn't know who she was or where she fit in. It wasn't until she came here that she realized she had power. Only she doesn't know how to control it. And we don't know where she is." She took a breath. "I—met her when I was younger. We were friends for a while. And then we weren't. I don't know what she thinks of me now," she continued, fighting to keep her voice steady. "The last time we met, she did something that hurt me and I walked away, which probably hurt her more. I got over it, I think, but I don't know whether she has," she admitted. "I hope she did; she was one of the best friends I'd ever had." It wasn't a lie. Bouncing around from foster home to foster home—with a few stints on the run thrown in for good measure—she'd never made many connections before Storybrooke. She'd learned early not to let herself make friends; moving away only made it worse when it meant you had more people to miss. But from the moment she'd met Lily, there had been an instant connection she'd neither understood nor questioned. It had been like finding a missing part of herself; a secret sister, almost. And until she'd finally begun to lower her walls and discover that there were many more people in her corner, Lily truly had been the best—perhaps even the only—friend she'd ever had. She'd only recently discovered that there had been another reason behind that connection. She took another breath and went on. "Anyway, maybe we both need to put aside the past for now and put her first. After that," she sighed, "I guess if you still want to burn me to a crisp, maybe we can meet down here again and have a rematch."

"Emma!" Her father's gasp startled her and she turned to face him with a resigned expression.

"First things, first, Dad, okay? I didn't say I was going to roll over and let her fry me."

She turned back to the shield. "I said a rematch," she repeated. "You want to roast me, you'll have a fight on your hands, and I did beat you once. But I'm really hoping we can skip that part. Up to you." She sighed. "Okay. I'm done." She got up and turned to go, but before she could take more than a step, something rough, dry, and scaly coiled about her wrist, and she emitted a startled cry as it jerked her backwards.

"Emma!" Snow shrieked. She felt warm air by her cheek and realized that, beside her, Regina was readying a fireball.

Emma stumbled and fell heavily to the ground, the reptilian tail still wrapped tightly about her wrist. And then it withdrew back into the suddenly-so-much-larger shield and a pale, slender hand emerged to grip her arm instead. And a woman's voice commanded with a bizarre mix of trepidation and haughtiness, "Please? Tell me more about my daughter."

The captain didn't try to engage him in conversation—something Rumple appreciated. He'd never been one to engage in casual chatting. Until recently, he'd never had anyone he felt comfortable
enough with to hold a simple discourse—one that didn't involve favors, threats, or bargains, and while such was no longer entirely the case, whatever the relationship he currently had with the captain, it was still too tenuous for him to truly let his guard down.

Still, it was with some trepidation that he watched the captain drain his punch glass and set it down again on the coaster that Rumple had provided. "Another game?" he suggested.

The captain shrugged. "If you like." As the two men moved back to the dining room table where they'd set up the Battleship cases, he continued, "While nobody was especially forthcoming on the details, I've heard you passed a difficult evening yesterday. I can't imagine today's events have helped."

Rumple gave him a sharp look. "They haven't," he said finally.

"Ah." The captain said nothing further until they'd set up their game pieces. Then he shook his head ruefully. "I rather feel as though I'm navigating more than one battlefield where I can't see all the obstacles in my path."

Rumple looked up from his own case. "Do tell?"

Killian shrugged. "Like I said earlier, mate, you're not one for requesting assistance under the best of circumstances. Maneuvering someone into a place from which they owe you a favor and then exacting it from them, of course. But asking outright from one who owes you nothing? Not your style. Nor mine. So, I can well understand why you're loath to discuss what's truly on your mind. And I'm well aware that if I fire a salvo of my own into those waters, well, it would seem my choices are to miss my target completely or... to seriously damage it. I'd rather avoid both options."

Rumple's eyes narrowed. "Why do you even care?" he demanded. "A few weeks ago, I tried to kill you. Earlier, you were blackmailing me. A truce is one thing. Do you expect me to believe that after one speech from Emma, you're ready to be my friend?"

Killian took a breath. "That... should have happened earlier. Would have if I hadn't been in denial."

"I beg your pardon?"

The captain sighed. "When you killed Milah, I swore I'd return the favor, no matter how long it took me. But somehow," he continued with a bitter smile, "something always thwarted me."

"I don't imagine I could stop you now, dearie," Rumple remarked, but though his tone was jesting, he felt his muscles tense, preparing to bolt if the pirate's speech was merely a preamble to another murder attempt.

Killian only shook his head. "You already did," he said flatly. "When I said that you killed Milah, I meant the Dark One. That's who I've been hunting all these years. That's who I swore my vengeance upon. Not the father on the dock trying to keep his family together, but the demon he later allowed in. The demon," Killian added, "that I saw die nearly a year ago on the main street of this very town."

He gave a bitter chuckle. "Nearly two centuries ago, you wished me luck in living long enough to find a way to have my revenge. I lived long enough to see you cheat me of it." He shook his head. "And then you came back. And I," he lowered his eyes in embarrassment. "I couldn't leave well enough alone. I saw another chance to get my revenge, and when I realized that you were still lying to Be—to everyone," he amended quickly, "I thought I could justify that impulse. Even if I sensed that the town would look askance at me for cold-blooded murder—even yours—well, at least I
could have the satisfaction of seeing you squirm." He looked up and greeted Rumple's unreadable expression with a wry half-smile. "You know," he continued thoughtfully, "even if you'd truly given Belle your dagger, I wouldn't have let myself believe it. I just… saw another chance to finally get my vengeance."

Rumple's face hardened, but there was something unreadable in his eyes as he rapped out, "And now?"

Killian shook his head once more. "Whether I wanted to admit it at the time or not, the demon who murdered Milah has paid the price twice over. You aren't he."

"We weren't entirely separate," Rumple pointed out. "And back then, I was less inclined to balk at exacting retribution on those who slighted me."

"Aye," Killian nodded. "You were the Dark One. And I was a… how did you recently put it? '… Cunning, selfish pirate,' I believe?" He sighed. "The past isn't some slate that can be wiped clean with a cotton cloth, much as we both might wish it. Old habits die hard. Perhaps, though, it would behoove the two of us to help them along this time?"

Rumple blinked. He wasn't sure whether he was more startled by the captain's admission, or by the outstretched hand that reached toward him across the dining room table. He stared at it wide-eyed for a moment before he hesitantly clasped it. "I… I think I'm rather inclined to make that deal," he murmured, taking refuge in familiar terminology to cover his discomposure.

"If you say so," Killian nodded. He took a breath. "C—"

An angry pounding on the front door startled both men. "I'm not expecting anyone," Rumple said, getting to his feet.

"Shall I…?"

Rumple shook his head. "No," he said pushing his chair back. "I'll just see who it is." Whoever it was, they were bellowing something unintelligible on the other side of the heavy slab of oak. Rumple peered through the peephole and his shoulders slumped. He did not need this now.

But then he squared his shoulders, pressed his lips together, and opened the door slowly to Moe French. "What do you want?" he demanded.

Moe shouldered past him, almost knocking Rumple into the vestibule wall. "I've come for my daughter, Gold, and you'll not be keeping her from me this time!"

"…And that was the last time I saw her," Emma finished. "I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you that I listened and stayed with her, or that I walked a couple of blocks and then turned around and tried to go back but she'd already got on the bus, but I was… kind of a mess back then," she said straight-faced. "Not really what you wanted to hear, huh?" she added, not daring to look back over her shoulder at her audience. Out the corner of her eye, she could just make out a figure swathed in black behind her; the shield had vanished at some point during her narrative.

And then, a quiet voice said firmly, "I wanted to hear the truth. I wanted to know about the child I lost. Not some sickeningly sweet fantasy about how happy and fulfilled a life she's been leading, but the reality. You've given me what I asked, and for that, I'm thankful."
Emma swallowed. The woman's tone was mild, but there was a coldness backing it that reminded her of Ingrid. Thankful was one thing; forgiving was something else. It occurred to Emma that she might be a second away from being turned to charcoal. And maybe it was fool's courage, but something in her told her that if she was about to die, she wanted to face her executioner head-on. She stood up slowly and turned around, one hand reaching reflexively under her jacket for her revolver, even as she wondered how much good it could do on someone who was already dead.

The woman in the horned headdress raised an eyebrow. "I thought you wanted to wait before we had a rematch," she said, with a hint of a smile.

"You mean, you aren't going to…?"

"Kill you?" Maleficent finished with a mocking laugh. "That's a poor way to repay a service, isn't it? Besides, from what you've told me, you and my daughter share a connection. If I want to find her, Savior, it sounds as though you're my best chance. And from what you've told me, it would seem that you want to find her, too."

Emma blinked. "Yeah," she said. "We… we don't want to hurt her. Seriously. It wasn't so long ago that I lost control of my own magic and I know how scary that was for me. If it had happened to me the first time I found out I had magic, I…"

"Yes," Maleficent nodded. "You do have some idea of what's likely going through her mind right now. Fortunately, her situation is one I know how to rectify. So, if you'll be so kind as to help to point me in the right direction?"

Emma nodded. "Finding people is what I do," she said. "But it's not magical. I need to look for clues… leads… signs…"

"I understand. And I'll accompany you in your searching. If you have questions, I think I need to be close by to provide answers."

David chose that moment to step forward. "We'd like to help, too," he said.

Maleficent smiled coldly. "I really think that you and your dear wife have helped enough."

"W-we're sorry," Snow spoke up. "I know that doesn't mean much right now—"

"You're right," Maleficent cut her off. "It doesn't."

"You don't know the whole story."

"I know enough," Maleficent snapped. "I don't need to hear the rest. I just need to find my daughter. You and your husband can rot for all I care."

"Hey," Emma said. "Whoa, look I know you're angry, but—"

"Angry doesn't begin to describe it," Maleficent retorted. "But don't worry. At the moment, I'm more interested in finding my daughter than in avenging past wrongs. So, if we're finished here, I do believe you've a quest to complete."

Emma turned to her parents. "It'll be okay," she said, wondering who she was trying to convince. "We've got to find her anyway."

She turned to Maleficent. "You won't hurt them," she stated.
"Not if they don't interfere. But from what you've related, my daughter is currently out of control. Who knows where she'll aim her fire breath?" She gave Emma a thin smile. "I'll do my best to protect you, but don't expect me to split my attention in too many directions."

Emma swallowed hard. "She's right," she murmured in her parents' direction. "I'll handle this."

"Emma!" Snow whispered.

Emma forced herself to smile. "I'll be fine. I'm the savior; this is what I do, okay?"

_Not okay_, Emma thought to herself. _Nowhere near okay._ But _I need you to believe me anyhow._

And maybe her parents did, for each nodded, albeit reluctantly.

Maleficent drew herself up and swept toward the entrance to the cavern. "Come along, Emma. Lovely to see you again, Regina. I'm certain we'll catch up later."

And then, she and Emma were gone. Snow and David turned to Regina. "I don't like this at all," Snow said.

"I don't either," Regina admitted, "but I don't see our input being particularly welcome." She sighed. "Go. Mobilize the dwarfs and any other soldiers you used to have. Tell Granny to dig out her crossbow. I'll... track down my old guards. If we do find ourselves facing a pair of angry dragons, we're going to need backup and I'd much prefer people who know how to fight."

"She isn't here," Rumple protested as Moe started up the stairs as though he knew precisely where he was going. And perhaps he did; he'd already been here once before and Rumple had never bothered to remark on whether his father-in-law had a better-than-average memory.

"Then you won't mind if I check for myself," Moe snapped. He turned a furious glare back on Gold. "I knew letting her go to you was a mistake. It was back in our land and it was three months ago. You took my daughter and you twisted her into... into..." He charged back down the stairs, six feet one and a half inches of rage glowering down at Rumple's slight five foot eight. "You did this!"

Rumple staggered back, shaking his head, but in his heart, he wasn't certain that Moe was wrong. Darkness loathed containment nearly as much as it loathed Light. And it enjoyed nothing more than having free rein to snuff out the latter. All the weeks and months that Belle had spent in his company trying to change him. Could he truly say that his Darkness hadn't changed her?

Moe pressed forward. "She may have been the arrow that killed that woman, but you fired the bow! And I'll see to it that you pay the price for it," he said ominously. "No more magic, Gold, right?" He chuckled mirthlessly. "Just a skinny guy with a bum ankle who can't get the upper hand without a gun? Well, you don't have that now." Without warning, he delivered a kick just above Rumple's right knee. Rumple fell to the ground with a grunt of pain, losing his grip on his cane as he went down. Moe kicked it out of reach. "And you don't have that either. Now," He stood over Rumple his right hand upraised in a fist. "Where. Is. My—?"

"That's enough, mate." Killian didn't raise his voice so much as project it. "As he told you, she's not here. Now, stand down."

Moe tried to twist around to face the pirate, but Hook was holding onto his right wrist, immobilizing it, and the move came off awkwardly. "You?" he snapped in disbelief. "You're helping him?"
"Aye," Killian answered in the same deliberate tone of voice he'd used a moment ago. "Stand down." Then, more quietly, "You're hurting, mate, and you want to hit back. I understand that. But Rumpelstiltskin isn't your target."

"He corrupted her!" Moe snarled, struggling to break loose. "Twisted her into his own image until she—. He's a monster!"

"You're hurting, mate," Killian repeated evenly. "That's why you currently stand to come out of this encounter with nothing more than a bruised wrist. Go home. Pour yourself a beer, or something stronger; nobody would judge you for that. Consider talking to Doctor Hopper. And if you should avail yourself of that option, perhaps you might examine why it is that you think so little of your daughter that rather than see her take responsibility for her own choices and actions, make her own decisions, and accept those consequences upon herself, you'd sooner believe her weak enough to be manipulated or enchanted by another." He shook his head. "If you show your daughter so little respect, mate, then I'd say it's no mystery why she hasn't gone home to you at this time. But that's something for you to reflect upon elsewhere."

"He—"

Killian cut him off. "Spew any more bile and you can test your sword against someone who knows how to use one, understood?" He smiled faintly at the older man's consternation. "You don't have a sword, I take it. Well. Not to worry; I've several. The marina at dawn?" he suggested. "It doesn't have to be to the death. First one to drive the other off the pier can be declared winner, though it does seem perfectly idiotic to go through with the thing. So," he continued with more than a hint of steel, "why don't you just… go home?"

Moe struggled once more in the pirate's grip. Then he turned back to a dumbfounded Rumple. "This isn't over," he snapped.

"More's the pity," Killian sighed. He looked at Rumple.

"Technically, he's trespassing. Should we place a call to the sheriff station?"

Rumple, back on his feet now, shook his head with a bemused expression. "I suspect that in light of everything else going on, this incident would hardly be treated with high priority. By the time anyone from that department got out here, I'm sure that Mr. French would be long gone." He gave his father-in-law a meaningful look. "Won't you?"

Defeated, Moe nodded.

"Here," Killian said, transferring his grip from Moe's wrist to his upper arm. "I'll see you out. Just to make sure you get over the property boundary without mishap; the walk might be slippery." He glanced at Rumple. "I'll be right back."

Rumple nodded and hoped his incredulity was nowhere near so obvious as he feared it was.

Finding the shop locked, Henry, Cecily and Skippy headed for Granny's instead. Henry and Cecily couldn't have much of a conversation without Skippy's interjections, so they tried to work on their homework and keep Skippy from getting in the way of the wait-staff, making grimy handprints on the windows, and trying to punch buttons on the jukebox because one of his friends had apparently told him that if he hit the right ones in the right combination, it would play a song for free.

All the same, Henry could feel Granny's glower burning into the back of his head as though he was somehow responsible.
They'd been there for nearly an hour when the door opened and a lean man with a neat mustache and goatee came in holding Roland and Aggie's hands tightly in his own.

Cecily pushed her chair back from the table at once. "Mr. Howard? Is something wrong?"

"You can't bring them here!" Granny spoke up as she strode forward from behind the counter.

That was when Henry realized that she was holding her crossbow. "What's going on?" he demanded.

Mr. Howard gave Granny an apologetic look. "I don't mean to leave them here. My wife and I got the same text you must have. My eldest is twelve. I trust her to look after her little brothers, but I think expecting her to take on another two is a bit much, especially when Aggie's big sister is right here."

Cecily sighed. "I understand, Mr. Howard. Roland lives just a bit past my place. I'll see them both home." She gave Henry a pained smile. "I guess we'd better pack up here."

"Good guess," Granny said grimly. "I have to close up." Then her scowl faded, replaced by a look of almost motherly concern. "I wouldn't head out toward the forest, though, girl. Is there some place in town where you can be safe?"

"What's going on?" Henry demanded.

Granny looked as though she'd rather not answer. "According to the mayor," she said finally, "we might be facing a pair of angry dragons in short order. She's hoping it won't come to that. But meanwhile, the roads—and the woods—won't be safe. If you kids want to stay here, I modified one of the freezers into a bunker of sorts. It's not cozy, but you can probably wait out the attack there if it comes."

"I'm not going to bunk in a freezer!" Aggie proclaimed. "It'll be cold!"

Granny's lips twitched. "This one will be warm enough," she allowed. She looked at the older two. "Well, how about it? Is there somewhere you can stay in town?"

Henry hesitated. "The closest place I can think of is… Grandpa's house."

Cecily nodded at once, but Granny looked horrified. "Surely there's somewhere else," she said.

Henry shook his head. "Mom's house is more than a half-hour's walk away. The loft…" He winced. "Every time the town's in trouble, something smashes the clock tower. The loft's right across the street from the tower. If we're trying to stay safe, that might be one of the worst places to go."

"I think Henry's right, Mrs. Lucas," Cecily said respectfully, but firmly. "Skippy, get your stuff. Aggie, do you," her eye fell on the box of candy bars and potato chips by the cash register, "do you want any snacks before we go?"

"Hold that thought," Granny said. She moved briskly behind the counter and began filling a takeout box with muffins, doughnuts, and canned pop. "Most of this is only going to go to waste if we're closing," she said, adding a loaf of sliced bread and several packages of deli meat. "And who knows if he wasn't going to order takeout." The lid bulged when she pressed it down over the bounty and she quickly tied it shut with a length of cord.

"Right," she said, thrusting the box at Henry. "Go straight there; don't dawdle. You little ones, don't go running off on your own, you hear me?"
"Course we do," Aggie said, much offended. "We're not babies!"

"Aggie used to be," Skippy said impishly.

"We all used to be," Cecily stated. "Including you."

"Specially you," Aggie giggled.

"We should go," Roland said, scuffing his shoe on the floor. "Before the dragons come."

"Roland's right," Cecily nodded, glaring at her younger siblings. "Pipe down, you two. Let's go see Mr. Gold."

Granny locked the door behind them. It wasn't until they'd gone nearly two blocks that Roland remembered. Mr. Gold wasn't just Mr. Gold. He was also Rumpelstiltskin. And Roland never wanted to see him again. He swallowed hard and Henry gave him a reassuring smile. "We're almost there," he said. "Just another block."

He wanted to protest. He wanted to run. He didn't want to go to Rumpelstiltskin's house! But he didn't want to tell the others and have them think he was a coward. And he didn't want to get eaten by a dragon. He swallowed again and slipped his hand into Aggie's. "Don't be scared," he whispered.

"I'm not!" Aggie said loudly.

"Shh!" Roland whispered urgently. "It's okay," he said, remembering something Daddy had told him once. "It's okay to be scared, as long as you just do what you have to."

Aggie looked up at her older sister, who had a firm grip on her other hand. "Cis?" she said in a loud whisper.

"What is it, Aggie?"

"Boys are weird."
Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter Notes

A/N: According to the Wonderful Wiki of Oz Wiki, Gayelette was Glinda's mother and a powerful sorceress. Although she's not explicitly referred to as the previous Good Witch of the South, I'm assigning her the part here. A snippet of dialogue has been excerpted from S3:E8, "Think Lovely Thoughts."

Chapter Forty-Two

By the time Killian returned indoors, Rumple was sitting at the table, looking no more the worse for wear. "He's gone," the captain announced.

Rumple nodded and forced himself to smile. "I suppose some thanks are in order," he said pleasantly enough.

Killian made a face. "Not really."

Rumple frowned. This didn't sound like typical false modesty on the captain's part. If anything, he appeared to be rather more uncomfortable than the situation seemed to warrant. "Do tell?"

For a long moment, there was no response. Finally, "I suppose it touches on what we were discussing earlier. I blinded myself to a number of things that might have dampened my desire for vengeance. And after this encounter, well, I'm not certain whether I've glimpsed my reflection in a distorted glass or merely a likely place that path might have led me, had I not opened myself to other possibilities."

Some months earlier, Rumple might have gloated, or at the very least, gotten a few digs in at the captain's expense. Now, he only nodded. "Don't feel too badly on that score, Captain," he murmured. "You're not the only one to slide into that trap."

"Oh?"

Rumple hesitated. "For a long time," he said slowly, "I'd believed that once one surrendered to Darkness, there was no returning. No second chances, no true change possible. At best, one could restrain one's darker urges for a time, learn to delay gratification in pursuit of some significant goal, but ultimately, the truth would out." He got up from his chair, leaning heavily on his cane and walked to the empty fireplace. As he continued talking, he checked the damper and struck a match, holding it up to the flue. "Of course," he said, "because I believed that of me, the result was that not only did I fail to think that any efforts on my part could bear fruit for long, I also failed to recognize such efforts in others." He began taking old newspapers from a nearby rack, crumpling them, and arranging them on the grate. "When Regina gave into her son's plea and gave up her plan to secure Snow White's heart for a certain spell, I didn't see it as change, but subterfuge. When you returned to port with the bean to take us to Neverland, I assumed it was simply to curry favor with Emma."

Hook shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "That much was more or less true at the time," he admitted.
Rumple placed several pieces of kindling atop the tinder. "Perhaps, but a year later, you saw Regina's magic shift from Dark to Light just as I did, and I still thought that there had to be some other explanation." He shook his head. "And I doubt that the man you used to be would have offered any kind of truce after my return to Storybrooke, when it was plain to anyone that I had no further power I dared use to cause harm to anyone, including yourself. When one witnesses an event that one knows to be impossible, one can either revise one's opinion of what's possible or revise one's opinion of what it was one witnessed." He added a log to the kindling and lit the tinder. "If you don't believe people can change, then you find yourself spending a good deal of time watching them to prove to yourself that your belief is correct."

Killian nodded. "I suppose I can attest to that statement in my own dealings as well. As I said weeks ago, I knew you well enough to know you'd never trust anyone with the power to control you. Perhaps if I hadn't thought to turn that situation to my advantage…" He let his voice trail off.

Rumple faced him with one raised eyebrow. "I was about to bring up the slightly-later incident with your hand, actually."

"Ah." Killian frowned and shifted once more in his chair. "The point that I was trying to make was that once I opened myself to the possibility that you might be trying to forge a different path, I saw the signs. Oh, they weren't obvious; I think that might have been what convinced me that they were sincere," he added quickly. "Had they been obvious, I would have assumed that you were putting on a show and wanted to be certain we all noticed. But to one who cared to look, the evidence couldn't be disputed." He hesitated for a moment before adding, "But not for want of trying."

"You didn't want to believe that I could change," Rumple nodded, sounding neither accusatory nor surprised.

"No more than you did of me." Killian sighed. "I suppose it's fortunate that our ability to turn over a new leaf wasn't dependent on whether others recognized our efforts. Though a bit of support was always welcome."

"Indeed." He tilted his head to one side. "Well. I think I detected something rather like an apology in there, and if so, I'll accept it and extend one of my own, but what has any of this to do with my unexpected caller?"

"Apology accepted," Killian nodded. "And, I suppose I meant to say that as loath as I was to notice your efforts, I did spot them. And once spotted, well, it's just as you were saying a moment ago. When I faced the choice of whether to reconsider my opinion of your actions or my understanding of what I was witnessing, I chose the former. Tonight, I saw how I might have appeared had I chose the latter. And I rather think I made the right decision."

The blaze was beginning to generate some real heat and Rumple added another log. "I'm beginning to think you might be right," he said softly.

A knock on the door startled both men. "Once again," Rumple said slowly, "I'm expecting nobody."

Killian was already out of his chair. "I think it's my turn this time," he said, adjusting his sword belt as he made his way to the foyer.

He opened the front door and blinked when he faced a teen who appeared as startled as he. And before he'd fully registered that the youth hadn't come alone, Henry had taken an incredulous step forward. "What are you doing here?"
"Moments earlier…

"I can't," Roland whispered, as they started up the walk. "I can't go in there."

"Roland?" Cecily blinked. "What's wrong?"

"I don't wanna see Rumpelstiltskin." He hated himself for sounding like a baby. "I can't, okay? Please, let's go somewhere else. Anywhere else."

Henry shook his head. "You heard Granny. We need to get to safety fast and my grandpa's place is going to be safer than anywhere else we can get to—except maybe the shop, and that's locked."

"I'll stay in Mrs. Lucas's freezer! Please!"

"We're not going back there; we probably don't have time." Henry was trying not to lose his temper, but Granny's apprehension had been contagious and he was feeling more than a little tense.

And then, Aggie said, "It's okay to be scared, Roland, 'member? It's okay to be scared if you do what you have to. And now? You have to do what Cec'ly an' Henry say cuz they're older and they're in charge."

Roland wanted to jerk his hand out of Aggie's grip. He wanted to tell her to shut up instead of throwing his own words back at him. He wanted to throw himself down on the pavement and kick and scream until they listened.

But Aggie was littler than he was and she wasn't crying or trying to run away. And if she told Daddy on him, Daddy would be so ashamed of him for not acting brave. Daddy always said you couldn't control how you felt, but you could control how you acted. And anyway, hadn't he learned early that making too much noise could tell the sheriff's men where you were? Even if the sheriffs in this town were so much nicer than the one in Sherwood, Daddy still wouldn't want him crying and carrying on. He had to be a brave boy, or at least act like one. So he clenched his teeth together and took another step forward and then another, until they stood at the front door.

He wouldn't look at Aggie, but he gave her hand a squeeze when Henry rang the bell.

"You're hurting me," she said, trying to pull loose.

The door opened and Henry blinked in surprise. "What are you doing here?" he demanded of an almost-equally startled Killian.

"So," Emma began, hoping that she wasn't about to sound like an idiot, "help me out here. My parents told me that you built your… uh… nest?" When Maleficent gave her a slight nod, she went on, "Your nest. You built it in a cave. Is that a dragon thing, or are there other places Lily might seek out?"

"If she were thinking clearly," Maleficent replied thoughtfully, "then caves or catacombs would make sense. But from your account, she probably wasn't. If this was her first transformation," she continued, "with nobody to guide her or explain what was happening, it would have been frightening enough. But for Cruella to be there to take advantage…" Her expression took on a menacing note. "If Rumple's maid hadn't taken care of her, I'd do it myself."

"Uh… she's his wife, now," Emma murmured.

Maleficent's eyebrows climbed nearly to the edge of her headdress. "Perhaps that shouldn't come as
a surprise," she said. "Well. At any rate, thanks to her and… Tia, you said?" Emma nodded and Maleficent continued, "Lily's free. But it doesn't sound as though taking on dragon form was a conscious act on her part. If she doesn't know what she did, she won't know how to reverse it. If she were calmer, she might be able to figure it out, but after everything that happened, she won't be calm. And the more she panics, the less rational she'll be. She'll want to hide," Maleficent said slowly. "Are there other underground warrens besides the one I occupied?"


"Are there miners currently working there?"

"Sometimes," Emma nodded. "The dwarfs get around. And those tunnels are pretty extensive. But I don't know if they're our best bet," she continued.

"Oh?"

"There's only one mine entrance I know about. I can show it to you if you like. I… don't think it's something that could be spotted from the air. But even if I'm wrong, a few hours ago, she started a fire in one of our parks. The dwarfs—I told you they get around—and some of our other volunteers got it under control quickly, but…" She pulled out her phone and brought up the electronic copy of the town map. "See, here's the well. And here's the park. And here," she pointed to the spot on the touch screen, "is the entrance to the mines. On the other side of town. I don't think she could fly over it without someone spotting her."

Maleficent looked at the phone. "After this," she said, "I think I'm going to need to understand more about that device you're holding."

"Sure, okay," Emma nodded. "I mean… I don't fully understand how it works myself. I couldn't build one from scratch. But I can show you how to use it."

Maleficent nodded. "I'd appreciate that. And," she said slowly, "on our way here, I couldn't help but notice that my current attire seems to be somewhat out of step with the local fashions. I don't mind standing out, but I'd prefer it be for the right reasons." Despite her conversational tone, there was something apprehensive in her eyes. "When I finally meet my daughter," she said more softly, "I wouldn't want to make a poor impression."

Emma took a breath. "I don't think it's going to matter that much," she said, trying to sound reassuring. "But first, we have to find her."

Maleficent nodded. "Here," she said, her finger stabbing the screen. Then, alarmed, "What did I do?"

"Easy," Emma said. "Sorry, I didn't think to mention. It's a touch screen."

"Touch screen?" Maleficent repeated, sounding out the syllables as though she was trying to pronounce some foreign language.

"Yeah, uh… when you touch the map, it zooms in on that spot." She looked at the irregular blue shape. "The lake?"

"I thought it might be water," Maleficent nodded with satisfaction. "I couldn't be certain that you'd use the same convention of blue pigments that I'm familiar with, but I'm relieved to note that some things are familiar. How big is it?"

"Uh… it's…" She took back the phone and keyed in her query. "It's about six hundred acres, give
or take. Why?"

"How deep?"

Emma typed another query. "Forty-eight feet at its deepest," she read dutifully.

"That might be large enough," Maleficent nodded.

"For…?"

"She's new to her talents," Maleficent reminded her. "It might be helpful if you think of flying as you would swimming. In some villages, I've heard a common way to teach children to swim is to fling them into deep water and let nature take over."

"Here too," Emma nodded with an angry look on her face. "It doesn't always work."

"No," Maleficent nodded. "It doesn't. But even when it does, I would imagine that when the child surfaces, they are either treading water or, I believe the stroke most often used would be the dog paddle?"

"Sounds about right."

"And one disadvantage to that stroke—particularly in the case of a person who'd never used it before—is a tendency to tire relatively quickly." She smiled faintly. "While even rudimentary flight has far more elegance to it, the first time a dragon takes wing, it's usually just as exhausting, especially when a fledgling does so instinctively. She flew several miles—almost certainly not in a straight line, and she breathed fire after she'd done so less than six hours earlier. She'd be exhausted, looking to land someplace where she could recover. And dragons breathe in water as easily as in air." She looked down at Emma's phone again. This time she pointed to the screen but didn't touch it. "How far away is this?"

"About fifteen minutes by car," Emma answered. "Come on."

"Car?" Maleficent repeated. "That… carriage we arrived in."

"Yeah," Emma nodded. "One more thing to wrap your head around, I guess. But there'll be time for that later."

For the first time, Emma thought she saw a glimmer of hope in Maleficent's guarded smile.

"Apparently, your home has been designated a safe harbor," Killian remarked dryly, as he ushered the group of children into the dining room.

Rumple half-rose to his feet, shock plain on his face. "What's going on?" he asked somewhat nervously.

As he listened to Henry's explanation, his astonishment only deepened. Half a year ago, would his grandson have thought to come here when instructed to find sanctuary? And then his gaze rested on the small boy edging behind Cecily, shoulders hunched and eyes lowered. Clearly, Roland did not feel safe in this house. Rumple swallowed hard.

"Do your parents know where you are?" he managed.

"I texted Mama before we left Granny's," Cecily said. She pulled out her phone and turned it on. "She hasn't replied yet, but it's just about dinner time; she probably hasn't had a chance to check."
She held out the to-go box. "Mrs. Lucas gave us some food to bring with us. She said that there was enough for you, too."

"I didn't message anyone yet," Henry admitted. "With everything else going on, I thought it might be too much of a distraction."

"Contact at least one of your mothers now," Rumple said. "Once they realize that they can't confirm your whereabouts, worry will prove more of a distraction." He looked at the only child who was neither his grandson nor a Lapine. "Roland?"

The little boy shook his head. "I don't have a phone," he mumbled, studying his shoes rather than meet Rumple's eyes.

"Mr. Howard said he was gonna call our folks an' tell 'em we were with Cis," Aggie volunteered. Rumple smiled. "That's all well and good, but if Roland's father doesn't know where Cecily is, that won't be much help."

"I'll tell my mom to pass on the message," Henry said. "Roland's dad is probably with her anyway."

Rumple nodded. "Well," he said, trying to exuded a calm he didn't fully feel, "I suppose you'd best make yourselves at home for now. Cecily, you may set that box on the kitchen counter. I'll see if Mrs. Lucas's offering will require any additional fortification."

He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid I haven't much here in the way of amusements. If those of you who might wish to watch television can all agree on a single program, I've no objection. Otherwise, such books and music as I have are available for you."

"You got paper and stuff to draw with?" Aggie asked.

Rumple smiled. "I do have several pens. You won't mind having to restrict your artwork to blue or black ink?"

"It's what she draws with at home, Sir." Cecily smiled.

"Don't you got any games at all?" Skippy wanted to know.

"We do have the two Battleship games," Killian spoke up for the first time and Rumple knew he wasn't imagining the glint of amusement in the captain's eye as he went continued. "Perhaps, one of the others might be interested in a game. If not, I suppose we could rotate the lad into ours."

"Cis?" Henry asked. "Maybe we could take turns. Or..." he twisted around to see Roland hanging back. "Roland? Do you play?"

Roland didn't look up. "I gotta go to the bathroom," he mumbled.

Ordinarily, Rumple would have considered it good manners to escort his young guest to the room in question, instead of merely pointing it out. But taking Roland's obvious apprehension into account, he merely nodded. "Top of the stairs, turn left," he gestured in that direction, "and it's the second door."

Roland murmured something that Rumple thought might have been a thank you and nearly bolted up the stairs.

"Well," Rumple said, "I'll see about supper. And we'll deal with other matters as they crop up." His
eyes found Henry's and he smiled. "I must confess that I hadn't planned on entertaining this
evening, but I'm not at all unhappy to have been granted the opportunity."

Henry grinned back. "We're glad to be here, too, Grandpa."

"Well," Emma said slowly, "this is the lake. Can you tell if she's down there?"

Maleficent shook her head. "Normally, I'd be able to catch her scent easily enough, but cold
temperatures and water muddle things a bit." She examined the shoreline carefully. "If she's in
there, she didn't land and wade in—at least, not at this part. More likely, she dove. Or crashed."

"Crashed?"

Maleficent nodded. "Takeoffs aren't always easy when one has the leisure to plan them, but
remember, we're talking about a sink-or-swim situation. And," she added a bit more darkly,
"Cruella knew my powers rather well. If she was controlling my daughter and gave her a command
to fly, Lily wouldn't have been able to resist or protest that she didn't know how. Her body would
have obeyed as best it could. And once you're up in the air, well, staying there isn't that difficult. At
least, not until one wearies.

"However, trying to land while tired and, quite possibly frightened, may be one of the hardest
techniques to master. And she would have been tired after the… incendiary incident in the park." She looked at Emma again. "Does the water level seem lower than what it ought to be?"

"Uh… I don't know. Why?"

"If she crashed from a great height, it would be noticeably down." Although Maleficent sounded
dispassionate, Emma didn't miss the worry in the other woman's eyes. She looked at the lake again.

"It doesn't look lower to me," she said. "I don't know if I'd notice, though."

"You'd notice," Maleficent said firmly. "Come to think of it, if she had tumbled from the skies, the
splash would have been seen by anyone close by, including your emergency fire brigade."

"That's if she's in there at all."

"There aren't many places where a dragon can hide. In the forest, I think you'd have had some
reports of smoldering wood by now, if not actual flames; with the melting snow, the wood would
be wet, but a hot enough blast would still ignite it. If the entrance to the mines can't be seen from
above, then this is our best prospect."

She took a breath. "I'm diving in."

Emma's eyes grew wide as Maleficent changed shape. Even though this time, the dragon wasn't
trying to kill her, the transformation was still frightening. Had Maleficent's claws been that sharp at
their first meeting? Suddenly, Emma was glad that the lights had been dim in the cavern beneath
the library. She watched as Maleficent glided almost serenely out onto the lake. About a quarter of
the way across, she dipped her head below the surface. The rest of her followed with barely a
splash.

Emma wondered how long she'd be. Then she pulled out her phone to update the others, noting in
passing that Henry had left her a message. Since he hadn't flagged it as urgent, she decided she'd
play it back after she reported in. Or after Maleficent emerged, with or without Lily; whichever
came first…
Rumple saw the children settled in the living room and repaired to the kitchen to examine the contents of the to-go box that Mrs. Lucas had provided, leaving the captain to keep an eye on things. He shook his head. Cold cuts and desserts were a start, but hardly a sound foundation for a meal. He made his way back to his guests.

"Have any of you eaten, yet?" he asked.

"I'm not hungry right now," Cecily said quickly.

"We had a snack after school," Henry added. "I'm good for a while."

"Mr. Howard was gonna give us supper," Aggie said. "But then he said Cis would."

"Well, I'm hungry!" Skippy proclaimed. And at Cecily's warning look, he demanded, "What? I am!"

Rumple smiled. "Well. We'll certainly need to address that, then, won't we?"

Cecily got up at once. "I can help," she said.

Rumple shook his head. "There's no need."

"I don't mind," Cecily countered. "Besides, I usually cook for more people." In an undertone, she added, "And Aggie can get a little fussy sometimes. I know what she likes and how she likes it."

"Ah," Rumple smiled his understanding. "Well then. If you'd care to accompany me?" He realized that Roland hadn't returned yet. "Actually," he said, as he led her into the kitchen, "perhaps I ought to review the proposed menu with you and have you commence preparations. There's something I need to attend to first, and then I'll be back to assist you."

The slate blue pile carpeting in the upstairs hallway did a fair job of masking Rumple's footsteps, but did little to conceal the small muddy boot prints of the person who'd come up here shortly before him. Roland had found the bathroom, but the tracks led from there to one of the spare bedrooms.

Rumple closed his eyes. It was all too easy for him to place himself in those small boots. Roland was terrified; that was no logical deduction, it had been obvious from the moment that the boy had come into the house that he wasn't here of his own free will. It didn't matter that Henry had been right about this place being safer than most. Roland didn't feel safe here.

He considered his options. Then he made his way carefully to the master bedroom and pulled open one of his night table drawers. Removing a key ring, he examined each key intently until he found the one he wanted. He started to slip it into the pocket of his suit jacket when something made him hesitate.

If he wanted to set the boy at ease, perhaps his usual manner of presenting himself was at odds with his aim. Roland was feeling vulnerable. And Rumple's customary attire was, perhaps, a bit too imposing under the circumstances. He removed his suit jacket and draped it neatly on the back of his chair; he'd want it again before going back downstairs. The tie was next. He debated with himself for another moment before slipping off the vest as well and leaving it on the bed. He checked his reflection in the mirror and hesitantly unfastened the top button of his dress shirt. Then he took up the key once more and walked to the spare bedroom.
He paused for a moment before knocking lightly on the door. There was no answer. He opened it carefully and found himself looking at a boy standing by the window, facing him with a panicked look on his face. Rumple took a deep breath. Then, taking care that Roland could see exactly what he was doing, he placed the key on the chest of drawers directly to the right of the door. "If you don't wish to be disturbed," he said, "I'll not trouble you further. And if you choose to lock the door, nobody else will either."

Confusion mingled with the fear in the boy's brown eyes.

Rumple shook his head sadly. "I mean you no harm, truly," he murmured. "But I realize that after my actions in the forest that day, you've no reason to believe me. So. If you wish to remain up here, I give you my word I won't bother you. It will be some time yet before dinner. I'll ask one of the others to let you know when it's ready. And then, if you'd like to join us, you'll be welcome. If not, I'll have a tray sent up."

He turned to go, when a small voice called after him, "Daddy explained."

He froze on the threshold. When he turned back around, Roland was facing the window. "He told me the witch made you do it so you could get Regina's heart?" His voice soared up on the last word, making it a question.

"Yes, that's true," Rumple said slowly.

Roland whirled back. "But did she tell you to aim the arrow at me?"

Rumple winced. "She told me to take the heart swiftly and by whatever means necessary. I had no choice but to obey that command. I knew that your father wouldn't let me fire that arrow. At least," he remembered that terrible moment when he'd thought that, perhaps, Robin wouldn't react as he'd planned, "I hoped he wouldn't. I didn't want to harm you. I don't know whether you can believe that, but it's the truth."


Rumple said nothing, but nodded back in a way that he hoped was encouraging.

Roland sat down on the edge of the bed. "Daddy told me what you're telling me," he said. "That you didn't want to scare us. That you had to. So, it's like it wasn't you doing it. Only… only it was," Roland finished. "I saw you turn the arrow to me. I didn't see the witch. And even if I tell myself it was all the witch's fault, when I dream about what happened, I still see you." He drew a noisy breath. "Even if Daddy says it wasn't your fault and I shouldn't blame you, I can't help it."

Rumple felt his heart begin to pound in his chest as the boy's words gave voice to feelings that he'd been experiencing since early that morning. It felt like an eternity had elapsed since then instead of mere hours, but it had only taken a moment to turn his world on its ear once more. "I-I think I need to sit down," he whispered.

Roland leaped up. "Are you all right?" he asked sharply. The fear was back in his voice. "I-it's not your heart again?"

Rumple shook his head, recalling at once that the boy had been present when he'd suffered his attack in Bae's old apartment. "No, no," he replied at once. "Not that. I…" He took another breath. "I really do need to sit down, though." When Roland said nothing, he took the three steps that carried him to the bed and sank to the mattress.
"Are you all right?" Roland asked again. "Sh-should I get Henry? Or Cec'ly?"

Well. At least the child didn't seem to want him dead, Rumple thought without irony. That was a start. "No, that won't be necessary," he said, with a modicum of his usual calm. "It would seem," he said slowly, "that I've one more thing to apologize to you for. I-I meant to come in here to set your mind at ease, not give you more cause to be frightened. But you see," he said again, "the sentiments..." He stopped. Roland wasn't more than six years old and probably didn't know what 'sentiments' were. "The... the feelings that you've just described, well, let's just say that they're feelings I've been wrestling with over the course of the last few hours. Hearing you express them... I suppose it came as something of a surprise."

Roland blinked "I don't understand," he said, and for the first time, the confusion in his voice overshadowed his fear. "Did someone aim an arrow at you today?"

Despite himself, Rumple chuckled. "No, not that," he said. He took another breath. "There is someone in this town," he said slowly, "who has long nursed a strong dislike for me. I don't think she'd ever call it hatred, but her behavior toward me does point in that direction. She's wronged me many times in the past, in ways that I believed I could never forgive."

"I didn't say 'never'," Roland mumbled, digging the toe of his boot into the carpet. (The mud, Rumple noted, appeared to have dried by now.)

Rumple gave him a quick smile. "That's very true," he agreed. "You didn't. I thank you for pointing that out to me."

Roland shrugged. "So... what did she do?"

He wasn't about to burden a child with those details, except in the most general sense. Instead, he shook his head. "It's not your concern," he replied. "However, earlier today, I learned that this... person who... wronged me, this person who I'd believed was the reason that someone I loved dearly was lost to me for many years..." His breath hitched and he took another breath. "Today, I learned that someone had taken her heart. And that she might not have been responsible for the harm she caused me after all. And, like you, I am finding it hard to... to look beyond the puppet and see who holds the strings."

Roland regarded him searchingly for a moment. Then he pressed his lips together firmly, walked back to the bed, and sat down. True, he'd chosen to sit about as far as he could from Rumple without pressing himself into the footboard, but he had sat down. "So, what are you going to do?"

Rumple hesitated. It would be easy to say that he was going to forgive her, because it was the 'right' thing to do. But he was trying to avoid lying these days. Getting caught in a truth was so much less embarrassing. "I don't know yet," he admitted thoughtfully. "You see," he added, "most of what she did to me, she did a rather long time ago. And I don't know when her heart was taken. If this was a recent thing, well then, her past actions were entirely her own choice and I've every reason to be angry with her. But if it was taken in the past, that would be a different matter." He shook his head. "Or maybe I'm just looking for an excuse to stay angry with her." A chuckle escaped him. "After all, I've been angry with her for a very long time and letting go of that feeling won't be easy."

"Even if it's wrong?"

"Well," Rumple allowed, "if it proves to be wrong, I imagine I'll have to. But it won't happen quickly."

"So," Roland said—and Rumple noted that the child's fear seemed to have been subsumed by
Rumple considered. "As to your first question," he said at last, "I'm afraid that time will tell at its convenience, not mine. But as to your second, well, let's just say I have my suspicions…"

The Black Fairy smiled with satisfaction as she laid the rolled parchment down inside the onyx casket. Then, still smiling, she picked up each of the two hearts in turn and her smile broadened as she remembered…

Almost three hundred years ago…

The witch Mombi had proven a shrewd bargainer, demanding far more dark fairy dust than Fiona had first offered her in exchange for assistance, but it had been worth it. With an army of animated pumpkin-men marching on the Emerald City, Gayelette and her sisters had mustered forces of their own and were, even now, on their way to meet the enemy forces.

And with Gayelette gone, neutralizing the protection spells on the Book of Records was child's play. The final battle was centuries away, but while Fiona believed in Fate, she didn't fully trust it. She wanted a glimpse of the master plan, the better to prepare herself when the time came. Perhaps, this was a fool's errand. Perhaps, this artifact of Oz would have no information on anything that would transpire beyond Oz's borders. But Fiona thought otherwise. After all, Oz's continued existence, like that of all the magical realms, would hinge on the battle's outcome.

It was with an air of wonder and trepidation that she opened the leather-bound tome and carefully turned pages, skimming for some nugget of useful information. And then, she found it.

**Behold, the Black Fairy will hold the Dark One's heart and if she will preserve his love, then the Savior will not prevail against them. But as she loses it, then perforce, may her cause be lost.**

The next paragraph changed topics abruptly to discuss some sorceress from 'the West' who was supposed to arrive by cyclone and Fiona bit back an expletive and turned pages more swiftly, but she could already feel the tether that bound her to the Dark Realm beginning to retract. She closed the book and clutched it to her to peruse at her leisure, as the tether began tugging in earnest. As she felt the portal open, she realized that there was another force in play, one which swirled about the book and, wrenched it from her arms, just as the portal closed behind her. She was swearing when she returned to her throne room.

And then, she squared her shoulders and told herself firmly to stop carrying on like one of the children in her dust mines. Her journey hadn't been a failure, after all. She'd learned something important. Something useful.

The Dark One was fated to be her ally.

But the Final Battle was still centuries away and there might be any number of Dark Ones between now and then. And while Dark Ones lived for a very long time, there was no guarantee that the one who would stand with her had even been born yet. Well. Perhaps, she could discern that much, even now.

With renewed purpose, she strode to her dressing table and caught up a round hand mirror set in a frosted glass frame. "Show me the Dark One fated to stand at my side when the Final Battle is upon me," she commanded.
At once, she saw an image of a slight man with mottled golden skin, piercing yellow eyes, and stringy hair that might have been a dark blond or a faded brown. He wore a suit of dragon-hide armor and a hooded cloak. Evidently, Fiona realized, this Dark One would be no novice to the part. He would have had years to hone his power. Perhaps decades. Perhaps... Fiona's eyes widened. Perhaps centuries...

She looked at the mirror thoughtfully. "Show me the current Dark One," she ordered.

As soon as the mirror complied, she realized that the figure in the glass was not the same man. His power would pass from him long before the Battle. She would need to be patient until then.

And then, a new thought struck her. Again, she commanded the mirror to show her the Dark One who would be her ally. And then, she uttered another command. "Show me this Dark One as he appears today."

For a moment, the glass clouded. When it cleared, she saw a boy, perhaps eight years old, perhaps a year or so older, no more. He sat at a spinning wheel, his expression serious as a cop of thread collected about its spindle.

Behind him, a woman's voice exclaimed, "Someone so young..."

"In such a short time," breathed another female voice.

"Look at him," continued the first one. "He could spin for..."

"...for kings and queens!" finished the second.

"I didn't think I had any talent." The boy spoke for the first time.

"Oof," sniffed the first woman. "More than talent—a gift! You could apprentice with anyone in the land!"

The view in the mirror expanded and Fiona could now see the two women. Common villagers, from the look of it. Then her gaze hardened. There was a faint flicker that surrounded each woman. Magic. Probably some glamor spell. She gripped the mirror's handle more tightly. "Show me the true faces of these women." It did. Fiona's lips pulled back in a feral snarl. "Blue..." she hissed. "Now what are you playing at? And what chance my plans if your influence shapes that boy?"

Her eyebrows knitted together as she thought. And then she smiled with satisfaction. Dark Ones were shaped by loss and despair. The boy would know his full measure of both. "And you, Blue," she said aloud, "will guarantee that..."

After that Fiona bided her time and kept watching. The town had its safe quarters and its disreputable ones and Blue's home was situated in the former. So, perhaps it wasn't odd that the Blue Fairy, or Hulda as she was calling herself now, went alone to the well in the town square one moonlit evening. It was autumn and it grew dark before the fifth hour of the afternoon, so while it really wasn't late, the square was deserted. The market was closed and the merchants had gone home to prepare the evening meal—or to the taverns and pubs, where someone else would prepare it for them. There were a few stragglers in the streets, but the winds were picking up and the square was too open and offered scant protections.

The Black Fairy smiled. This evening would do rather well.

She waited until Blue was turning the well crank, straining under weight of the full bucket, and
shook her head derisively. Really, a bit of magic would have made that task far easier. But clearly, Blue had her reasons for pretending to be mortal. When Blue had laboriously tipped the bucket's contents into the two clay jugs she'd brought with her and turned to go, she found Fiona—features concealed beneath a hooded cloak—blocking her path.

"Excuse me," the fairy murmured, trying to move past.

Fiona shook her head. "No. No, I don't believe I will."

"I beg your pardon?" Blue replied, her eyes widening in surprise. The surprise yielded to shock when Fiona lowered her hood.

"One day, Blue, you will beg that from me in earnest and on your knees," Fiona laughed. "But tonight, I've something else in mind." With no further preamble, she thrust her hand into the Blue Fairy's chest. Blue gasped and Fiona giggled as she drew out the heart. "Well," she sniffed, "I must say you've kept it in good condition. It hardly looks as though it's been used, does it?"

"If you're going to crush it," Blue lifted her chin boldly, "just do it. Another will take my place."

Fiona laughed again. "Now, why would I want to do that, when you'll serve my purpose so well?"

"You can't control me," Blue warned. "I've taken precautions against that."

Fiona tucked the heart into a fold of her robe, still beaming. "I don't have to control you to get you to do what I want, Blue. You'll do it anyway; you won't be able to help yourself. You see, Blue," she drew a step closer and smiled when Blue took an involuntary step back, "I want the boy you're currently raising to know what it means to feel safe and secure and loved. I want him to be happy and carefree. And then, I want you to tear all of that away from him."

"Never," Blue snorted. "Fiona, he's—"

"Innocent? I suppose he is. Now. And they're all cute when they're young, I grant you that. But it doesn't last, Blue. You see, I want that child to know a bit of happiness now, so that when it's taken from him, he'll feel the loss more keenly. I want him to grow up lonely and bitter. In short, I want him primed to surrender himself to Darkness when the opportunity presents itself."

"And you think I'll be a party to that?" Blue sputtered.

Fiona only smirked. "Of course. I didn't take your heart so I could control you, Blue. I took it because it was in the way. Without it, you'll be able to assess your priorities with a cool eye and a clear pragmatism. No emotions or sentiment to cloud your judgment. The time will come when you'll realize that raising a child is too burdensome for one of your talents and responsibilities. And when that day comes," she grinned broadly at the dawning horror in the Blue Fairy's eyes, "you'll know precisely what you need to do."

Her smirk vanished, replaced by an expression of exaggerated distress. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I fear I've kept you too long! They must be awaiting you and your water with bated breath! You'd better go home. But first," from within the folds of her robe she pulled out a leather pouch and shook a fine rust-colored powder into her hand, "since I can't control your heart, and as you took my wand before you banished me, I suppose I'll need to use this instead." With that, she blew the dust directly into the Blue Fairy's face.

At once, Blue began to cough. The dust was choking her, burning her eyes and she wiped at them with her sleeve as she doubled over. When she straightened once more, she was alone. Of course she was alone. The square was deserted at this hour. But she'd thought for a moment that she'd
been talking to someone... She shook her head. She really wasn't given to daydreams. Perhaps it was Flora's influence. Well. She'd best get to drawing up the water— Her eyes widened when she saw the full jugs sitting on the rim of the well. She didn't remember filling those, but she must have done so while she'd been thinking about... Well, what had she been thinking about?

Blue frowned. If she didn't watch herself, she'd end up like too many of the townspeople she'd recently acquainted herself with, going about their daily routine with seldom an innovative thought in their heads. She needed to remember that this current assignment wasn't permanent, and that one day soon, she would resume her usual duties. She fitted the cork stoppers into the water jugs and began the walk back to the house.

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Present day...

Fiona set the heart back in the casket. "I suppose you would have told me that you were looking after my son, had I let you say your piece back then," she murmured. "Had I realized it, I might have taken him back with me that night."

Instead, she'd believed the words she'd read in Gayelette's Book of Records had denoted a rather different kind of relationship in the offing. Centuries later, when she'd felt the pull of the Dark One's summoning spell, she'd truly thought that she was about to appear to one who fancied himself a potential suitor. She'd been more than willing to go along with such a notion if it would promote her goals. And then, the Dark One had told her who he really was, and another piece of the puzzle had clicked into place.

"It shan't be long now, Rumple," she whispered, picking up the blackened half-heart and caressing it. "Soon, we shall be reunited again. And once you reclaim the power that is rightfully yours, nobody will stand in our way. Neither Blue, nor the Savior, nor any other Champion of Light will be a match for our combined might. I might have cut you away from Blue's purpose, my son. But now, I shall bind you to my own. Mother and son together, as we should have been from the beginning!"

She set the half-heart on her dressing table and closed the casket with a smile.
Chapter Forty-Three

It wasn't until he registered the expressions of surprise and—in the captain's case—shock that Rumple realized he'd neglected to put on his vest, jacket, and tie before coming back downstairs. Only Aggie didn't seem to notice. Well. She didn't seem to notice much of anything, so intent was she on her artwork, pen pressing firmly down on a piece of cream-colored construction paper that rested on a hardback book on the living room carpet.

Rumple sighed, murmured something about the hazards of preparing food while wearing garments that would require dry-cleaning, and made his way to the kitchen. And if he paused on the threshold to listen for snide comments and laughter, he was gratified when none were forthcoming.

"Well," he greeted Cecily. "How fare the preparations?"

Cecily gestured to the Dutch oven on the stove top for answer. "We didn't have squash in Sherwood Forest," she said, "but I'm so glad Mama took a chance on it when we got here."

"I must confess I've never tried it in a stew," Rumple said, lifting the pot lid. A medley of orange winter squash, green zucchini and string beans, and yellow summer squash and corn punctuated with burgundy kidney beans greeted him. "But I do believe I'm looking forward to it. And I'm just as happy that you've found a use for those canned beans," he added. He much preferred to use dried, but even the quick-soak method would take too long under the circumstances.

"I wasn't sure what to do with the luncheon meat," Cecily admitted. "Actually," she added a trifle shamefacedly, "I wouldn't really know what to do with meat at all. Cooking it, I mean."

"You're vegetarian."

"Not… exactly," Cecily said. "It's more… well, meat was expensive in Sherwood. The only time we had any was when Robin Hood brought it. And when he did, Mama always fixed it herself. She keeps telling me that she'll teach me how," she added quickly, "but there never seems to be enough time. Anyway, the stew's going to be good."

"Yes," Rumple nodded. "Of that, I've no doubt. Well. If you're managing the main course, then I suppose that the dessert must fall to me." He opened the bread box and pulled out a bag that contained most of a day-old loaf. Taking a knife, he cut it briskly into cubes.

Cecily watched as he set down a canister of raisins on the counter. It wasn't until she saw him bring out the apples that her smile broke into a broad grin. "Aggie is going to love it!" she amended hastily.

Rumple took a paring knife from the wooden block by the stove. "Well, she did say that it was something reserved for special occasions," he said mildly. "And it is indeed a special evening when I find myself hosting an unexpected dinner party."

"It is all right we're here?" Cecily asked. "I mean, when Henry said we should come, I didn't think to question, but if we're interrupting something or if we're imposing…"

Rumple snorted at that. "Do you imagine that I'd turn any of you out of doors when there might be dragons about?" he demanded, as he deftly sliced a peeled apple in half and set about removing the core. "It's not as though I haven't food and room to spare. Now, the stew will be a course on its own, but perhaps a salad wouldn't go amiss."
"I'll take care of that," Cecily nodded, going to the fridge.

"You might hand me the milk while you're at it," Rumple suggested. "And I think you'll find those deli meats a welcome addition to your salad, particularly if you were to add a few of the boiled eggs you'll find on the second shelf from the top on the door."

Cecily nodded. "I wouldn't begin to know what kind of dressing to use, though," she confessed.

"Worry not," Rumple smiled. "When the time comes, I shall furnish instruction."

Emma checked her watch and tried to conceal her impatience. The temperature had been dropping rapidly since sunset and it had been nearly two hours since Maleficent had submerged. The lake wasn't all that big; if Lily was down there, shouldn't her mother have found her by now?

She was glad that Henry was safe, and perhaps more amused than she should be at the thought of Gold entertaining a bunch of kids. It wasn't funny, she reminded herself. It was probably exactly the kind of thing he needed more of.

He'd been isolated for a very long time. People had come to him when they needed his expertise, but ignored him otherwise. Emma and August had been working to change that, but Gold had his pride. And the last thing that either of them wanted to do was make spending time with him feel like some sort of 'good deed for the day'. For Henry to go running to his house when he needed to find someplace safe to stay, for Henry's *friends* to accompany him as though it was the most normal thing in the world (at least, in a world where dragons might be attacking the town at any given moment)…

Emma smiled to herself. Under all the bravado, no matter how much he tried to keep up appearances, she knew that Gold was still worried about the state of his magic, afraid that without his powers he'd be back on the sidelines, overlooked, ignored—at least assuming that nobody wanted to retaliate against him for some old wrong. To have Henry and his friends to be seeking him out now was to be sending him exactly the kind of message he most needed to hear.

…No matter how nervous her parents had sounded when she'd relayed those details to them. At least, Regina had taken it in stride.

She checked her watch again and wondered whether Maleficent had run into any trouble down there. And wished that there had been time to give her a phone so she could have checked in. And wondered whether there would have been some way that she could have used the phone under water. And in dragon form. Could those claws even manage a screen?

She couldn't wait for Maleficent to surface so she could ask her.

In the dark, the lake's surface rippled. And suddenly a large hulking form broke through with a roar. And then, another slightly-smaller shape followed. Emma smiled and started to wave to get their attention.

That was when the smaller dragon whirled and lashed her tail, wrapping it about the larger one's throat.

"I'm sorry about before," Belle said, coming into the kitchen.

Astrid looked up. "For what?" she asked.
Belle sank into one of the chairs at the table. "Not appreciating your making me that anijsmelk," she sighed.

"I did it wrong," Astrid protested. "If anything, I should be the one apologizing. In fact, I'm pretty sure I did. If I didn't, then I'm sorry for messing up the recipe and for not saying I was sorry before and... well, anything else I did, and don't say I didn't do anything else, because there's always something else," she said, without pausing for breath. "Anyway, I'm used to it. I'm just sorry it's impacting you, now."

"Astrid?" Belle said tightly. "Please, don't apologize anymore."

"Sor—" She caught herself. "Um..."

"What I mean," Belle continued, "is that I murdered someone today. I should be locked up somewhere instead of complaining that you made a drink too sweet."

Astrid mulled that over for a moment. Then, slowly, she said, "You were locked up, right? For about thirty years? When you hadn't done anything? Maybe it balances out."

"I don't think it works that way," Belle muttered.

"Okay..." Astrid replied. "Then try this. If you hadn't stopped Cruella, then she'd probably be the Dark One right now and between her and the dragon, most of us would probably be dead. You saved—"

"Don't," Belle snapped. "Don't try to make me out to be some kind of hero. What I did today was one of the least-heroic things I've ever done."

"Less heroic than letting your friend fall off a cliff? Less heroic than betraying your husband's trust? Less heroic than—"

Belle's shoulders slumped and she closed her eyes. "You're really not making me feel better, you know," she muttered.

"Well, do you want to feel better?" Astrid asked levelly. "Because from where I'm sitting, I've been hearing you go on about how you deserve to be punished—which sort of implies you want to stay miserable. So, while I'll admit I was trying to cheer you up," she rolled her eyes slightly and sighed, "and failing as I usually do," she added more softly, "well... now it sounds like you're complaining that it didn't work. So, which is it?"

Belle's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

And then, blessedly, the doorbell sounded. "Should I get that?" Astrid asked. "Maybe Leroy came back."

Belle nodded. Maybe it was Rumple. She half-hoped it would be, though she doubted it. She'd been clear about needing time away and he'd been clear about respecting her wishes. But maybe he'd come anyway and she wouldn't be sorry if he had.

Her heart sank when she heard her father's voice coming from the doorway, insisting that he had to see her. She was half out of her chair when he stormed into the kitchen.

"Belle!"

She took a breath and tried to sound firm. "Father, this... this really isn't the best time."
He placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her in close. "I've come to take you home, Belle. We'll get you through this together."

Belle went cold. "This?" she echoed. "What… this?"

"Why, what happened at the well earlier." Moe exclaimed. "I know you'd never have committed so terrible a deed if your husband hadn't turned you about until you could no longer tell what was right anymore. It's okay. We'll get you sorted out. I can make arrangements for you to see Dr. Hopper discreetly and you can stay at home until the talk dies down. It's going to be okay."

Belle carefully slid out of her father's embrace. "How do you know about what happened at the well?" she demanded.

"Maleficent!" Emma shouted. A ball of white light was in her hand, ready to throw, but she hesitated. She didn't know whether her magic would be strong enough to do anything against a dragon. She didn't know whether her magic would be stronger than she was expecting; she definitely didn't want to kill anyone. And if her aim was off, Maleficent might just be in as much danger. And what if attacking Lily just made Emma an immediate target? If her magic wasn't enough; if her gun wasn't enough (and though she still didn't want to kill anyone, she knew that she would fire in self-defense if it came down to it), then she would be in real trouble.

Maybe Maleficent could handle herself. After all, technically, she was already dead; what else could Lily do to her?

And then Lily cracked her tail as though it were a whip and released her mother. Maleficent landed on her back in the lake with enough force to send her careening into the shore to crash into some shrubbery, and Emma had her answer.

With a wordless shriek, Lily took off flying in the opposite direction.

"Maleficent!" Emma exclaimed again, bending over the fallen dragon.

For a moment, there was no response. Then the dragon blinked, shimmered, and transformed back into the woman she'd been earlier. "I'm all right," she said quickly. "She's enraged." She exhaled heavily. "I suppose that I can understand why. But she wasn't in any state to listen to reason. She's angry and afraid and…"


"So you were telling me." A wild hope sprang to Maleficent's eyes. "Perhaps, you might be able to reach her?"

"I'll try," Emma promised, hoping her nervousness wasn't obvious. "But you know she's probably pissed with me, too, right?"

"Perhaps, but from what you were telling me, it's not the first time. She's afraid. You're a familiar face. And you know each other."

"I'll try," Emma repeated dubiously. Then she realized the direction in which Lily had been flying. "But first, I gotta warn the others that she's heading back to town!"

"Warn them in the air," Maleficent said, struggling to rise. "You'll get there faster on my back."

Emma took a step backwards as Maleficent started to change. "Uh… if I fall off, you can catch me,
"How did you find out?" Belle demanded again, when her father didn't answer.

"Just pack what you need for tonight," Maurice ignored her question. "We can worry about the rest later."

Belle fought not to burst into tears. If she started bawling now, she'd just reinforce her father's view that she was a child in need of coddling. And maybe she did need a bit of coddling right now, but not like this. "I'm not going anywhere tonight," she said steadily. "This is where I want to be. I'm sorry, father. But if you came here to try to cheer me up, I'm not ready for that. Please go."

Maurice blinked in surprise. "You can't mean that. And you can't expect me to just sit back and watch you founder. Belle, I love you. I want to help."

Belle took another breath. "Then let me work through this for myself. I don't need you to try to make everything right again. Had I wanted your help, I would have turned up at your door or called you to pick me up instead of Astrid. I just want to rest now."

"And you can do that at home. With me."

There was a pounding in her head and the room seemed to swim before her eyes. Her face was hot, her throat was raw, and she didn't know she was bellowing until the words were past her lips. "My home is not with you! It is with my husband and when I'm ready to leave here, then that will be where I return! Now, get out! GET OU—!"

A deafening crack interrupted her tirade. Astrid, who had been standing in the background, apparently transfixed by the scene unfolding before her, darted for the door and poked her head out. She returned, wide-eyed.

"There are two dragons fighting outside," she said, her voice oddly calm in contrast to the terror manifest in her suddenly pale face. "I think one of them hit the clock tower. At least, there's glass in the street. A lot of it."

Belle gaped at her for a moment. Then she collected herself. "Into the library," she ordered. "We should be safer toward the center." She hoped. A tremor shook the building and she hastened to the door that connected the apartment to the library proper and flung it open. "Quickly!"

There was a small army converging on the library, and the dragon who had just shattered the face of the clock and cracked one of the tower corners. They ceased their advance when Maleficent landed in front of them, but hands flew to weapons as they watched warily.

"Hold your fire!" Emma shouted from Maleficent's back. "She's scared a-and confused, but I think we can still get through to her!"

"The question," Regina called, stepping forward, "is how much of the town will be left when you do!"

There was a shimmer and Maleficent slowly began to transform back. Emma slid off her back quickly. "Seriously?" she sputtered, "You gotta warn me; I'm a little old for piggyback rides!"

Maleficent shot her a look that might have been apologetic before turning to face the crowd. "I
almost got through to her before," she said. "If we can calm her down, I can show her how to return to her human form. And teach her how to control herself so this situation won't repeat itself." She rested her gaze on the crowd, trying to make eye contact with as many people as she could. "Those weapons are only going to make things worse. Not because they're likely to hurt her, but because she'll think they will. And she'll react accordingly."

"She knows me," Emma spoke up. "No matter what she might think of me right now, she's got to be trying to make sense of what's going on and I'm about the only person here who's remotely familiar. Maybe it'll count for something."

Regina hesitated. Then she glanced over her shoulder at the two people standing a half-pace behind her.

Snow nodded slowly. "Most of this is our fault," she said, pretending not to hear the surprised murmurs behind her. "I have enough on my conscience already. If we can resolve this without hurting anyone else, we have to try."

"All right," David said. "But if she hurts anyone, all bets are off."

Maleficent nodded. "I understand. But I hope that you understand that I'm not about to stand by and watch you harm my daughter."

"Maleficent," Emma broke in, "your sleeping curses. Can you make one that can be broken without True Love's Kiss?" She winced. "I-I mean, right now, you love her, but I think it has to be mutual a-and..."

"And she doesn't love me," Maleficent finished. "You're right. On both counts. If we can't break through to her, then we have to, at the very least, get her to land. At that point, I can cast the curse and we can determine how to proceed from there."

"Maybe that delaying potion we worked into the spell to revive you," David suggested.

"Possibly," Maleficent said, giving the prince a slow nod. "That might work. But one can hope it won't come to that. The sleeping curse is not without certain side effects and there's no time now to explore neutralizing them. It's a last resort if we can't get her to listen, not a preferred course of action."

"We understand," Snow replied, just as a loud shriek split the night sky. Automatically, all eyes flew to the clock tower and the dragon who circled it. "You'd better hurry."

"Good luck," Regina added.

Maleficent pursed her lips together and nodded once more. "Come along, savior," she ordered. Then she changed back to her dragon form, caught Emma up in her tail as though the savior were no more than a rag doll, and deposited her on her back.

Emma shot her parents one frantic look as Maleficent took to the air once more.

By the time supper was ready, Aggie was whining and complaining that Skippy was looking at her. Whether her brother had been or not, he certainly was now—scuttling closer to her, eyes owlishly wide as he inched his neck forward until she lunged for him and he darted away with a, "What? I was looking at the wall!"

Killian was trying to play peacemaker. Henry was occupying himself with some hand-held video
game, but as the children's squabbling increased in pitch and volume, he was casting looks in their direction that suggested that he could cheerfully throttle both of them. And Roland…

Roland had come downstairs and was sitting quietly in an armchair in the corner, weaving a narrow leather strap through a series of holes that had been bored through a larger piece of hide. Rumple smiled. It appeared that the boy was attempting to craft a coin purse, and not too badly at that.

Rumple cleared his throat. "Supper will be served within the next five minutes," he announced. "Those who are not washed and seated at the table by then will not be served. And those who are not served the meal will not be served dessert either."

Skippy gave him a suspicious look. "What's for dessert?" he demanded.

Rumple gave him an enigmatic smile. "Well. Given that I seldom have company, let's just say that this is a special occasion, deserving a rather…" he turned his head slightly toward Aggie, "…special offering."

"Pudding?" Aggie squealed.

"If you are washed and seated at the table within the next," he made a show of checking his watch, "four minutes. And provided that there is no further bickering."

"Where do I wash?" Aggie asked, getting up at once.

Rumple told her.

Three minutes later, Cecily was ladling out stew.

"Not so much," Aggie said. "Wanna have more room for pudding!"

Cecily laughed. "Aggie, supper's more important than dessert."

"Not to me!"

"Or me!" Skippy chimed in.

Roland said nothing, but Rumple noticed a faint nod. The boy was clearly a good deal more relaxed than he had been, for all that he seemed to be trying to avoid attracting attention.

Rumple smiled. "Well," he said, "I doubt any of your parents would approve if I brought the dessert out before the meal. But then," his smile broadened, "I do have a reputation for being something of a poor influence…"

Cecily tried to look disapproving, but the fragrance of apples and cinnamon wafting in from the kitchen was difficult to resist. "Maybe we could have both at once?" she suggested. "I mean, I've had savory bread pudding as a side dish; sweet should work too."

"Well, I'd say that's a reasonable compromise," Rumple approved, pushing back his chair to go to the kitchen.

Killian nodded his thanks as Cecily ladled stew onto his plate. Just then, a mighty crash sounded from outside. Almost as one, the children ran to the window.

"Whoa…!" Skippy breathed. "There is a dragon! And it just wrecked the clock tower!"

"What?" Rumple joined them with surprising speed. As he took in the scene outside his face paled.
"Belle!" he whispered in horror. "She—she went back to her old apartment."

"Why?" Henry asked.

Before Rumple could answer, Killian broke in. "By 'old apartment', I'd presume you're speaking of the one beneath that clock tower?"

The dragon shrieked once more, but this time the noise was partly overshadowed by the sounds of more splintering glass and groaning timbers, as the upper part of the tower seemed to wobble and sway.

"Come on, mate," Killian said, nudging Rumple's arm. "I'll take you."

"Don't be a fool," Rumple snapped, taking a step away. "I'm not about to ride pillion on a horse when there's a car in the garage. I'll drive you." He looked at his young guests.

"Cecily," he said, "can you manage things in our absence?"

The girl's eyes widened slightly, but she nodded almost at once. "Yes, of course."

"All right. If anyone wishes to sleep, they can either do so in the living room or in any of the upstairs bedrooms save my own. Try to leave over enough food for two or three people." He doubted that the captain would be returning here afterwards, and he wasn't certain that Belle would either, but better safe than sorry.

"Henry," he added, "come with us."

"Really?" Henry brightened at once.

Rumple sighed. "Not outside," he clarified, smiling a bit as the disapproval on Killian's face yielded to relief. "I want you to accompany us to, or more to the point, toward the garage. There's a passageway," he explained, "which connects it to the house. If the dragon should come here, I want you and Cecily to take the others there. And there is where you shall remain until it's safe for you to emerge. I need to show you where it is. And," he took another breath, "as the passageway is located in the basement, and as you'll need to pass through my… workspace," his eyes were deadly serious, though his voice never altered in tone, "I am trusting you to restrain such childish curiosity as might lead to any of my experiments or ingredients being disturbed."

Henry nodded. "Got it."

"Very well. Come along, then."

_____________________________________________________

Things were getting out of hand, Emma realized. Or rather, they already were. Her gut told her that Lily wasn't actively trying to hurt anyone. Well, her gut and the fact that the crowd they'd left behind presented an appealing target if she was wrong. But whatever the dragon's intent, her flight was clumsy and she didn't seem able to keep her tail clear of the highest rooftops. Better make that 'rooftop', she thought with a wince. The clock tower was the tallest structure around. She was glad that the upper levels were generally unused—unless someone was trying to work some serious magic or something anyway. And with Belle back with Gold, there shouldn't be anybody in the building at this hour.

Except maybe Astrid…

She hoped not. Deal with Lily, first. Once she's no longer a threat, you can look for Astrid; if she is
in there, then you'll help her more by dealing with the creature… the monst—the one shaking things up. All true, but she really hoped that Astrid was out with Leroy or back at the convent or anywhere but here.

She had to get through to Lily. Maleficent had tried, but Maleficent didn't know her daughter. Emma did. Maybe not well—they hadn't seen each other for around fifteen years, give or take. But better than Maleficent.

As long as I'm on Maleficent's back, she's probably not going to notice me. She's going to see her mother as the main threat. A thought struck her. She could… Could she? Seriously? I did it once, she reminded herself. Just because I never tried it again after Regina unraveled that bridge out from under me doesn't mean I can't. Lily screeched and Emma steeled herself. She could do this.

She leaped off from Maleficent, trusting her magic to keep her afloat as it had that day on the bridge. As Regina's magic had kept her in the air during the battle with Zelena. It could be done and she'd done it before…

…And she was doing it now.

"Hey!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Lily! Hey, it's me! Emma!"

A jet of fire streaked toward her, and she didn't think; she just reacted, casting a shield that deflected the flames, though it didn't completely block out the heat.

"I'm not going to fight you," she called. "I just… want to talk!"

Lily roared and Emma braced herself for another blast. It came, but this time, when it hit her shield, it was with considerably less force. Was Lily tiring? Or just not ready to stand down? Emma decided it didn't matter.

"Look," she said, "We know it wasn't you, before. Cruella was controlling you. It's okay." Lily shrieked and Emma winced. "Sorry, you're just… louder than I expected. But I guess I can understand why you want to yell. Hey, why don't we take this away from the town? The beach isn't far."

She watched the dragon anxiously. Lily seemed to be listening, or at least, deciding what to do next. Emma thought of something else. "The baby's okay, by the way. Zelena woke her up." Was it just her imagination, or had something just… softened in Lily's eyes? What the hell was she supposed to say next? Lily might be angry, but she also had to be confused and frightened and trying to make sense of everything going on. Mentioning any of that was probably going to get Emma fried, though.

"Lily." Emma turned her head slightly in response to the voice coming to her left. Maleficent had changed back to her human form.

"Lily," Maleficent repeated. "I-I'm your mother. I've been… praying for this day for a long time. Won't you let me help you?"

Lily regarded Maleficent for a moment. Then she reared up and discharged another breath of fire.

"Maleficent!" Emma screamed, but her companion was ready. A shimmer of lilac smoke emanated from Maleficent's staff, dissipating the flames and reaching past them to envelope Lily. The young dragon struggled, but her movements were now slow and sluggish. Her wings beat erratically and she tried to flee, but she was losing altitude. Her tail caught what was left of the clock tower, sending it crashing through the library roof, as she dropped inexorably lower, finally coming to rest
Emma touched down before the slumbering dragon, and then glanced up at Maleficent. "The sleeping curse?" she asked.

Maleficent landed beside her and nodded sadly. "I started thinking about the delaying spell we were discussing before and realized that I could work it into the curse as well as the revival. If I hadn't, she would have plummeted from her original altitude when the curse took effect." She raised an eyebrow and continued with a faintly amused smile, "You should have told me you could levitate."

"I forgot?" Emma murmured. "So… what now?"

Before Maleficent could answer, there was a horrifying groan and then a crash, as the library seemed to fall in on itself.

And then, Emma heard a car squeal to a stop behind her. She turned to see a familiar Cadillac. The front doors opened and Killian emerged from the passenger side a moment before Gold staggered out from the driver's.

"Rumple?" Maleficent greeted him, taking in his sick expression at a glance.

"Gold?" Emma said at nearly the same time.

Rumpelstiltskin waved a trembling hand at the remains of the clock tower. "Belle's in there," he croaked in a voice thick with horror.

Emma's heart lurched. "Oh my G-d."

Moments earlier

Why, Belle wondered, as she herded Astrid and her father into the main circulation area, had the Dark Curse not seen fit to include a staircase to the lower levels in this building? If an elevator wasn't safe in a fire, it certainly wasn't ideal when there was a fire-breathing dragon outside.

"M-maybe we'll be safe in here," she said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. "It's a solid enough structure and the upper levels have taken damage before without harming this part of it."

Her companions nodded. "You," Moe said abruptly, looking at Astrid. "You're a fairy, aren't you? Can't you do anything?"

Astrid shook her head. "I surrendered my wand when I left the convent. And even if I had it, I'd need fairy dust. And even if I had that, well," she sighed, "I was never really good at magical combat." She winced. Fauna had once informed her caustically that she'd be better off aiming for her fellow fairies. At best, she might actually be able to hit an enemy. At worst, since the safest place to be appeared to be wherever she was aiming, at least there would be fewer 'friendly fire' incidents. But Belle's father didn't need to know that.

Moe snorted. "Well, isn't that just perfect, then?"

Please, Belle pleaded silently, please don't do this now. I can't deal with it. Aloud, she said, "Just stay calm. We're going to be okay. We just need to sit tight and…"
A sickening crunching sound came from above. The entire building shook. And something heavy hit the street outside. Belle's eyes widened. Suddenly, she was back in her father's castle, hiding under a table while ogres stomped through the library and it was too late to run, too late to find a weapon, too late to do anything but cower and wait and…

No. No, that wasn't going to happen again. There was another crash. The building seemed to sway violently. And then something seemed to slam into the ceiling directly above them. To Belle's horror, cracks appeared in the ceiling and a huge chunk of plaster narrowly missed her arm when it hurtled to the floor. She cast one disbelieving look upwards before she bellowed, "The elevator! NOW!"

She was the last one inside; her heels weren't meant for running; not on this smooth floor, but her stocking feet might have slid just as easily. She pulled the door shut and stabbed her finger on the 'down' button. At least now, she knew what it was for; the first time she'd sought safety in this apparatus, she'd panicked and called Rumple when she hadn't seen a rope or lever to start the elevator car moving. She sighed with relief as the car started to descend; never mind that it creaked a little.

The car lurched violently from side to side and the passengers flung themselves to the floor. There was a horrible shearing sound. And then a deafening crash as if the world was collapsing about them. Belle looked at her companions and saw the rising fear she was feeling mirrored in their own expressions.

Then the lights went out, plunging them into darkness, as outside, the dragon roared in triumph.
Emma looked wildly from Maleficent to Regina. "Can you help shift the wreckage?" she demanded.

Maleficent nodded. "If Rumple and I do the heavy lifting, and you and Regina make sure that no stray beams go crashing where they oughtn't."

Rumple exhaled heavily. "You'd better have Regina do your lifting," he said. "She's presently a bit more up to the task."

"Why?" Maleficent asked with more than a little surprise. "I'd think that you'd—"

"I'm no longer the Dark One!" Rumple snapped. "Such magic as I possess is a bit unpredictable these days."

Maleficent's eyes widened. Then she glanced at Regina. "Well?"

Regina considered. "Emma has the power, but not the practice. The two of us had better take on the brunt. Emma," she said briskly. "As we lift up the wreckage, I want you to put a shield under it, wide enough to catch any pieces that might fall; we're going to be using magic as a sort of scoop and smaller objects may well slip through. Rumple," she said, "if you happened to bring that spindle, a net might be a good idea."

Rumple blinked. Then a slow smile spread his lips. "I didn't bring a spindle, but after last night, it seems that I can achieve similar results with a cane. Provided I've the appropriate materials on hand."

Regina shrugged. "Done," she said, pointing at the ground beside him. A field bale of straw, four feet long, a foot and a half wide, and nearly as high appeared instantaneously. "Let me just untie that for you," she added, raising her hand once more.

"I'll need the twine," Rumple said quickly, before she could cast another spell.

Regina raised an eyebrow. "I'm glad you told me." She frowned for a moment. Then she made a slight gesture and the twine unknotted, rolled itself into a ball, and came to rest at Rumple's feet. He stooped to pick it up.

"We'll get her out," Regina assured him. "That tower didn't fall without warning; she would have had time to find a protected space."

Rumple nodded. He knew that she was only speculating, of course, but he still appreciated her efforts. He took a breath and fastened one end of the twine about his cane. "Let's get to work."

"Is everyone all right?" Belle asked. Her voice echoed slightly in the confines of the dark elevator car.

"I think so," Astrid replied a moment later.
"I'm fine," her father grunted. From the angle of his voice, Belle guessed that he was sitting on the floor. She wished she had a flashlight.

"Can we get the doors open?" she asked. When nobody answered, she held out her hands before her and took a tentative step in the direction where she knew that the doors must be. The car seemed to wobble and there was a grating creak. Belle stepped backwards with a startled yelp.

"I think we're wedged between floors," Astrid spoke up hesitantly. "But I don't know how tightly."

"Do we know if the cables are still holding?" Belle asked. If they were, then dislodging the car wouldn't be serious; they'd simply continue their descent to the basement. But if they'd been severed, or if they were no longer anchored above, then once freed, the car would plummet uncontrolled.

Nobody answered her and Belle realized a moment later how silly it had been to ask the question. "All right," she said slowly. "All right. There's a vent in the ceiling. With any luck, there's nothing blocking it, so we shouldn't need to worry about running out of air. We just need to sit tight and wait for the others to find us."

"Will they know to come looking?" Moe asked. "I'd thought that you were at Gold's house at first; I only came looking for you here when I learned you weren't."

_My house_, Belle corrected mentally, stifling her urge to shout the correction.

"Leroy knows where I am," Astrid said. "But he went home after he came over here and I know he was tired after the park fire. He might be sleeping through this."

"And you didn't tell anyone you were coming here, Father," Belle guessed.

Her father sounded surprised. "Who would I tell? Though I suppose your… husband might be smart enough to guess it."

Belle smiled broadly in the darkness. "Rumple knows where I am," she said, hope filling her voice. "He'll find us."

Moe snorted. "If the sight of two dragons flying overhead didn't send him hiding under his bedclothes."

Had it been safe to move about in the car, and had Belle been able to pinpoint precisely where Moe French was situated, father or not, Belle really thought she might have slapped him.

"Interesting company you're keeping these days," Maleficent remarked, as she helped Regina shift some of the debris clear of the gaping hole in the roof. Human speech was something she wasn't capable of in her dragon form, but early in their acquaintanceship, Regina had cast a spell that would allow the two of them to communicate regardless. It had never worn off.

Regina was silent for a moment as she debated with herself. Then she shrugged. "Times change."

"So it would seem." Then, sharply, "Is that Light magic you're using?"

"Times change." Regina repeated. She took another breath. "This isn't really the time or the place to go into greater detail, but I'll be happy to bring you up to date sometime in the next day or so."

"Very well. I suppose I would like to know why it's so important that we help Rumple's maid out
of this predicament, but I'll wait for a re…” Maleficent's voice trailed off as her reptilian eyes widened in shock. A large beam had fallen off of the pile that she and Regina were moving and fallen toward the ground, only to be caught in a net of Rumple's weaving—one which appeared to be made of golden thread.

Regina smiled. "Yes, he's also using Light magic these days, though it's a much more recent development."

"But he was the Dark One!"

"Yes," Regina smiled. "He was. Focus. I can't hold this up by myself, and Emma's too new at this to do much more than what she's told." As though on cue, she saw Rumple turn his head slightly toward the savior. Emma nodded at whatever he'd told her and, with a wave of her hand, the beam slid gently out of the net to rest on the ground out of the way of the crowd below.

Maleficent looked as though she wanted to ask something else, but she stopped herself, blew an irritated puff of smoke, and went back to clearing the ruins of the clock tower.

Regina nodded to herself, already starting to plan everything she was going to have to relate when things quieted down and Maleficent came to demand further explanations.

As Rumple spun his straw, he was still wrapping his head around the conversation that had just taken place. In one sense, little had changed: the town was in trouble and the Heroes needed his help. Business as usual, really. But in another…

Well. There really had been no point in trying to bluff his way through the exchange with Maleficent. The others all knew that his magic wasn't now what it had been and, even if they'd picked up on his need to conceal that truth from an old foe, their expressions would surely have given him away. Better by far to admit it and get it over with.

He'd been raging inwardly, knowing that he couldn't help the woman he loved. That the Heroes would do that, he had no doubt. They didn't need him along for the ride and with his magic currently unpredictable, he was sure to be more a hindrance than a help. All true. But he'd still wanted to do… something.

And then Regina had not only suggested a way in which he could contribute to the rescue efforts, she'd phrased it in such a manner that, had she overestimated his abilities, he could have bowed out without further embarrassment. He hadn't brought his spindle, though he could see that he'd need to consider keeping it with him in future. If he'd truly not felt up for this, he could have taken the escape she'd offered and left with his dignity more or less intact. Somewhat bruised, it was true, but not crushed.

His eyebrows lifted and he smiled. The cord he'd already spun had seemed to intuit his will; once removed from his cane, it had begun shaping itself into a net far faster than he could have worked it with his fingers. Then his eyes widened. The net was hovering over the messy pile of unspun straw that had been compressed into the bale a short time ago. And as he watched, his fingers automatically feeding new pieces of straw into the cop currently collecting around his cane, the net began drawing loose straw into it, the pieces twisting and weaving themselves into the mesh.

Was he doing this? If he wasn't, then who was? And if he was doing this, then what purpose did it serve?

Realization seemed to explode upon him then. Gold in its pure state was too soft and malleable; the
beams and siding would probably tear right through a net of its construction. But with a bit of straw mixed into the weave…

…If magic hadn't been involved, it probably still wouldn't be strong enough. But as he watched a large beam plummet from the stack that Regina and Maleficent were shifting above fall into the net, quiver slightly, and remain aloft, his smile broadened.

He didn't need Darkness to be useful. The Darkness had nothing to do with this. This? This was all… him.

He reached for another piece of straw. The faster the net was woven, the quicker they could shift the debris and reach Belle. Right now, he had to keep his focus on that.

"Careful, love." Killian caught the edge of the beam that Emma was moving before it scraped the car parked on the sidewalk in front of the library.

Emma tried to hide her irritation. She still wasn't used to using magic for tasks that she could accomplish by more conventional means and she was doing a bit of both now, shifting the wreckage with her hands, while using magic to boost her physical strength. It took a lot of concentration and she'd been so focused on lifting the boards and timbers that she hadn't spared much thought for what might be in their path. Killian had been right to step in, even if her first instinct was to lie and snarl that she knew what she was doing. "Thanks," she managed.

"Perhaps I could assist? I'm not accustomed to standing on the sidelines."

And he'd been making a good start of it. Emma nodded slowly. "I can handle the lifting," she said. "But I guess I could use a little more direction. As soon as we get word from on high," he eyes automatically lifted toward Regina and Maleficent, "that enough's been cleared that it's safe to go inside, we're going for it."

Killian nodded. "Understood. Shift that load to starboard ten degrees."

"Uh, that's left?"

"No," Killian said carefully, recognizing the danger in being misunderstood if he gave her a one-word correction. "That'd be the opposite, love."

"Oh, right," Emma muttered, turning it in the proper direction.

"Aye," Killian smiled, "that's it. We'll make a sailor of you yet, love. Now lower it gently."

It really didn't take long before they'd cleared away enough of the wreckage to make their way into the library, though it seemed to take forever. There were no lights on when they finally stepped inside, but a spell from Maleficent took care of that. The five surveyed the main circulation floor with dismay. Falling ceiling beams and plaster had knocked over several of the shelves, which had fallen into other shelves, knocking them over in turn as though they were dominoes. Plaster dust coated everything and filled the air, making it harder to breathe. There were no signs of life.

"Are you sure she's here?" Regina asked.

Rumple looked worried. "Perhaps the apartment at the back?"

The others looked in the direction he was pointing with dismay. A combination of shelves, tumbled
books, and broken beams blocked the most direct route and it was hard to see a place where all of that might safely be shifted. And if, after their efforts, the apartment proved empty—

"No," Maleficent spoke up sharply. "Not there. There!" She pointed toward a door set at the opposite end of the floor.

"You're certain, milady?" Killian asked, his tone far more reverent than usual. Emma imagined that he was just the slightest bit nervous about ticking off someone with the ability to roast him alive if she took offense to being addressed as 'lass' or 'love'.

"Well, I don't know if it's her," Maleficent huffed. "But someone's in there. Make that three someones. And at least one of them is bleeding; I can smell it." She shook her head with irritation when Killian took an involuntary step back. "I'm a dragon, not a vampire!" she snapped. "The scent of blood doesn't turn me into some slavering animal." Her eyes narrowed. "But that's not human blood I'm smelling; it's fairy."

Emma sighed. "I guess that answers the question I had about whether Astrid was here."

"Perhaps it's for the best," Rumple said heavily. "I don't know that I liked thinking of Belle here alone, particularly in light of what's just transpired."

"Any idea who the third person might be?" Regina asked. To her surprise, Rumple and Killian exchanged a resigned glance.

Rumple sighed. "If I must venture a guess, Moe French paid a call on me earlier this evening, seeking his daughter. Once he learned that she wasn't at the house, well, this is the next most logical place he'd check."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough if that guess is right," Emma said, taking a few steps toward the elevator. "And at least this end of the floor didn't get hit as hard as that part back there. It shouldn't take too much work to shift those shelves, if we can just get them upright."

"Leave that to me," Regina smiled, as a cloud of white light swirled about her fingertips.

"And once you've done that, Your Majesty," Killian remarked, "I'll see about prying those doors open."

"Yeah, if the lights aren't working, the control panel won't be either," Emma agreed. "Okay, while you're doing that, the rest of us should probably keep our eyes open and see if there's a first aid kit anywhere we can safely get to." She'd been using her magic far more than usual today. If it failed her now, she wanted to know that they could still patch up any injuries, at least until a proper EMT or doctor could look them over.

The crowd was keeping its distance, but David, Snow, and Robin Hood could feel the tension in the air. The three formed a protective half-circle about the sleeping-cursed dragon and tried not to worry about the others inside the library.

Leroy stomped forward, a pickaxe gripped in both hands. "Has anyone seen Astrid?" he demanded. "Did she get out before all this happened?"

The heroes exchanged quick looks. Finally, Snow admitted, "We don't know. The others are in there now, looking for anyone who might be trapped."

"You mean, 'checking for survivors'," Leroy growled. "And meanwhile, the thing responsible for it
is sleeping out here and you're protecting it?"

He took another step forward and suddenly found himself staring down an arrow that Robin had strung in what had to be record time. "That's far enough, friend," Robin said quietly. "The dragon's not currently a threat to anyone."

"Which is why now's the perfect time to make sure it never poses one again!"

There was a rumble of agreement from the crowd, as a wind started up. Many of the townspeople were holding lit torches and Snow rubbed at her eyes as their smoke reached her.

"No!" David's voice rang with authority. "Stand down. We don't know that we're dealing with a hostile, yet."

"The scorched earth by the wishing well? The park fire? Now this?" Leroy demanded. "Seems pretty hostile to me!"

The rumbling swelled to a roar.

"STOP!" Snow's bellow was heard even by those at the back of the assembly. "First of all, we're dealing with someone who had no idea what she could do until today. Second, Cruella de Vil was controlling her when she burned those trees." Ursula had explained that much, at least, before leaving with her father and Ariel. "Third, that is Maleficent's daughter and Maleficent is with Emma and Regina inside the library, looking for injured people. How do you think she's going to react when she comes out if you hurt her child?"

More rumbling, but this time it sounded a good deal more subdued. Snow pressed her point. "What we have is a woman who discovered a power she didn't know how to control and panicked. Maleficent will teach her. Give her a chance." She took another breath. "Give them both a chance."

The crowd was wavering. Snow could sense it. Then Leroy locked his eyes with hers. "All right, sister," he growled. "I'll stand down. For now. But if she hurt Astrid, then all bets are off." He turned his back on them with calculated deliberation and stalked back to where his brothers stood watching in the crowd.

Snow sighed with relief.

"Well," Robin smiled, "I'd say the crisis has been averted, milady."

"For now," Snow nodded. "But let's just hope that everyone's okay in there."

"They are," David assured her, hoping his own worry didn't show.

"You didn't tell anyone that you were coming back here, did you?" Moe asked in the darkness of the elevator car.

Belle sighed. "No. I didn't want company. Well, besides you, Astrid," she added, turning her head in the direction that she thought the fairy was sitting. "And Rumple, of course."

Moe snorted. "So nobody, then."

"Father."

"Well, one of the two people you told is down here with us and the other one was playing some fool game with his new best friend and right now? He's probably up in his attic planning some new
scheme or other and figuring out how to pull the wool over your eyes this time. Not that it's been any great trick."

Belle stifled the angry rejoinder that surfaced immediately in her mind. When Rumple's frightened, he tries to hide it by getting angry and sometimes, I don't think he even realizes it. Maybe this is a bit of the same thing. Or maybe it's that when Father's frightened, he just says what he usually keeps bottled up around me. "We don't have an attic, Father," Belle said evenly.

"Leroy knows where I am," Astrid spoke up suddenly. "And he knows Belle's with me."

"So he'll come looking," Belle felt her lips pull into a smile. "Or he'll tell the others."

"If he's not wasting time running down Main Street bellowing about terrible news," Moe scoffed. "Or eaten by that dragon."

There was a choking noise from Astrid's direction and Belle sucked in her breath. "I don't believe you just said that!" she snapped. "Why are you—?"

"Why?" Moe repeated. "Why? Because I came here to bring you home and instead, I'm trapped in an elevator and you're both hoping for rescue when there's no reason to think that anybody's coming! We are going to die here, my girl, whether of hunger, thirst, or lack of oxygen. We are going to die."

Belle leaned back against the car wall. "You didn't tell anyone that you were coming here either, did you Father?" she asked with a sudden flash of insight.

There was a long pause. "No."

Belle nodded to herself, glad that nobody could see the smile on her face. Just like Rumple, indeed. He really is just lashing out because he's frightened. Except that Rumple usually tries to spare me this part of him, for all I've seen him unleash it on others when he thinks I'm not close by. She took a breath. "Well, we aren't dead, yet," she reminded him. "And even if nobody knows you're with us," she continued briskly, "Astrid's right. Leroy knows we're here. Rumple knows where I am and I can't imagine that the dragon attack passed his notice. They'll find us."

"He didn't find you for twenty-eight years," Moe muttered. "We won't last that long."

Belle sucked in her breath again as she felt her temper straining to break free. Filial respect be damned, she was going to say something unpardonable in a moment.

"Quiet!" Astrid's voice—or perhaps, it was the unaccustomed note of command in it—sliced through the tension like a dwarf pickaxe. "Listen!"

There was good deal of scraping and banging going on above them. Despite herself, Belle shuddered, even as she tried to tell herself that this wasn't the castle library, that she wasn't cowering under some table while ogres stomped about them overturning shelves and furniture. She was trapped in a confined space while loud noises sounded about her and she couldn't see what was going on.

Father was right. They were going to die. They were...

Something landed on the car roof and she gasped. Then there was a creaking sound and Belle shielded her eyes with a slight cry. It wasn't all that much light, but after pitch-blackness, it still hurt her eyes. And then, even through her closed lids, she realized that a far stronger light was passing over her and she lowered her face to her bent arm. "Please," she whispered, "it's... it's
"Sorry, Belle," a familiar voice said. The light was withdrawn. "Sit tight," Emma added. "We're going to get you out of here. Are you guys okay?"

"We're fine," Astrid spoke up. "Can you pull us up?"

"Not sure about that," Emma admitted. "The elevator cable's not anchored to anything now the tower's collapsed. You're wedged in the shaft. Hold on; I'm going to climb back up. We figured out where to find you; we'll figure out how to get you out of there. Just… uh… hang in there."

In the end, Regina teleported one of the nets that Rumple had woven earlier inside the library. It took him considerable less effort to unravel the knots, leaving him with several yards of golden twine.

"It's pretty thin," Emma said, examining it critically. "Will it—?" She stopped herself. "Sorry."

Rumple shook his head. "No, it was a fair question, dearie. An individual cord isn't nearly as durable on its own as it is when woven into something greater. But yes, it will be strong enough. He looked about. "It really would have been better were there a central pillar to which we might tie this, but," he sighed, "in the absence of one, I suppose one of those fallen bookcases will do. We've enough hands here to ensure that it won't be dragged into the shaft."

Killian nodded, picked up one end of the twine and passed it through one of the now-empty double-faced shelves, looping it several times about the support and tying it off with an intricate knot. He gave it an experimental tug. "This should hold," he called.

Emma nodded, took the other end, and approached the shaft. "Okay, you guys. I'm sending down a rope. We'll pull you up one at a time. Whoever's first, tie the free end about your waist."

In the dim light filtering from above, Belle realized something. "Hang on," she called up. "I think I might have better idea. The wall behind me… it's a metal lattice. If I tie the cord to that, I think we can all climb out. And if the cord is strong enough, it might be able to keep the car aloft."

Emma glanced behind her at Rumple. He frowned. "It may be strong enough," he said. "I-I've never tried anything like it before, though. I can't say for certain. And if the cord is anchored at the bottom, we won't be able to pull them out; they'll need to climb out on their own." He waited while Emma relayed that bit of information to those trapped below.

"Is the cord long enough to double?" Maleficent suggested. "That would increase its strength."

Rumple gave her a startled nod and the faintest of smiles, as Belle called up that they'd manage the climb if that was what was necessary.

"Okay," Emma breathed. Then she called down the shaft, "I'm sending down the cord. Once you've hooked it up to the lattice, send it back up. Um… I mean, get the end under the hatch opening where I can see it. I'll lift it myself."

"Got it."

Emma lowered the cord carefully, using her magic to guide it down the shaft. The golden twine gleamed bright in the darkness though it radiated no light, reminding Emma of the glow-in-dark toys that she'd occasionally played with at some of her foster placements.
She was jerked out of her reverie when she heard a grinding sound and saw the car shift. There were cries of alarm from inside. "Are you guys okay?" she called, when the noise stopped.

For a moment, there was silence. Then Belle called up once more, "Y-yes. But when we move, so does the car. Will the rope be enough?"

Emma looked at Regina.

"I can keep the car stable," she said. "But that means you'll need to climb all the way out yourselves. I was hoping I'd be able to levitate you, once I could see you. But I can't do that and hold up the car."

"You'll only have to climb about fifteen feet," Emma said. "Maybe twenty; you're not that far down. I think it's doable."

"And if the cord breaks?" Moe's voice echoed upwards.

"You'll have to hope it doesn't," Regina retorted, feeling her patience beginning to fray.

"I'm good at that," Astrid's voice called up dryly.

"Just get out the hatch," Regina called back. "Climb up. Once we can reach you, we can help you up the rest of the way."

"I'll… try to help Regina keep the car stable," Emma called down. "But I've been using my magic a lot tonight. I don't know how much more juice I've got in me."

"Sorry," Maleficent said, her tone unreadable. "When there's any hands-on lifting to be done, I generally take my other shape. This space is too narrow for that. I suppose that if the captain is going to keep an eye on the twine, I can make sure that the roof is in no danger of falling in any more than it has."

"Sounds like a plan," Emma nodded. She glanced in Rumple's direction. "If that happens now, if it's important… don't be shy, okay?"

Rumple snorted at that and Emma grinned. "Thanks for the rope; I don't know what we'd be using without it."

Rumple shook his head. "Belle's down there. That rope is our best means of getting her out. No thanks are necessary." He turned away then, but Emma distinctly heard him add in an undertone, "But they are appreciated."

Astrid went first, climbing as nimbly as though she still had wings to carry her should she slip. "It's not so bad," she called over her shoulder. "Wait." She kicked off her shoes.

"Careful doing that!" Moe snapped. "You don't want to go throwing more weight around in here. Who knows how long those two will be able to keep holding us up?"

For someone who doesn't want anyone throwing their weight around, Father, you're hardly leading by example, Belle thought waspishly. Then she had to suppress a giggle. Just nervous tension, she told herself. Then she frowned and eased her feet out of her own shoes. If Astrid was having a harder time climbing in flats, Belle wasn't about to attempt it in stiletto heels.

"Careful, dearie," Belle heard Rumple saying above her. "You've nearly done it."
There was a grunt, which started to become a squeal, but quickly became a sigh of relief.

"Steady, lass," Killian's voice was unmistakable. "I do think I've a crewman or two could take lessons from you on how to climb the rigging."

"If they can show me how to stay up, once I've got there," Astrid gasped, and it was impossible to tell whether she was returning a quip or merely stating a truth.

"Father?" Belle asked.

"You go," Moe replied. "I'll follow."

"But—"

"Go."

Belle sucked in her breath and gripped the cord. Astrid had been right; shoes would have been a hindrance. Hand over hand, she half-climbed, half-crawled upwards. There was no breeze in the shaft, but she still felt as though she was swaying with every upwards movement. The cord was smooth, or her hands were sweaty, she couldn't say which. Emma had been right; there wasn't really that far to climb, but it felt as though for every three inches upwards, she slid back down two. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see how much more she had to go. It wasn't as though she could take a wrong turn, after all. She'd get there when she got there. And then, she felt a firm grip on her forearm, and Killian was telling her to be steady, and hands were guiding her back to solid ground and—

"Belle."

She opened her eyes to see her husband smiling at her and she fell into his arms. "I shouldn't have come back here," she mumbled. "I'm so sorry."

A horrible grating sound came from above, commanding everyone's attention. "Trouble," Maleficent pronounced. "I hate to say it, but I don't think this place is done with falling in on itself." She sighed. "I suppose I'll go out and topside and see whether I can relieve some of the strain, but it would help if someone could hold things up from in here."

"Do it, Emma," Regina said tersely. "I can keep the car steady another few minutes. But not if the rest of the roof comes down around us."

"Okay," Emma said, wide-eyed, pulling her magic back from the car, just as Moe's head emerged from its hatch.

At first, everything seemed to be going well. Moe wasn't particularly nimble, but he soldiered grimly upwards. And then—

"WATCH OUT!" Rumple shouted, as a ceiling beam fell. It struck a nearby book truck, knocking it on an angle and sending it careening toward Regina. Killian leaped for it and pulled it aside barely in time, but several large volumes were dislodged, falling to the floor with a resounding crash.

With Emma's magic elsewhere, Regina had been so focused on her task that she hadn't noticed her peril. The noise startled her, shattering her concentration, and the car plummeted.

"FATHER!" Belle shouted.
Moe was still holding onto the cord tightly, but—Belle realized—that cord was now the only thing keeping the car aloft. She heard a grating squeal and realized that the weight of the car was dragging the bookcase to which the cord's other end was affixed forward to the shaft. She, Astrid, and Killian leaped for it almost as one. "Will the cord hold?" she asked her husband.

Rumple looked at her helplessly. "I don't know," he whispered.

"I don't have the reserves in me to cast that spell again," Regina said quietly. "Not for another few minutes, anyway. Which we might not have."

Rumple looked about frantically and his eye fell on a potted plant on the circulation desk. "How about a different spell?" he asked.

"What do you have in mind?"

"That philodendron." He pointed toward the desk. "Could you make it grow?"

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Moe French did his best to hold onto the golden cord, as it swayed beneath his sweaty hands. The fact that those hands were torn and bleeding from bits of former straw that poked out of the twist didn't make the task any easier. Below him, the elevator car heaved and jolted. He looked down behind him; not the brightest move under all circumstances, but the car was only a few feet below and he wasn't normally frightened of heights. From his vantage, he guessed that they'd managed to pull the grate that the cord was attached to out of the elevator wall and it was banging against the roof of the car. For a moment, Moe debated dropping back down onto that roof; it really wasn't that far down, but the car might plummet to the bottom of the shaft at any moment, and he didn't know how far that might be.

"Grab the vine!" a voice called down to him urgently, and for once, Moe didn't care that the voice belonged to the imp his daughter had married. He looked to his left and saw the thick green tendril inches away. Thick, yes, but how strong was it?

"Father!" Belle shouted. "The vine! Tie it around you and we can pull you up! You won't have to climb!"

It wasn't all that thick. But what choice did he have. He took one hand off the cord. As he leaned over to grab the vine, the car gave a groan, the cord seemed to rock, rather than sway, and he immediately replaced his hand. This was foolishness. He could do this.

He couldn't do this. "I'll climb," he called up. "I'll—"

The grate came out of the hatch with a dreadful shearing noise and the cord whipped back and forth, buffeting him against the shaft walls and shaking him loose. As his nerveless fingers went slack, he heard his daughter scream.

"FATHER!"
Zelena had no idea what she was humming. It might have been something the woman she'd believed was her mother had sung to her when she'd been a baby. It might be something she was making up now out of her head, or some Winkie children's song she'd heard in the market place on those rare occasions when one of her adoptive parents had taken her into town. Whatever it was, it seemed to be working; the baby was sleeping peacefully.

She smiled as she laid the infant in the nearby cradle. For now, at least, there was no evidence of repercussions from her having been under that curse. It had only been a matter of hours, Zelena reflected. Maybe there wouldn't be any effects. Then again, Henry hadn't been under one for long, and he'd hardly escaped unscathed. It was something to watch for.

Zelena frowned and reached for one of the magazines she'd taken from her cell. One of the articles featured on the cover promised to teach her how to recognize her baby's 'signals' and understand what different cries and facial expressions meant. Skeptical though she was, it couldn't hurt to give it a read through.

She smothered a yawn. Or perhaps, she ought to sleep while she could. It wasn't as though she was going anywhere, she thought, sparing a glance toward the door. Although it was open, the faint gleam of her sister's magic ringed the opening. The vault nursery might be more comfortable than her previous quarters, but it was still a prison, though one her sister assured her would be temporary.

"We'll figure things out," she'd promised, and Zelena had been surprised that the statement had sounded more hopeful than ominous.

Months ago, Regina had promised her a second chance; one Zelena had never had the opportunity to accept. If another such opportunity was in the offing, well, on the one hand, Zelena was loth to live under her sister's rule. She'd almost rather go back to Oz. But her decisions didn't just impact herself anymore.

She looked again at the cradle. She had no intention of going anywhere without her daughter. But if she took the baby with her, she suspected that the Heroes would pursue. And any fighting would almost certainly put the baby at risk.

Well. She wasn't going anywhere for now. Not until she was certain that all was well with her daughter. If it wasn't, then between herself, her sister, Rumple, Emma, and now, Maleficent, surely some cure or treatment might be found.

Feeling satisfied with her decision, she stretched out on the cot and closed her eyes.

Only to open them what felt like mere minutes later when her daughter began to shriek.

Belle watched in horror as her father lost his grip on the cord and dropped, heavily to the roof of the elevator car. "Father?" Behind her, she could hear Rumple on his cell phone saying something about needing an emergency team inside quickly.
She heaved a sigh. "Father," she called, "help is on the way. Just h-hold on." A stupid thing to say, she realized as the words left her mouth. He was lying atop the car because he hadn't been able to 'hold on'. But she had to let him know that they were going to get him out, that they wouldn't abandon him, that—

There came a harsh metallic grinding noise and then, Belle heard herself scream yet again, as the car plunged. It was scarcely more than a second before it hit bottom with a heavy thud and she watched her father slide to the edge of the car roof as though he were no more than a broken doll. "F-Father?"

She felt her husband's hands on her shoulders, and when she looked back at him, she saw concern and empathy in his brown eyes. "They'll get him out," he murmured. "This town boasts a surprisingly capable emergency response unit."

Belle fought to keep her lips from trembling as she nodded and buried her head in his shoulder. She wanted to lose herself in the feel of her husband's cashmere broadcloth coat on her cheek, the ethereal white tea fragrance of his Bvlgari shampoo, the safety of his arms clasped about her, as she hugged him back fiercely.

She didn't know how long they sat locked in one another's embrace, but she didn't ease herself out of it until she heard Killian directing the EMT crew toward the shaft, as though they couldn't tell for themselves where they were needed.

Later, Belle would never be able to recall how long she waited for the EMTs to hook up a rope system and for two of them to descend the shaft in safety harnesses, bearing a basket stretcher. It seemed to take forever before the stretcher came up again, this time with her father securely strapped within. Moe French's eyes were open, but glazed with pain above a heavy cervical collar.

She took a step forward, her gaze shifting inquiringly toward the rescuers. "Is he…?"

"It's just a precaution for now," the dark-skinned woman whose nametag read J. Lynde reassured her. "He took quite a fall; we're covering all bases."

Emma started forward. "I could—"

Rumple raised a hand, cutting her off in mid-sentence. "A hospital would be wiser at this time," he said. "Your healing spell is still fairly rudimentary; you can only fix such injuries as are visible. If there's any internal damage, you're liable to miss it. Worse, if your spell removes his pain, so might anyone else."

Eyes wide, Emma nodded. Then she frowned. "But… last night, when I healed you? You told me—I mean, shouldn't you get checked out, too?"

"I would have," Rumple nodded back. "Had Ursula not gotten part of the job done prior to your arrival at the scene. She's been working magic a bit longer than you have; her healing spells are more advanced." Then, seeing the worry on Belle's face, he sighed. "I suppose since we're heading to the hospital anyway, I can see whether they're not too busy look me over as well."

He gently turned Belle's hands over and winced when he got a good look at the palms. "I'm afraid that metal cord isn't ideal for climbing," he murmured. "Emma, if you're eager to heal, perhaps you might…"

Emma's fingers were already glowing. "I should've figured," she admitted. "If Astrid needed it…" She jerked her head in the direction of the fairy she'd healed moments earlier.
"I didn't even realize," Belle whispered disbelievingly.

Emma glanced at the other EMT and realized she recognized him as well. "Adrenaline?" she asked.

John Ringel nodded. "Probably. That doesn't look too serious, though. I can probably patch it up now, if—" Emma had already passed her hand over Belle's palms. For a moment, they glowed with the same white light emanating from her fingertips. When the light faded, so had the cuts, leaving no trace of scab or scar. Ringel blinked. "Or that works, too," he smiled.

He moved briskly to the foot of the stretcher, all business now. "We'll see you back at the hospital. There's room for one more in the ambulance, if anyone wants to come with?"

Belle rather thought she ought to. It was almost certainly expected of her. And yet, she slid her newly-healed hand into Rumple's and said, "Rumple and I will be right behind you. Astrid?"

The fairy gave her a pained smile. "If there's room for me in the car, I'll come with. But could someone let Leroy know I'm okay?" She jerked her head toward the worst of the wreckage at the far end of the room. "I left my phone in the apartment."

Rumple wasn't overly surprised when hospital staff converged on Moe's stretcher while, after a few perfunctory questions, he and the others were told to make themselves comfortable in the emergency ward's waiting room. There was no question who was most in need of medical attention.

It didn't take long for his name to be called and he parted reluctantly from Belle to follow the nurse into the main area. There, he answered more questions, submitted to having his blood taken, and endured what felt like several more X-rays than he'd been subjected to some months earlier.

Finally, Whale informed him that there appeared to be nothing wrong, but gave him a list of symptoms to watch for over the next few days and sent him back to the waiting room.

Snow, David, and Robin had arrived in the interim, and, as Rumple reclaimed the seat beside Belle's, Leroy came charging in as well.

"Maleficent's keeping an eye on Lily for now," David informed them, while Astrid clasped both of Leroy's hands in hers with a glad cry. The two quickly moved to chairs in a corner at the opposite end of the room, as David turned to Regina. "She said to let you know that she could use your help, once you're recovered enough to teleport them to the mines."

Regina nodded at once. "I'm feeling a bit stronger already," she said. "Assuming Whale clears me, I'll head back shortly." She smothered a yawn. "Sorry," she murmured with some measure of embarrassment. "It's a bit late. Or early." She looked at her watch and her eyes widened. "I don't think there's more than an hour to go until dawn," she marveled.

"Under the circumstances," Robin said, "I'm not at all sure I want to rouse Roland for a cold ride back to the forest if it's not necessary."

Rumple nodded. "I quite understand. If the boy's asleep, then it's best he remain so. I'll not turn the Lapine children out at this hour either. And as for Henry…"

Emma and Regina exchanged a look. "If he's up," Emma said, "I think he can decide for himself. If he's asleep, leave him."
Regina nodded. "All things considered, I'd say he can afford to miss school tomorrow."

Snow rubbed her eyes. "I think I might miss it myself," she admitted. She turned to Belle. "Is there any word on how your father's doing?"

Belle shook her head. "We're waiting to hear."

"Are you all right?"

Belle let out a heavy sigh. "Not really," she admitted. Rumple's arm tightened about her shoulders and she leaned in gratefully. "I'm still... well... processing, I guess."

Snow nodded.

"I mean," Belle went on, sliding her own arm about her husband's waist, "it seems like every time I try to be a hero, somebody gets hurt, or worse. I-I..." She clamped her mouth shut. "I'll get through this. With time."

"And support," Snow nodded again. "You've got that, you know."

Belle twisted her head to meet Rumple's eyes and her lips curved in a watery smile. "I do."

"And Belle? Don't blame yourself. It's not your fault that your father was hurt."

"I know," Belle said, struggling to be gracious when she really wished that Snow would just leave her alone.

"Okay," Snow said, after eying her searchingly. "I just meant... well, after I lost my parents—not that your father isn't going to recover, of course," she added hastily, "I blamed myself." Her eyes found Rumple's. "The candle... Cora told me it would have worked," she said. "And I kept thinking about how I could have saved her if..."

Really, she didn't want to hear any of this, but Belle pasted on a polite smile anyway. "I understand," she said. And forced herself to add, "And I'm sorry for your loss."

Snow smiled back sadly. "I'm just saying, I know you and your father have had your disagreements, but... he's still your father. I knew that he'd be there for you when you needed him."

Belle started to nod. Then she stiffened. "Wait. It was you?"

Snow blinked. "What?"

"You told him what happened at the well?" Belle felt Rumple tense behind her and dimly realized that other eyes were turning toward her now.

"I-I—"

"The only person I told about that who wasn't already there was Astrid," Belle continued relentlessly. "I couldn't think how he'd found out. But you told him, didn't you?"

"You didn't tell him?" Snow said faintly. "But I thought—"

"I didn't tell him," Belle repeated. "But because you did, he went to my—" She covered Rumple's hand with her own, "our house looking for me, and when I wasn't there, he tried my old apartment. And because he did, he's hurt and I don't know if he's going to be okay, and if you hadn't butted into something that was none of your business, then he'd be home watching football instead of
falling down an elevator shaft!"

Snow's face went pale. "I-I didn't mean—"

"I don't care what you meant!" Belle fired back. "If anything happens to him—"

The door between the waiting room and the emergency area swung open and Whale stepped out. "Belle? Could I have a word, please?"

Belle eased herself gently out of her husband's embrace and took a breath. "Yes, of course. Privately?" Before Whale could reply, she amended, "I mean, just with me and Rumple. That's okay, isn't it?"

Whale nodded and pushed the door open again. "If you'll both follow me…?"

As soon as Rumple and Belle were out of the room, Regina stormed up to Snow. "You just don't learn, do you?" she demanded.

Snow looked as though she wished she could sink into the floor. "I thought…"

"No," Regina countered. "You didn't think. You got an idea in your head and you just steamrolled it ahead without once asking yourself if everyone's parents were perfect, like yours!"

"I know they weren't perfect. I just thought Belle needed more people around her, so—"

"So, you approached her father, knowing that she'd gone home with Rumple and not considering that maybe given the way Moe feels about the man she married, having him come barging in might not have the most calming effect?" Regina shook her head. "You know, I was going to suggest that you call on her in a couple of days, considering that you've had some experience with some of what she's probably going through." She rolled her eyes. "Good luck with that now."

Snow seemed to wilt even further under Regina's caustic words. She felt David's hand on her shoulder and reached up to squeeze it, noting at the same time that, while her husband was offering her empathy, he was also not voicing a word in protest over what her stepmother was saying. "I thought it might bring Moe French and Rumpelstiltskin together, too. Putting aside their differences to help Belle, I mean."

Regina rolled her eyes ceiling-ward. "The next time you get a brilliant idea, try lying down until it goes away. Speaking of which, you might consider doing that before Belle comes back. According to a certain video Henry took with his phone a few months back, Bookworm has quite the left cross. And while I'm curious as to whether she has any other moves—"

"I think we'll take a walk down to the cafeteria," David said firmly. "If Emma comes out before we get back, would you tell her where we went?"

Regina nodded. "Wise choice," she said with a tight smile. "But text her just the same. Once I'm able to leave, Main Street is the wrong place for a sleeping-cursed dragon; I mean to rectify that matter as soon as possible."

"He's going to have a long road ahead of him," Whale told her gently, but honestly. "There were a number of broken bones. And I'm afraid that those weren't his only injuries."

Belle closed her eyes and nodded numbly as he threw more terms out at her: separated shoulder,
punctured lung, flail chest, soft tissue damage, internal bleeding… "How… How long will he need to be here?" she asked faintly. The floor was cold; she could feel its temperature radiating upwards through the thin hospital slippers she'd been given in place of the shoes she'd left in the elevator.

Whale frowned. "Refresh my memory; is his house one story or two?"

Belle had to think about that one. "It's one. And a cellar, I think."

"Does he use it often? The cellar, I mean."

Belle frowned, thinking harder. "I… I don't know."

Whale was silent for a moment. "We'll want to keep him here for a few days for observation, make sure he's responding well to medication, and so on. After that, it really depends on whether he'll have anyone around to look after him. He's going to need physical therapy for sure, not necessarily as an in-patient, though. But he won't be able to manage alone for at least six to eight weeks, possibly longer. And stairs are going to be a problem; that's why I was asking about stories and cellars."

Belle exchanged a worried look with her husband. Well. There was worry there, but also a weary resignation in his brown eyes. Her breath caught. She realized what he expected her to say next. It had been her first impulse. And, had her father kept his opinions about Rumple to himself earlier, she might even have deluded herself that this would be an opportunity for the two of them to finally bury that particular hatchet as Rumple and Killian seemed to have done recently. But her father had made those comments. And Belle was learning to accept that trying to force people to do 'the right thing' (or her idea of it, at any rate) often had a way of backfiring. She knew what was expected of a dutiful daughter. But she was more than Moe French's daughter. She was also Rumple's wife. And if her trying to do 'the right thing' was going to cause him the distress she thought it would… then it wasn't the right thing after all.

She squeezed Rumple's hands tightly. "Thank you," she said, turning back to Whale. "How… how could we arrange for full-time nursing care? Is that something we can set up here, or do we need to run an ad in the Mirror, or what?"

Whale's eyebrows lifted slightly. "I'll ask Merryweather to discuss that with you," he said. "With Blue… indisposed, she's looking after that kind of thing. It can wait until tomorrow, though," he added. "Get some sleep; you look like you need that more than anything else, right now."

Belle nodded. "You're probably right," she admitted, not missing her husband's slow smile. "Could… could I see my father before I leave?"

"He probably won't know you're there," Whale cautioned. "He's pretty heavily medicated right now. But you can have a few minutes."

Belle nodded again and Whale led her down a corridor, to the room where her father lay propped up in a cot. His eyes were closed and machines in the background beeped softly as lines and numbers glowed red and green on various displays. She realized that Rumple hadn't come in with her, but was standing patiently in the doorway. Belle sighed. Then she took her father's hand in hers and kissed his forehead. "Rest well, Father," she said gently. "I'll be doing the same."

Then she turned and walked back to Rumple and Whale. "You'll call me if there's any change?" she asked the doctor.

Whale nodded. "Of course."
"You do want to come home?" Rumple asked anxiously, as he held the car door open. "If you need more time, I suppose Granny's would be an option." When Belle lifted her head to look at him, he added, "It's a bit closer to the hospital, if that's a concern."

Belle shook her head. "It's not. Unless… Unless you're not ready for me to come home?" she whispered.

"Wh-what?" Rumple gaped at her. "Wait. Don't move." He shut the passenger door, came around and got in on the driver side. "Now," he said, pulling his door closed, "What's this about then?"

Belle closed her eyes. "I was just thinking that… after what happened yesterday," she frowned, "or, I guess, the day before yesterday now, maybe you also needed to… to process… things. If I'm being honest, that wasn't on my mind when I left earlier, but it is now. It's," she took a breath, "not being fair to you to ask you to push what happened to you aside and ask you to be there for me. And," she continued, when Rumple opened his mouth to say something, "I do want to be there for you, too. You know I do. But I don't know if I can be right now." She winced. "We did say we were going to be honest with one another."

"So we did," Rumple nodded. "I also believe something was mentioned about taking things one day… one step at a time?"

A small smile formed on Belle's lips. "It was."

"So… perhaps, we might try to work through this together. With the understanding that, at times, either of us might need to confide in others as well."

"I'm not used to doing that," Belle admitted.

"Neither was I until several months ago," Rumple replied, covering her hand with his own. "It's not always easy." He leaned back in his seat, feeling the cushioned upholstery through his coat. "Admitting that one needs assistance is admitting to vulnerability, after all. Not something that's gone well for me in the past."

Belle squeezed his hand. "I think," she said slowly, "that I owe you an apology."

Rumple blinked. "Whatever for?"

"Ever since we… decided to make another go of… us, I've been wishing you'd open up to me instead of Emma or August or Regina or…" She shook her head. "And then today, instead of my opening up to you, I went running to Astrid."

"She's your friend."

"Yes, but you're my husband."

"And as such, you want me to see you at your best." He returned the squeeze. "While I've no doubt you want Astrid to think well of you, should she fail to do so, I doubt you'd take her rejection nearly so hard." He let out a breath. "At least, that's what I'd suspect from my own experience," he added with a half-smile.

Her seatbelt was already on, but she unfastened it to lean over, fling her arms about his neck, and kiss his cheek. He hugged her back tightly. For long moments, they remained locked in their embrace. Then they slid apart. Belle closed her seatbelt again with a soft click. She took his hand once more, gave it another squeeze, and released it.
"Let's go home. Wait. Could we… drive about for a bit? I know it's late, but I think I'd just like to take in the scenery." She smiled a bit self-consciously. "Even if the nightlife is extremely limited."

Too late, she remembered that Rumple had only said that to her in a half-remembered dream, but even though the full context of her statement was lost on him, he smiled back. "As you wish."

"This is… rather homey," Maleficent murmured as she took in the cavern to which Regina had brought her.

"Well, I'm glad you like it," Regina smiled, "because I'm honestly too exhausted at this point to show you any other properties. I should let you know about one drawback: the dwarfs are down here mining for fairy dust, off and on. Their current site is a couple of miles from this section, but with your hearing, you may not find things as peaceful as you'd like."

"Well, I did mean 'homey' in the sense that it reminded me of my childhood home," Maleficent replied. "Once Lily achieves a modicum of control, we'll find someplace else."

"We," Regina repeated. "That's a little optimistic, considering she tried to kill you this afternoon."

Maleficent looked away. "She was confused."

"She wasn't confused when she threw Rumple down a flight of stairs, and left him bound, gagged, blindfolded and caged while she fed my sister some pregnancy-accelerant-laced onion rings and kidnapped a newborn."

Maleficent whirled back to face her with a shocked expression.

"I haven't even gotten to this afternoon's property damage," Regina added, just as quietly and calmly as she had her previous sentence. "Nor to the serious injuries sustained by Rumple's father-in-law."

"It sounds as though she has started off on the wrong talon," Maleficent said, sounding more than a bit stunned. "What kind of restitution did you have in mind?"

Regina sighed. "Me? None. The fires are out. I can fix the damage to the clock tower and library easily enough after I've had a good night's sleep. Perhaps it'll take more than one, come to think of it," she admitted. A thin smile played about her lips. "In many ways, this town has been a second chance for all of us. Knowing the kind of Darkness your daughter carries, I can understand how she might have gotten a bit… carried away. If she's willing to start over, I'm willing to give her the opportunity."

Maleficent gave her a disbelieving look that quickly became a relieved smile. "I won't pretend not to be grateful."

Regina wasn't finished. "I said that I'm willing to give her the opportunity. If I were the only person impacted by her actions, then that would suffice. Sadly?" she shook her head, "I don't think that my name is anywhere close to the top of that list." She let that sink in before she continued. "I'll talk to the others in a few days, after everyone's had the chance to calm down. But if your daughter wants to make a fresh start here, I think there's going to be a bit more involved than a warm smile and a hearty 'Welcome to Storybrooke'."

"I understand," Maleficent said slowly. "And I'll ensure that Lily does as well. But for now, first I'll need to wake her. Then teach her how to resume human shape. And then," she exhaled, smiling just a bit, "I think I'd like to get to know my daughter."
Regina smiled back. "I quite understand. Meanwhile, I'll do my best to ensure that no pitchfork-wielding mobs converge on you en masse."

"I appreciate that," Maleficent nodded. Then her smile grew wider. "Although, come to think of it, how would I go about getting my meals delivered to me?" The smile became a smirk. "Since you seem to be cutting off the most obvious avenue."

Regina's laugh defused a great deal of the tension that had been forming in the atmosphere. "I'm not sure if a phone would work this far underground, but we can set up some method of magical communication, if nothing else." She smothered a yawn, which was immediately followed by a mortified, if sleepy, 'Excuse me!' She rubbed her eyes. "I'll get started on it as soon as I wake up."

After the mayor was gone, Maleficent brought her fingers gently to her daughter's cheek. "Oh, Lily," she murmured, "I've been waiting so long to meet you. We'll get this sorted out," she continued, more for her own benefit than Lily's. "Somehow."

They didn't pay attention to the hour, nor to the route they took, but eventually, Rumple and Belle found themselves at the docks. "Well," Rumple murmured, "I suppose now would be the proper time to turn about, unless you propose to drive out into the ocean."

Belle smiled. "Could we maybe walk around?" she asked. "Just for a little while longer? It's nearly sunrise."

Rumple hesitated. "It's a mite chilly. And surely, you must be tired?"

"I am, a bit," Belle admitted. "But I think I'd like to stretch my legs for a bit." She frowned. "Unless you're too tired?"

Rumple considered. "I suppose a short walk won't hurt. But we really ought to be getting back."

Belle nodded. "I'm sorry. I just… want to watch the sun come up and the view isn't the same at the house. I guess I need proof that yesterday is well and truly over."

"Ah," Rumple smiled. "I suppose I can understand that." They trod the pier together silently and gazed out at the Atlantic. Then, as the night sky began to lighten, Rumple gestured to a nearby wooden bench and Belle nodded and let him guide her to it. Her feet were beginning to ache by now, both from the skimpy footwear (she'd left the hospital still wearing those slippers) and from the damp cold.

"And I am worried about Father," she added, breaking the silence as they both sat down, as though her earlier conversation had never paused. "He won't like… well. Any of this."

Rumple nodded. "It will be an adjustment. Back in our land, I suppose that when one is a peasant, one is forced to endure all matter of hardship and learns to take most of them in stride. I fear that he'll be at somewhat of a disadvantage."

"He'll need a nurse," Belle nodded. "I know he'll want me to move in with him while he convalesces, but," she winced, "I just hope I'll be strong enough to turn him down."

Rumple blinked. "I thought you were going to ask…" He caught himself. "Never mind," he said quickly. "It's not important."

But Belle was squeezing his hand again. "You thought I was about to ask if you were all right with my offering. Or if we could have him move in with us," she added, not phrasing it as a question.
She smiled sadly when her husband nodded slowly. "I can't blame you for it. It's… well, it's the sort of thing I probably would have done… before." Her smile fell away. "Taken you for granted. Pushed my idea of 'the right thing' on you, and called you selfish and unfeeling if you'd done anything other than agree to it."

"You never—"

"Maybe I would have. Asked," she went on. "Thought that perhaps, if he spent time with you, got to know you a bit better, he'd finally see you for who you are now..." She let her voice trail off, before adding, "After all, others have."

"Your optimism is almost without bounds," Rumple remarked, far more gently than he might have in another realm.

"Almost," Belle admitted. Her sad smile was back. "The other day, I watched you in the shop, restoring some china statuette that had had an arm snapped off. You glued it back so carefully that I had to look hard to see where the break had happened. And you cautioned me not to touch it before the glue had fully dried, because any pressure might cause it to break again." She sucked in a breath. "I think… I think that might be where our marriage is now. Restored, but not fully set. It needs more time to grow stronger. And Father moving in with us would be a pressure we don't need." She sighed. "I love him. I want to get him whatever care he needs. And, I'll probably go over to the house for an hour or two, most days. Either in the morning—after you've gone to open the shop, but before I have to open the library, or in the afternoon—after I've closed the library for the day, but before you close the shop." The look she turned on him now was direct. "He's still my father. I still love him. But I love you, too. And from what I saw and heard this evening," she winced. "Well, Father's never been the easiest person to get along with. Mother could… temper him a bit; I'm sorry you never met her. But when I think back, I know you've felt you had to… to walk on eggshells around me in the past. That's not something you need to do again, not with me, not with him, and certainly not in your—in our—own home."

Rumple regarded her disbelieving for moment. Then he drew her into a fierce embrace. "I never stopped loving you," he whispered hoarsely. "Not when I drove you out of my castle, not when you banished me, not even when I withdrew from you in New York."

"Nor I you," Belle murmured back. "No matter how angry I was, no matter how... thoughtless. I think, even those times when I didn't remember you, I never forgot our love. I just… didn't know how to find it."

Rumple's arms tightened about her. "And now, you have."

"We both have."

Cecily wearily tucked the blanket around her younger brother and took a moment to pick up Aggie's doll from the floor and place it on the sofa beside her slumbering sister.

As she got up, Henry emerged from the kitchen, leading a sleepy-eyed Roland, who curled up on the loveseat without a word or an argument. He was already slumbering when Henry draped another blanket over him. "You okay?" he whispered to Cecily.

She nodded. "But I don't think I'll get back to sleep again now." She sighed. "I'd already be up and dressed if I were home."

Henry looked at his watch. It was slightly past seven; the sun had only just risen. "I had a text from
my mom that I could stay home from school today," he said.

Cecily sighed again. "Mama would let me," she replied, "but I don't think I'd get any sleep with the twins bouncing in and out of the bedroom."

"You share a room with them?"

"Oh, not to sleep in," Cecily said. "But during the day, well, we don't really have a playroom and they share a bedroom with Aggie. Between the beds and the dressers and the toy box, there's no room for play, so during the day while I'm at school…"

"Your room's the playroom," Henry winced. "Got it. They wouldn't play somewhere else, though?"

"They would," Cecily shook her head with a wan smile. "But they wouldn't stay there. They'd start off in the living room, but if I were home, they'd be running in every few minutes to tell me about what they're doing or ask me to read them a story or…" She shook her head. "Mama would try to keep them quiet, but sooner or later, she'd ask me what I expected, staying home on a school day, so," she patted down her short hair, reached for the satin puff headband she'd removed earlier, and donned it decisively, "I'm going to school. When I get home later, I'll be so tired I'll sleep through anything."

"It's not fair," Henry said.

"It's not supposed to be," Cecily returned, still smiling. "I'm used to it."

"You're…" Henry smiled back. "You're actually pretty amazing."

Cecily actually laughed at that. "Nah. I'm just me."

"Yeah," Henry said. "And that's amazing." His hands were on her shoulders, and she wasn't pulling away, as he leaned toward her. In fact, she was drawing him closer. Her lips touched his and he smelled apples, and cinnamon, and vanilla and he didn't know whether it was his own heart that was pounding or hers, but he didn't want the moment to end.

And then Cecily's eyes opened wide and she pushed him back and murmured quickly, "We were just rehearsing."

That was when Henry realized that he was feeling a bit of a draft from the basement door, which was now open, and he turned to see Grandpa and Belle standing in the doorway, both wearing faint smiles. "Uh… yeah," Henry nodded, hoping he was being convincing enough. And that neither of them had actually read the play, since he and Cecily didn't actually kiss on stage. Maybe he should say that it was Mr. Quince's idea to add it in. Maybe he shouldn't say anything unless they brought it up. Maybe—

"Of course you were," Rumple murmured, and Henry still didn't know if they were buying it. "Well. The danger's past, so it's safe for you all to depart after breakfast. Cecily, Robin will escort you and your siblings home, as you're on his way. Henry—"

"I can walk it," Henry murmured. When had Belle gotten so… short?

"Very well," Rumple replied. He took a breath. "I don't know that I'll be opening the shop today. Perhaps not tomorrow, either. We shall see."

"Okay."
Rumple smiled. "Well. If you didn't devour the baked goods Mrs. Lucas sent with you last night, I suppose that would be the easiest. And if they aren't as fresh as they might have been, a few seconds in the microwave ought to rectify the matter."


Cecily was slumped in the armchair behind him, her head lowered and her hairband askew. She was sound asleep.

Rumple shook his head tolerantly. "The two of you've been up all night, haven't you?"

"Sort of," Henry admitted. "The others kept waking up."

Rumple sighed. "Well. Let's not disturb her, shall we? Come along. I trust you left us some of the pudding as well?"

"Yeah," Henry said, falling into step behind his grandfather and Belle. "Even though Aggie wanted more. A-are you guys okay? You look kind of…"

"I don't know," It was Belle who answered this time. "But," she continued with a faint, wondering smile, "I think… we might be getting there, after all."

"What happened?" Henry asked, still speaking quietly, so as not to awaken the others.

"You know," Rumple remarked, "I am curious as to how many other changes your director is making to that play of yours. I take it that the characters of Minnie and Barnaby will be demonstrating their affections on stage, as well?"

He felt a pang of remorse when he saw his grandson swallow hard and noted the red flush creeping across his cheeks. But Belle had been through enough tonight without having to rehash the details. And now, it appeared as though Henry had no further interest in hearing them. As he followed his wife and grandson into the kitchen, he was smiling broadly.

Especially when Belle glanced back at him over her shoulder and mouthed a 'thank you'.
Chapter Forty-Six

Rumple set the table and arranged the baked goods on a microwave-safe plate. Then, judging that he'd allowed sufficient time to elapse, he excused himself on the pretext of 'checking on the young ones' and made his way back to the living room.

As he'd expected, Cecily hadn't moved. He gave her another moment before he drew closer, not missing the way her breathing became a little bit slower and a little bit steadier at his approach. He shook his head, smiling just a bit. "You can get up now, dearie," he said softly. "I imagine you're wanting breakfast, as well."

For a moment, Cecily didn't move. Then her eyelashes fluttered, and she stretched and yawned. "Sorry," she murmured fumbling for her hairband. "I-I must've dozed off."

"Indeed." Rumple fixed his gaze on the blanket that had been beside her on the chair. "That's a very good cover," he said dryly.

"P-pardon?"

Rumple's lips twitched and he gestured pointedly to the blanket. "It's quite warm and not inclined to wrinkle."

"Oh," Cecily said with a relieved smile. "Y-yes, I'd meant to use it earlier, but the little ones kept waking up and I had to get them settled and, well, I guess I was pretty tired when you came back and…" Her voice trailed off when she realized that he was nodding encouragingly with an expression that made it plain that he was humoring her.

"I begin to see why Henry speaks about your theatrical skills in such glowing terms," Rumple remarked.

"Oh?" A pleased look sprang unbidden to the girl's face. "H-he does? I mean, thank you. It's good to hear. I mean, I practice a lot. I mean…"

Rumple snorted slightly as he smiled back. "Well, I daresay you'll continue to improve if you keep at it." He heaved a sigh and shook his head tolerantly. "Come now, girl. The path on which you're currently embarking will have pitfalls enough without my adding to them."

Cecily regarded him nervously, but with the faintest glimmer of hope.

Rumple sighed again. "Don't expect me to pretend I didn't see what I saw. But I think I've lived long enough to recognize when a matter requires intervention, and when it's… well, really none of
my business. I trust the two of you are both sensible enough not to let matters progress to a point where I feel obliged to move this incident from the latter category into the former."

"We are," Cecily murmured, her face rapidly turning red as she looked away. "Really, it was just… I mean… I mean, we're not going to… do anything, honestly."

Rumple nodded. "Well. Now that we've got that out of the way, as you're awake, will you join us in the kitchen for breakfast?"

Cecily took a breath, let it out, and nodded. "Just let me take a minute to wash up," she said, sliding out of the chair without meeting his eyes, as she headed for the staircase.

The torch was heavy in Lily's hand as she walked apprehensively down a dark corridor. She no longer jumped when she saw movement; she'd noted early on that she was surrounded by mirrors. At first, she'd thought that she was trapped in a large room, but then she'd realized that there were corridors leading out from it, also mirrored so that she'd almost missed them before she'd started trailing one hand along the wall. So far, she seemed to be the only person here.

Person. A puzzled frown creased her face. That wasn't right. She hadn't been a person before she'd found herself here… had she? She'd… changed. Or had that been a dream? Or was this a dream? "Uh…" She cleared her throat. "Hello? Hello, can anyone hear me?"

Her voice echoed, reverberating through the maze, coming back to her in a tumultuous cacophony. It was like the mirrors weren't just reflecting images, but sounds.

"Hey!" she shouted. "Hey! Let me out of here!"

More echoes, but no other voice but hers. She frowned. Maybe she had something in her pockets that might help. There was no place to set down the torch, so she reached awkwardly into her jacket pocket with her free hand. The mace wasn't going to work. Neither would the tissues be of any use. Her eyebrows lifted as her fingers found a small cylindrical object. Well, breath mints wouldn't help either, but at least one might take care of the sour taste in her mouth. She pulled out the roll, then swore as the mace canister came out with it and hit the floor. Great. She stooped down to retrieve it, trying to hang onto the mints and keep the torch steady. When her bare hand brushed the floor she pulled it back with a yelp. It was hot!

Did mace explode when heated? She couldn't remember, but she wasn't about to pick the canister up now. She struggled to her feet and moved on hastily.

Lily.

She froze. "Who's there?"

Lily. The voice was firm, gentle, and not entirely unfamiliar. Lily, it's time to leave. Let me show you how.

"Who are you?"

She wasn't prepared for the answer. I'm your mother, Lily. And it's time to wake up…

To everyone's surprise including her own, after leaving the hospital and getting home shortly after seven that morning and promptly going to bed, Emma awoke not long after half-past nine. In robe and slippers, she made her way into the kitchen.
Her mother was already there giving Neal his feeding. She looked up at her daughter's footfalls.
"Couldn't sleep?"

Emma shook her head. "I did for a bit, but I don't think I can right now." She rubbed her eyes.
"Doesn't mean I don't still feel tired, though. There any coffee?"

"I can put a pot on after Neal's had breakfast."

Emma shook her head again. "This once, I'll have instant."

Snow gave her a sympathetic smile, which Emma returned as she opened one of the kitchen
cabins and took out the canister—which probably hadn't been used since the first Dark Curse.
"Do you have any plans for today?" she asked.

Emma shook her head. "Henry went to Regina's to sleep; he thought it'd be more restful there," she
added, her eyes flickering meaningfully to her baby brother. "Apparently, he and Cecily had to deal
with the younger ones waking up periodically last night."

Snow gave a slight laugh. "Welcome to my world."

"Yeah," Emma nodded, smiling a bit herself. "So, since he won't be back here till later, and since I
really was planning on sleeping in, I… guess I'm pretty free. Why? Did you need me to babysit for
a while?"

"Not that," Snow replied. Then she seemed to reconsider. "Though if I need to run out to the
grocery store, it'll be a help. No, I was wondering if maybe you could try to talk to Belle."

She tried not to let the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach show in her expression. Maybe her
mother didn't mean what Emma thought she meant. "I know she's going through a lot," she said
finally. "I mean, lately, she's been turning to Astrid for support; she hasn't confided in me much
since she and Gold got back with each other. But, yeah, she is going through a lot. I can let her
know I'll be there if she needs me."

Snow smiled. "That is a wonderful idea," she said. Her smile wilted slightly. "And maybe you
could tell her how sorry I am about what happened. I didn't mean to… to…"

Emma waited for her mother to finish. Then she exhaled. "I don't think that that's going to be as
wonderful an idea," she said.

"Emma!" Snow gasped. "I'm not asking you to apologize for me; I just want you to get her to listen
to me."

"While her father's still in the hospital with major injuries," Emma pointed out. "Seriously don't
think the timing is right."

Snow lowered her eyes. "Of course," she murmured. "But after Moe's released? Maybe you could
sound her out? See if she's calmed down enough?"

"I…" Emma took another breath. "I'm not getting involved. This is between the two of you." She
sighed. "Look. You meant well. I get it. And despite what Belle said in the hospital, I think we
both know that what happened to Moe wasn't exactly your fault. But I can understand why she feels
that way." She smiled sadly. "She's not going to stay mad forever. But I'm staying out of this." She
let out another, heavier, sigh. "As bad as it seems, this… isn't a 'savior-level' crisis. You'll work
things out."
Snow started to say something, but the look on Emma's face seemed to check her. Instead, she lowered her eyes and busied herself with the baby.

Emma cast about looking for something more reassuring to add, but she couldn't think of another thing to say. So she finished her coffee and retreated back to her room to get dressed. She hadn't been planning to go out today, but she didn't want to stay here with this new, uncomfortable tension in the air. It looked like she was going to head over to the sheriff station, after all.

"You're probably hungry," Maleficent said. "Transformations generally require a good deal of energy, at least initially." She smiled at Lily and extended her hands toward her, palms upraised and angled upwards. "What might I offer you?"

Lily looked about dubiously. She was in a cave of some kind. And she was… "Uh… was I really a-a…?"

"Dragon?" Maleficent smiled. "You were. And still are; just in human form at the moment."

"You changed me back?"

"I showed you how. The sleeping curse did make it easier; in your mind, you were already in human form. It was a matter of getting your outside to conform to your inside."

Lily rubbed her head. "Maybe I'd understand better if I had some coffee," she managed.

"Coffee? What is that, please?" Maleficent asked.

"You don't know?" Lily groaned. "Wow, how do people stay alert back where we come from?"

Maleficent shrugged. "Those who don't tend not to survive for long. The Enchanted Forest is not without dangers. As dragons, we're safer than most, but there's always some bold knight off to make a name for themselves by trying to jab a pike into us." She heaved a sigh. "It's annoying, but it does tend to wake you up. However…" She held one palm flat and facing roof-wards and frowned. A plume of purple smoke appeared floating above it. When it cleared, an earthenware mug hovered several inches above her hand. "The land that bordered my castle to the east is home to a mighty empire. Perhaps it exists still, I've no idea. This is one of their beverages. I believe it has the properties you seek. They call it 'tea'."

Lily reached for the mug with a broad smile. "I can work with that," she said with some relief. Then she blinked. "Whoa."

A wooden table had materialized before her, laden with what appeared to be a medieval banquet.

"I realize that these foods may not be what you're accustomed to, but I don't believe I've eaten in over thirty years," Maleficent admitted frankly. "And while an old friend promised to send supplies over in a bit, I'm not sure I'd like to wait." She beckoned her daughter toward the table. "Please. Join me. I can make more, if need be."

Lily eyed the fare curiously. She recognized bread and meat. There were pastries—she had no idea whether they were sweet or savory—turnovers and fritters mostly, and large bowls that looked suspiciously like porridge in varying shades of beige, yellow, and brown. "I don't know what half this stuff is," she murmured. But she shrugged and put a ladle of one of the porridge-like substances in a shallow bowl. When she tasted it, her eyes widened. It wasn't oatmeal, she didn't think, but it was rich and sweet and flavored with currants, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and something else she couldn't quite name. "What is this?" she asked, taking another spoonful.
Maleficent set down a pasty on her own plate and peered across at Lily's bowl. "I believe that would be a sweet frumenty," she said. "Cracked wheat, eggs, cream, spices, a bit of ale…"

"Ale?" Lily laughed. "I thought it had a bit of a kick to it."

She downed another spoonful with gusto.

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Robin arrived about an hour later to escort Roland and the Lapine children home. "And I believe there's a horse to collect as well?"

Rumple nodded. He'd forgotten about that. "He's just in the back," he murmured, remembering that the captain had told him as much after he'd returned from escorting Moe off the property the night before. "I-I'm afraid we've neglected to feed him."

Robin didn't seem overly surprised by the statement. "Under the circumstances, I can see why that might have slipped your mind. Well. We can see to that. If you've oats on hand, a mash shouldn't be too difficult to make up."

Rumple smiled. "While I've far more experience with sheep than horses, during my brief enlistment, I was instructed in the care and feeding of them."

Belle blinked. "But… weren't there stable grooms for that?" she blurted.

"There were," Rumple nodded, remembering that his wife had never been part of an army, never fought in a war, and didn't realize that the way horses were cared for in a noble's castle might not hold true in a military camp. "However," he elucidated, "it was understood that in war, one might not always have the luxury of returning to camp or of bedding down in a location where one might find a stable, let alone the staff to run it." A shadow fell across his face. "Civilians were required to oblige the army, of course, providing food and lodging for both soldiers and horses. But wartime meant hungry times and while obligations were met with regard to provisioning, it generally seemed that the hostlers had all been coincidentally drafted and there was nobody about with the expertise to feed and care for a mount." He smiled thinly. "Having been on both sides of that issue, I find fault with nobody. However, because such occurrences were common, every soldier understood that they might need to attend to their own steed. And thus were we instructed." As he'd been talking, he'd been opening kitchen cabinets and taking out a canister of rolled oats, a large jar of applesauce, and a box of oat-based breakfast cereal. "I'm not certain I've ever eaten any of these," he admitted. "They came with the Curse. But blended with boiling water, I do believe that they will suit."

"Admirably," Robin nodded. "At least, until he's back home and can be fed properly. Speaking of which," he eyed the remains of breakfast on the table with a faintly hopeful smile. "Might I…?" he asked.

Belle passed the plate at once.

Cecily pushed her chair back from the table. "I should be headed to school," she murmured.

"After last night?" Robin asked.

"Yes, sir," Cecily said with a slight shrug. "I can't really afford to miss it and it's not as though I'll be able to sleep at home."

"You might be surprised," Robin returned. "Your mother contacted me a short while ago, asking whether your younger siblings might benefit from a day in the forest. She thought she could do
with a bit of quiet and mentioned you'd likely want the same."

Cecily's eyes widened. "Sh-she did?" she said incredulously.

Robin nodded. "Back in Sherwood, I'd often thought that your mother to be more perceptive than might appear at first blush. As you're probably aware," he smiled, "she was your age once. And the eldest of a rather large family. Responsibilities and duties fall on us all and mustn't be shirked, but every now and again, I'd say that some respite is in order and I'd judge that she feels the same way. Of course, if you'd rather go to school…"

Cecily smiled a bit self-consciously. "I should," she hedged, "but honestly, I'll probably sleep the day away wherever I am. And it's not like I have any tests I'd be missing. And…" She took a breath. "I guess a day off isn't that bad an idea. And today isn't a rehearsal day," she added. "I don't think." She looked at Henry. "Is it?"

Henry shook his head. "Tomorrow."

"All right then," Cecily said. "I guess I'll sleep better in my own bed than in history class. And," she flushed, remembering her manners, "thank you."

Henry waited until Robin and the others left, Cecily holding Aggie tightly on horseback, Roland on his father's shoulders, and Skippy living up to his nickname as he pranced about Robin, peppering him excitedly with questions faster than the outlaw could answer them.

Finally, he turned to Belle and Rumple with a sigh. "I guess I ought to head over to my mom's," he said. "Uh… you need me to do anything before I go?"

Rumple shook his head. "Thank you, no. I think that after last night, a bit of rest will do all of us some good." As they moved from the vestibule into the front hallway, he glanced into the living room and noted something on the coffee table. "Though should you encounter the captain before I do, you might mention to him that he left something behind other than the horse he rode to come here."

"Uh, sure," Henry said. "But if he asks me what...?"

Rumple smiled. "He oughtn't. But if he should, just tell him that he'll be enlightened on his return here."

"Okay…” Henry said. Then, a moment later, "Grandpa? What you were saying before? Do you… still know how to ride a horse?"

A startled laugh escaped him. "I'm not sure I could now," he said. "It's been more years than I'd care to count since I attempted it and it was more, shall we say, an exercise in not falling off than in riding. And I must confess it's not something I've attempted since my injury," he added with a wince. "But," he continued, "I suppose that, in theory, at least, I do. Why do you ask?"

Henry sighed wistfully. "Did you see Cecily just now? She looked… great up there. I didn't even know she could ride. And Grandpa—I mean, my other grandpa—was going to teach me, but first he wanted me to learn how to look after my horse and muck out his stall—"

"Both important tasks to master, I'd agree," Rumple nodded.

"Yeah, but then, well, Dr. Whale brought Daniel back and he kind of spooked me. And maybe the horse, too. And then, uh, we all…” He hesitated. "We went to New York. And then I got
kidnapped and you followed me to Neverland. And then, Pan switched bodies with me, and cast
the Dark Curse and…” He shook his head. "I guess I never got back to learning and now, with the
new baby and Grandpa being co-sheriff and all…” He sighed again. "I don't think he’s going to
have time to teach me for a while. I don't even know if my horse came back with the second Curse
or if he stayed in the Enchanted Forest."

Rumple pressed his lips together. "Well, Henry. I'd say that finding out whether he did would be
the first order of business. Otherwise, I fear there's little to discuss until you obtain a suitable
mount. Once you have," he looked at Belle, "I believe that riding was often the pursuit of
noblewomen?"

"I-I'm no expert," Belle murmured with a slight smile. "But yes, I can ride. I don't know if I can
teach, though."

Rumple was smiling as well now. "You know how to ride. I know how to teach. Surely, if we put
our heads together, we might manage some sort of plan?"

Belle slipped her hand into her husband's. "We might," she said slowly. "But maybe we could hash
it out in a few hours? I could really use a bit of sleep right now."

"As could we all," Rumple intoned, still smiling.

Henry had been listening hopefully. Now he grinned. "Sorry. I didn't mean to keep you up. And I'll
find out about my horse. And if I still have one…"

"Then we shall see," Rumple said. "But I daresay we could arrange some manner of instruction."

Henry's grin broadened. "Thanks, Grandpa; you're the best! I mean you both are! I mean… Uh…
I'd better let you get some rest." He darted into the living room and emerged seconds later with his
knapsack. "Thanks for everything," he added.

Rumple, looking vaguely stunned, managed an answering smile. "You… you're quite welcome.
Uh… any… time," he added, his astonishment only growing at his grandson's enthusiastic nod.

After Henry had gone, he turned to Belle. "I don't know that I've heard that said about me before,"
he murmured.

Belle leaned her head against his shoulder. "I have a feeling you might start hearing it more often,"
she murmured back, closing her eyes. She was laughing a little as he slid an arm about her waist
and guided her toward the staircase.

Once Lily got over the strangeness of having meat that wasn't bacon for breakfast, she discovered
that she quite enjoyed venison—even if she'd never imagined eating it in a pie with sweet spices,
wine and dried fruit. There was another kind of frumenty, a savory one this time that had the
consistency of pilaf instead of porridge, which she rather liked. Actually, dried fruit, cinnamon,
ginger, and some sort of alcohol—wine, beer, ale, or cider for the most part—seemed to be present
in most of the dishes, whether protein or carb-based. It wasn't any kind of cuisine she was used to,
but she found herself going back to put more on her plate.

Finally, she leaned back with a sigh of contentment, belched, excused herself, and asked, "So.
What now?"

Maleficent smiled at her daughter and said nothing for a moment. Then she blinked. "Sorry. You're
so beautiful. I-I'm sorry. I just… just…" She exhaled. "You are. That's all."
She wasn't used to hearing compliments directed her way. Like the breakfast, it was strange. Not unpleasant, but nothing like anything she was used to. To cover her discomfiture, she pretended she hadn't heard. "How are we going to get revenge on Snow White and Prince Charming?"

Maleficent shook her head, still smiling. "Now that I see you," she said warmly, "I don't want to waste our time on revenge. While I can understand why it's important to you, it's suddenly so clear that we should only look forward."

Lily stood up from the table, her eyes blazing. "Seriously?" she demanded. "We're going to let them get away with this?"

Maleficent nodded. "We have a choice, Lily. We can be happy in the future, or we can be angry about the past."

"Can't we do both?" Lily snapped back. "Look, all these years since I figured out what happened, I've been trying to figure out how two humans could get me away from a freaking dragon. But now, I get it. You're a pushover." She registered the hurt in her mother's eyes, but kept going. "What'd they do, rub your belly? Give you a dragon treat?"

"Lily!" Maleficent exclaimed. "No. I did everything I could. But all I want to do now is enjoy our time together. I'm your mother. I-I missed so much that can never be recovered. I don't want to miss more."

"Sorry, Mommy," Lily retorted sarcastically. "I'm grown up now. I don't need fashion tips from Olga Mara or Morticia Adams or-or whoever wore that look first. I gotta go." She spun on her heel and headed for the passage beyond the chamber in which they were situated.

Maleficent hurried after her. "Wait! Wait. Please. These tunnels are a maze. You don't know how to find the exit."

"I'll take my chances."

"But you'll stay in town?"

Lily's lip curled bitterly. "What for?"

"Lily. Please. Regina explained it to me. This town has a protection spell around it. If you go, if you leave town, you'll never find your way back here again. And I can't leave at all. I'll crumble back into the dust that I was before I was revived."

Lily absorbed that. For a moment, she debated whether to tell her mother that she'd gotten past the protection spell once and could probably do it again. But why build up false hope? It wasn't as if she was planning on coming back here. She'd been expecting someone like Smaug, not Puff the Magic Dragon, for crying out loud! "Man," she snorted finally. "That's a bummer."

"Please!" Maleficent started forward again, but stopped short when she saw the look in her daughter's eyes. "Please," she said, stretching out her hand, but coming no closer. "Can't you wait just a little while longer? Things could look different in a week."

Lily hesitated. Maybe Maleficent was talking sense. Maybe there was more out there for her besides vengeance. Maybe. But maybe not. And Lily had been dreaming of vengeance for nearly half her life. She couldn't put that aside now. And if her mother wasn't going to help her achieve it, then she had no reason to stay here. "Send me a postcard," she said. Then she turned and nearly ran out of the chamber.
Maleficent watched her go, not sure whether she should give chase or give space. By the time she'd made up her mind to go after her daughter, the passage was empty. And though she listened and sniffed the air, she found no clue as to Lily's whereabouts. Fairy dust, she thought bitterly. The residue had a way of dampening her dragon senses. Sadly, she withdrew back into the chamber. She didn't know where Lily was, and Regina would be back soon. Perhaps, her old friend would have some idea of how to track her daughter now. And perhaps, by the time they found her, Lily would have calmed down enough to listen. "Oh, Lily," she whispered, "please, don't let me lose you now that I've finally found you. Not again."

Lily didn't know where she was going, she just ran. Which, she thought bitterly, was kind of the story of her life. When times got tough, when things got hairy, she just hopped a bus or hitched a ride and found some new place to try her luck.

She'd really thought that this would be it. That she'd finally get her happily ever after and see everyone who was responsible for her whole messed-up life pay.

Nothing was working out the way she'd thought it would. Sure, her mother was a fire-breathing dragon, but all she seemed to want to do was light a campfire and toast s'mores. Ursula had abandoned her. Cruella was dead—not that Lily was chuffed about it or anything, but she was still on her own again. She rounded a corner and stopped inches from the edge of a crevasse. What the hell was that doing there? Lucky thing she'd seen it in time. Wait. How had she seen it? She was underground. There was no sunlight and while there had been torches in the chamber in which she'd awakened, there were none about her. She looked around wildly and realized that the walls seemed to be festooned with pink glitter. Glitter that gave off a pearly luminescent glow of its own, she realized. Hesitantly, she brought her hand to the wall. It came away covered with a fine layer of the stuff. She frowned, trying to think whether it was just here, or whether it had been around here all along. Cautiously, she turned back the way she'd come. Yes, there was more of that glittery stuff and... And she was hearing something in the distance. A muffled chink, like metal on rock, she identified with a frown.

For a moment, she hesitated, debating whether she wanted to know what—or who—might be making that sound. She doubted it was her mother. And if there was anyone else down here, then they might know the way out. And if there wasn't, well, at least she had something to track now, which had to be better than running blindly and nearly falling into crevasses. Especially pink glittery ones.

She took a breath, and set off in the direction of the sound, stopping only to pick up a large rock from the ground to carry with her. If the source of the sound turned out to be trouble, she wasn't about to be caught defenseless.

As soon as they made it up the stairs and into the master bedroom, whatever energy Belle had left seemed to drain away. "I need sleep," she mumbled.

Rumple nodded agreement. "I rather thought that you might doze off at the table," he remarked. "I'm sorry. Perhaps if I'd thought to warn you before we arrived home, Granny's would have been the better option, after all." At Belle's questioning look, he added, "You'd already be in bed by now."

Belle placed her hand over his. "And miss seeing you with Roland and Aggie and the others?" she demanded. "Not for all the books in the library." She winced. "Or what's left of them after last night, anyway."
"Perhaps much can be salvaged. Or replaced," Rumple said, placing his free hand over hers. "And as for the guests, well, I'm sure Henry's played some small part in, um, rehabilitating my reputation."

"I don't think it's been only Henry."

"Well, yes," Rumple allowed. "Emma has some influence as well, though not as much with the youth in this town."

"No," Belle said, smiling softly. "I wasn't thinking of Emma, either." Rumple's eyes widened and Belle started to laugh, but ended up yawning instead. "I think I'd better get my nightgown and get washed up," she murmured.

Rumple nodded and went to retrieve his own sleepwear from the dresser.

"Rumple?" Belle murmured.

"Hmmm?"

"The first time you killed someone," she whispered, "did you ever wish you hadn't?"

Rumple turned away from the open drawer, returned to where she was standing, and slid his arm about her waist. "The first time?" he repeated. "No. The first person I killed was the man who'd brutally beaten me for a minor lapse, who'd taunted and humiliated me in front of my son, and who would have marched Bae off to fight in a war where he was certain to be killed. No, I've no regrets over snapping his neck, not even now." He winced. "The second time, however, was a different story."

"How did you... move past it?"

Rumple closed his eyes. He didn't really want to talk about those details. And he didn't actually regret killing Beowulf. But he probably wouldn't have done it—not at that point—had matters been up to him. He understood that Belle was asking for tools that she might use to come to terms with her recent actions and he knew that telling her the entire story wouldn't help her find them. Still, he thought for a moment and found something that might. "Well," he said at last, "I knew that under the circumstances, there was no choice." He shook his head sadly. "Though I must admit that it took me some time to accept that."

No, he wasn't lying. And any qualms he might have had at intentionally misleading her about what precisely had happened on that occasion fell away when she leaned into him and squeezed his hand once more.

Lily made her way cautiously toward the sound, her heart seeming to pound more heavily with each step. She didn't know where she was going or how to get back or how to get out. She had no idea what else might be down here. And she knew her rock wasn't much of a weapon. She slid her free hand into her pocket and reassured herself that the mace was still there, and not back in that weird fun-house mirror maze. Then she continued her advance.

Rounding the corner, she found the source of the sound. A man—roughly her own age, she thought—was swinging a pickaxe at the walls, jarring loose some sort of pink crystals. He wore a purple hat, a Geronimo Jackson shirt, blue canvas work pants, and an affable smile.

"Uh... hi," she said softly, taking a few steps nearer.
Startled, the man whirled toward her.

"I don't suppose you know the way out of here?" Lily asked.

The man regarded her for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly.

"Uh… could you tell me, then?"

The man shook his head.

For a moment, Lily felt her anger rise up again. Then realization hit her. "You… can't talk, can you?"

The man shook his head again.

"Well, uh… could you show me?"

A silly smile spread across his face and he bobbed his head energetically.

Lily smiled back, partly out of relief, and partly because silly though the smile might be, it seemed to light up the little man's face and she couldn't help but feel warmed by it. "I'm Lily, by the way."

For answer, the man held up his pickaxe horizontally, one hand near the top, one near the blade and held it out to her.

"Uh… you need me to dig?" she guessed with dismay.

Still smiling, the man shook his head and held it out again.

"Okay…" Lily said. Somewhere at the back of her mind was the idea that she probably shouldn't get too chummy with a guy who smiled too much while brandishing a pickaxe, but he hadn't done anything remotely threatening yet. "You want me to take this from you," she guessed again.

He shook his head again, but a bit less vigorously. For a moment, his smile dimmed a bit. Then he took his hand away from the top of the implement and ran his finger along the side of the handle that faced him.

"You… want me to see something on the handle?"

Suddenly the man slapped his forehead and doubled over in silent laughter. Then he reversed the pickaxe so that the other side faced her.

"Dopey," Lily read aloud. "Dopey? Is that really your name?" she demanded, a note of anger creeping into her voice.

The smile seemed to freeze on his face and he nodded uncertainly.

Lily exhaled. "Sorry. It's just, well, that's a hell of a thing to call anyone. What kind of parent sticks a kid with a name like that?" She sniffed. "And I thought 'Lilith' was bad when I found out what it meant."

Dopey pointed to the pickaxe.

"Yeah, it says 'Dopey'," Lily said. "But that doesn't mean that's who you are. I mean, it's not like it named you, right?"
Dopey pointed to his name again, nodding vigorously.

"Wait. Are you trying to tell me that your axe gave you your name?"

He nodded again.

"No," Lily shook her head. "Someone must've written it on the axe and gave it to you, right?"

Dopey shook his head patiently and pointed again at the pickaxe.

"But that's not possible!" Lily exclaimed.

Dopey shrugged. Then he swung the axe up so that the blade rested just above his shoulder and started marching down a passageway to her left. After a few steps, he glanced back over his shoulder and beckoned to her to follow.

After a second's hesitation, Lily obeyed, falling into step behind her new friend. She didn't know why she trusted him, but she had the sense that he was trying to help.

And if her instincts were off, she still had her mace.

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In her dreams, Belle sat next to her husband in a movie theater in Greenwich Village watching a musical romance between a na"ïve orphan and a disabled war veteran turned puppeteer. She smiled as the music started up again and the young woman opened her mouth to sing. But instead of words, the sound that came forth from her lips was akin to a ringtone. Her ringtone, Belle realized as she woke up. After she and Rumple had finally reconciled, she'd reset her ringtone to 'Hi Lili Hi Lo' and it was ringing now.

Groaning, she reached for her phone, feeling a pang as she felt Rumple stirring beside her. She should have turned off the phone before going to bed, she thought, as she looked at the caller ID.

It was the hospital. Wide awake at once, she picked up. "Hello? No, Doctor Whale, that's okay, I..." She forced a smile onto her face and into her voice. "Thank you, Doctor. Tell him... tell him I'll be there as soon as I can."

She ended the call and turned to face her husband. "As you heard," she said, "that was the hospital. Father's awake." Her smile was strained.

Rumple smiled back. "Some good news, at least," he remarked. His smile fell away. "What's the matter?"

Belle heaved a heavy sigh. "Nothing," she said, lying badly. "I'm glad he's awake. I am."

"Well, I'm glad that's established," Rumple prompted. "So..."

"So," Belle took another breath. "So, I meant everything we discussed earlier. He's not moving in here. I'm not moving in there."

Rumple nodded encouragingly. "And...?"

Belle winced and reached for his hand. "And now? I have to tell him."
"No way!" Skippy exclaimed, when Mama greeted them at home. "We get to spend a whole day in the forest with Robin Hood?"

"Actually," Robin cleared his throat, as Mama nodded, "it would be with the Merry Men. I'm headed back to town."

Skippy's groan of protest was nearly drowned out by Aggie's, "Yeah! Last time, Friar Tuck told me he'd show me how to make lu-nated manaskips when saw him again!"

Robin smiled. "Illuminated manuscripts, eh? Well, I do believe he might have been sharpening some quills for that purpose yesterday."

"Won't you be coming back to the forest at all, today?" Skippy persisted, ignoring the exchange between his little sister and the outlaw.

Robin sighed. "Perhaps I will, Skippy, but I'm afraid I won't be much for playing games today. I've other duties to attend to."

"We quite understand," Mrs. Lapine said firmly. Then she gave her son a meaningful look. "I'm sure Skippy will still prefer a day in the forest to a day in school." She lifted her eyebrows. "Though, if I'm mistaken, I suppose you could bring him back to town and drop him off at the elementary…"

Cecily smothered a laugh. Her little brother was clearly conflicted between the prospect of a day off school and the prospect of having Robin Hood all to himself for the half hour or so it would take him to reach school.

"I'll take the forest," Skippy muttered finally.

"I thought you might," Mrs. Lapine nodded. Then she smiled at her eldest daughter. "You're tottering on your feet," she said. "Inside, get some rest. We can talk afterwards."

Cecily's smile fell away. Mama didn't sound angry. But Mama also seldom had time for 'talks' unless one of them was in trouble.

"What'd'ja do, Cis?" Skippy whispered, no stranger to trouble.
"Nothing!" she whispered back, but as she followed Mama back in the house, she found herself wondering whether Mr. Gold had phoned Mama about her kissing Henry after all.

Maleficent regarded the remains of the feast and reached for a chicken pasty. She chewed mechanically, barely tasting it. For all she knew, she might have been eating her cloth napkin to boot.

She waved her hand and a collection of flasks and bottles appeared on the stone beside her. Sleeping curse… seawater… toadstool, yes she had all she needed. She blended the ingredients with a practiced hand, as though she'd only done so yesterday. It was only when she was about to dip a wooden spindle into her beaker that she realized what she was doing.

"No," she said aloud. "No, this isn't going to bring my daughter back. I can't afford to sit here feeling sorry for myself. I have to find her."

And once she did, how was she going to get through to her? She didn't know her daughter. She had no idea how to go about building a relationship with her now.

But, she reflected, going by what she'd listened to yesterday while she was reviving, she knew of two people who did have some experience reconnecting with a long-lost child. And they certainly owed her a favor or two…

She hurled the beaker against the cave wall and departed without a backwards look.

Dopey never paused or faltered as he led Lily unerringly down one passage and past another until they emerged, blinking in the chilly daylight. "Thank you!" Lily exclaimed.

Dopey, however, frowned and tilted his head at her questioningly.

"What?" she asked.

Dopey lifted his index finger and moved it horizontally from side to side. Then he pointed at her, looking for some flicker of comprehension.

"What is that?" she asked. "Some kind of sign language?"

He nodded.

"Uh, I don't… Wait." She bent down and picked up a stick. "Can you read? Write?"

Dopey's eyes widened slightly and he gave her a cautious nod, then took the stick when she handed it to him. He kicked aside the thin layer of snow, revealing a muddy bank. Carefully, he gouged block capital letters into the mud: WHERE U LIVE

Lily hesitated. "Massachusetts," she said softly.

WHY U HERE

"I've been wondering that myself for the last little while."

HAVE PLACE STAY

"Do I have a place to stay?" Lily translated. She hesitated again. "Not… really. Not one I want anyway."
Dopey pointed to the last three words again, then to her, and then to himself, nodding emphatically.

Lily blinked. "Are you saying I can stay with you?"

Dopey nodded.

"Why?" she demanded. "You don't know anything about me."

Dopey shrugged. Then he smiled affably, pointed to his axe handle, and then to himself.

"You're Dopey," Lily translated, smiling a little despite herself. "Guess you must be if you're inviting me home. I'm not exactly the kind of girl you bring home to Mama."

NO MAMA. Dopey smiled. JUST ME.

"Oh," Lily said. "I… guess that's okay." And she didn't have a whole bunch of options right now. Rumpelstiltskin had seen her face and probably given her description to the police by now. Emma might recognize her on sight anyway; she didn't think she'd changed that much. She didn't care to go back to Maleficent. At the moment, her choices seemed to be bunk in with Dopey or go back to the bottom of the lake. And she wasn't sure she could pull off another dragon transformation right now.

Bottom line: her new friend didn't seem to mean her any harm. And if he was some pervert after all, well, she had some experience dealing with those, too. "Is it a long walk?"

Dopey shook his head. Then he shouldered his axe once more and started walking down the gravel path.

Lily followed.

Zelena pulled the baby toward her protectively as Robin and Regina advanced. "You can't take her," Zelena proclaimed calmly. "You can't raise a newborn in a forest in the middle of winter."

Robin raised an eyebrow. "I've done it before," he remarked. "But I do take your point that it's less than ideal. So, after some discussion…" he took a sideways step toward Regina.

Regina smiled. "…Robin and Roland are moving in with me," she completed.

"What?"

Robin shrugged. "We've been moving in that direction for some time, now. The baby just gives us a reason to stop dithering about it."

"We did come to an agreement about custody," Regina reminded her.

Zelena's face seemed to twist and crumple. "She's my daughter," she protested weakly. "She… she loves me, you know that. It's the only reason I could wake her up. She…"

"The agreement—" Regina started to say, but Zelena cut her off.

"Yes I know about that damned agreement!" she snapped. "Snow White… Emma Swan… Gepetto Jefferson… Michael Tillman… me… Keeping parents from their children is very much your stock in trade, isn't it? And yet, it never works out in the end." Angrily, she thrust the swaddled bundle out at them. "So here. Take her. Enjoy your triumph while it lasts. I'll allow you your victory. I may lose this battle, but I shall win the war."
Robin took the baby from her. Regina smiled. "Have you got it all out of your system now?" she asked evenly. "Because I was about to invite you back to the house as well."

Zelena blinked. "Pardon?"

"I believe we agreed to supervised visits? If we're all under one roof, I'd say the supervision would be near-constant." Regina heaved a sigh. "A second chance isn't a second chance if everyone's watching and waiting for you to fail. Something I've only really come to understand recently. And that's what this is. Not a test. A chance. You want to be a mother to your child? Robin and I will support you and cheer you on every step of the way. You're feeling overwhelmed? Hopefully you'll trust someone enough to reach out and ask for help—and it doesn't necessarily need to be one of us, so long as it's someone we can all agree on. Robin retains custody, but you are very much going to be a part of this child's life, so long as we can see you making an effort."

"We don't expect perfection," Robin said with a strained smile. "After all, it would hardly be fair to hold you to a standard none of us could attain. For now, we'll settle for your putting the child first. And, not trying to kill or enslave the lot of us, of course."

Regina noted the slight tension in Robin's voice and took over once more. "I don't think any of us is naïve enough to believe that this will be a happily ever after. Not now. But maybe we can start with 'happily for the moment' and see where it goes."

Zelena started to smile and she took a glad step forward. Then her eyes found Robin's and something hard and cold in them froze her in her tracks.

"I'm not forgetting," Robin said tersely, "that I was your unwilling pawn in all of this."

"You hardly seemed unwilling at the time," Zelena smirked. "Though if it makes either of you feel better, I didn't enjoy it."

Regina started to say something, but Robin spoke first. "You know damned well that you had to impersonate my wife before I went to you. And even then, it was out of a sense of duty, rather than love." Despite herself, Zelena flinched at that. Robin continued. "I'm not going to continue to trade barbs with you. What's done is done. And none of that is our daughter's fault; I think we can, at least, agree on that much."

Zelena ducked her head once automatically.

"So," Regina said, "as hard as it might be, we're going to do our best to move on from the past. I spent too many years trying to kill one person I blamed for destroying my happiness, never seeing that I could have found it many times if I'd just looked away from my course of vengeance. I'm not going down that road again. I'd urge you to avoid it as well. This is," she turned to smile at Robin, "a messy, complicated situation. But for your daughter's—my niece's—sake, I think we can make this work. Your call, Sis."

"And if I refuse?"

Regina shook her head sadly. "Then you can go back to your farmhouse. Or, back to New York, I suppose. Wherever you want; you aren't a prisoner now. It all comes down to how much you want to be in your child's future. Again, that's your decision."

Zelena looked from her to Robin. Robin nodded slowly, his face carefully blank now. She took a breath. "Well, then," she said brightly. "I suppose I'd better see the quarters you've picked out for me and determine whether I'll need to redecorate. Please tell me they aren't all frills and lace…"
Robin and Regina exchanged a cautious look. They both meant to give Zelena a second chance, but neither was naïve enough to assume that she was leaping for it with wholehearted sincerity.

Still, Regina reflected, if she had managed to change course, if Rumple had managed it, well, who was to say that her sister couldn't manage as well?

Not that 'could' and 'would' were the same thing, of course. She was nowhere near as hopeful as her stepdaughter. But perhaps, she wasn't quite as pessimistic as she once had been…

"Well," Uncle Bené smiled, "I know you both had a full day yesterday. I trust you've recovered?"

Tony and Tia exchanged a quick glance. "Well," Tony said, pouring hot water over the teabag in his cup, "my shoulders feel like I left the hanger in my shirt when I put it on this morning; I haven't really practiced flying since I moved to New York. But other than that, yeah."

Tia winced. "I'll let you know after the aspirin wears off," she said, reaching for the teapot once her brother had set it down. "Talking to animals is one thing. Talking to dragons is something else."

Uncle Bené nodded sympathetically. "All magic—even yours—does come with a price. Fortunately, you won't need to incur any further debts on that account unless you choose to do so." His smile grew warmer. "You've both completed the tasks for which I summoned you."

"You mean," Tony said with some dismay, "we have to leave? Already?"

Tia said nothing, but the disappointment in her brother's eyes was magnified in her own.

Uncle Bené shook his head. "You're free to remain here so long as you choose to do so, though I think your families will miss you. I meant only that the purposes for which I called you here have been fulfilled. You're now here," he smiled again, "for pleasure, rather than business."

"I'm not sure about that," Tia spoke up slowly. "I've been hoping for a chance to learn more about, well, about the sort of magic you do, Uncle. And this seems to be the right place to do it." She sighed. "I know I won't more than scratch the surface. But it'll be another week before Glenn and the kids get back from their ski trip. I can stay around for another few days before I have to drive back."

Tony gave a sigh of mock despair. "I… guess that means I'm stuck here, too," he said dolefully. "I mean, Tia is the one with the car and there doesn't seem to be much in the way of bus service from here to Manhattan." He looked down at the floor for a moment, then met his sister's eyes with a grin. "Looks like I've got time to check out that pawn shop for curios, after all."

Bené stroked his beard with a sage expression. "Well, then. I shall be delighted to host you a bit longer." He smiled. "Do you still take honey?" he asked, passing the jar their way.

Belle was silent on the drive to the hospital, but out the corner of his eye, Rumple could see her hands twisting and untwisting.

"If you've changed your mind…" he murmured.

Belle shook her head. "I haven't. But this isn't going to be easy."

Rumple nodded, keeping his eyes on the road.
"He's my father," Belle said.

Rumple nodded again.

Belle's hands clenched into fists in her lap. "I know what's expected. I know everyone's going to talk about it when they found out I didn't do it. They…" She winced. "They're going to blame you, too, you know. Just like he will. Nobody's going to believe that this is my decision. They'll think you put me up to it, no matter what I say."

Rumple his right hand off the steering wheel and placed it over her left for a moment. "Is that what's troubling you?"

Belle sucked in her breath. "Some of it, I guess. The rest is, as much as I know I'm doing the right thing, I also know it's not going to look that way. And I shouldn't care what anyone else thinks, but… I do."

Rumple nodded. "Well. We both know you made your choice with no input from me. And as for blame, well," he chuckled, "you can't imagine me unaccustomed to bearing the brunt of everyone's accusations. But, at least this time, you know the truth. That will make the current round of condemnations somewhat easier to deal with." And he rather thought that there were a few others this time out who would hear what he had to say—and believe him—rather than jump to conclusions.

Belle sighed. "I could almost change my mind to spare you those," she said, smiling just a bit. Her smile dropped. "But I think you'll endure them better than you will sharing a roof with Father. He… last night, he wouldn't stop… having a go at you. You weren't even there. He had to know that nothing he said could change my mind about you. I don't think he could help himself."

"It almost sounds as though he wouldn't want to stay with us, even if you were inclined to extend the invitation."

"Oh, he'd come," Belle retorted. "If only to keep trying to drive a-a wedge between you and me."

Rumple stopped at a red light and Belle gripped his hand. "We've had enough… wedges between us. I'm not giving my father a chance to try hammering in another one." She took another breath. "He's not staying with us. I won't change my mind."

Rumple squeezed her hand tightly. Over the purring of the Cadillac's engine, he almost missed her murmured, "…I hope."

She emerged from the hospital room after fifteen minutes with a look on her face that Rumple could only call apologetic. "You changed your mind," he deduced at once.

Belle shook her head. "No. But I couldn't tell him either. I don't mean I couldn't get the words out," she added hastily. "With the medications he's currently taking, he's," she winced, "he wasn't very lucid. He knew I was there," she said. "He smiled," and now there was a brittle edge in her voice, "and told me I was his good girl. And then he drifted off before I could say anything."

Rumple smiled reassuringly. "They won't be releasing him today," he pointed out. "You'll have ample time to explain the situation."

"I know," Belle replied. "I guess, well, I've been steeling myself for this since last night. As much as I didn't want—don't want—to upset him, I know I will and, for all I was dreading the conversation, I was also looking forward to getting it over with." She met his smile with a reluctant one of her own. "Now, I get to stress over it a bit longer."
"Oh, Belle!" The two turned as one to see Whale approaching at a clip. "I'm glad I caught you. Merryweather's in if you need to make those arrangements we were talking about last night. And when you're done," he added, "I'd like a word, as well."

"If it's about Father," Belle said, "perhaps we'd best have it now."

Whale shook his head. "It's not. And it's not all that urgent, either. I've just…" He stopped. "You know, maybe we should talk first."

"Sure," Belle said, looking puzzled. "But if it's not about Father, then what is it about?"

Whale took a breath. "Cruella. I've just seen a copy of the ME's report."

"Are we doing the right thing?" Robin asked quietly. Zelena was upstairs nursing the baby and he and Regina were in the kitchen with the door closed. "I thought we were. I truly believed that I could accept the situation. But now…"

Regina nodded. "Messy and complicated doesn't begin to describe it."

"If she hadn't been able to break the curse," Robin said, "had she not proven that she was capable of love, that she truly cared for the babe as something other than a-a badge she could flaunt in our faces…"

"It would be short-sighted to think that a child is going to solve all of her… issues," Regina said. "But if I'd never adopted Henry, I wouldn't have become the person I am today. Change doesn't happen overnight, but it does happen."

Robin nodded slowly. "But while this change is happening," he said, "how safe are we? More to the point, how safe will Roland be here?"

Regina lowered her eyes. "I don't know," she admitted. "We can both protect him, of course, but I won't deny that protections can fail."

"Yes," Robin agreed. "And I'm not about to leave him in the forest to be raised by the Merry Men while I try to come to some sort of civil accommodation with the woman who… who I thought was my wife."

"You're going back there, then," Regina said sadly.

Robin shook his head. "No. I still need to reach that accommodation. And much as it pains me to admit it, Zelena did have a valid point: raising an infant in the forest is far from ideal." He looked away. "We did well enough his first winter. But the following autumn, Friar Tuck could tell that his second would be far more brutal. It was then that we dared to chance refuge in the Dark One's former castle." He frowned. "Or, perhaps that should be former Dark One's former castle. We were outlaws," he added. "There was no choice. But that's not the case, now. I won't endanger either of my children unnecessarily. But neither will I step out of my daughter's life and leave her upbringing to your sister."

"I'll be keeping an eye on her," Regina pointed out.

"You're also the town's mayor. You have many responsibilities." Robin smiled. "I'm not saying you won't. But there will be times when you'll need to sacrifice your vigilance for the town's well-being and that's as it should be. Besides, I've never been one to shirk my duties." He took a deep breath. "I think for now, I need to ask a favor."
Regina felt her heart sink. She was going to lose him. No matter what sort of face he put on what he was going to say next, she was going to lose him. But every lesson she'd ever learned in concealing her true feelings and putting on a serene face to the world came to the fore and she somehow managed to smile and say calmly, "Of course. What do you need?"

"A house," Robin said. "As close to this one as possible. Roland and I will live there for now. While he's in school, I'll be here, of course. And if Zelena's leap into motherhood proves to be mere infatuation or worse, I think we can both agree that raising her in town is far less problematic."

Regina instantly forgot every last one of those lessons and flung her arms about her True Love's neck. "I'll talk to Rumple," she said. "He may know of a vacancy. I mean, he does own this town, after all."

"It's still not perfect," Robin cautioned. "Until now, when duty's called, I've been able to leave Roland with my men. That won't be nearly as easy going forward."

Regina started to nod her understanding when a thought struck her. The smile that had been slipping from her face returned in force.

"Regina?"

"I think I may have a solution," she said, with just the smallest hesitation. After all, the idea had only just occurred to her and she had no idea whether Astrid would accept. But the fairy—former fairy—did seem to have a talent for working with young children. And she was currently homeless. "I'll need to make a phone call," she said slowly, still smiling, "to make sure, but… I think I may have found you a perfect nanny…"

Belle swallowed hard. "Yes, of course," she murmured. She was aware of Rumple hovering in the background. She knew that if she tried to avoid this conversation, he would support her without question. But if she had done the deed, she had to face the consequences. She followed Whale into his office, Rumple close behind.

"I won't beat around the bush," Whale said. "While the official cause of death was a head injury, based on the ME's findings, it probably wouldn't have been, were it not for other factors."

Belle blinked. "I-I don't understand. I hit her—obviously harder than I'd intended—and knocked her into one of the well supports, and she died. I killed her. Whether I meant to or not, I killed her."

"That's just it, Belle," Whale explained gently. "You didn't hit her hard, not at all. The ME's conclusion is that if she hadn't been wearing stiletto heels and standing on a stone base that was more slippery than usual, thanks to all of the freezing and thawing and re-freezing that goes on at this time of year, she probably wouldn't have fallen, and almost certainly not hard enough to crack her skull. Belle, even if Cruella hadn't been manipulating a dragon, even if she hadn't been trying to crush your husband's heart, based on what this report says, I'm no lawyer, but I believe it would be hard to make even a manslaughter—much less a murder—charge stick. There was no recklessness; there was no criminal negligence. Maybe a case could be made that you were acting 'under the influence of extreme anger or extreme fear brought about by adequate provocation,' but since that would only apply if you had intentionally or knowingly caused her death—based on my understanding of the Maine Criminal Code, anyway—I kind of doubt it."

Belle shook her head. "I killed her," she repeated dumbly.
Whale sighed. "I know. Believe me." Belle's head jerked up, even as she felt Rumple's hand on her arm. Despite the doctor's words, she saw no condemnation in his eyes. "A woman died because of something you did," he continued. "That's not… easy to live with. Even when the law doesn't hold you responsible for it, your conscience does. I…" For a moment, he broke eye contact. "I've been there myself," he finished quickly.

Belle sucked in a breath. "How… how did you get past it?" she asked.

Whale shook his head. "I didn't. I don't think it's something you're supposed to get past, so much as something you go on with. Some days, that's easier than others. But it helps when you have people you can talk to who understand what you're going through. And while I am one of those, I… think you'll find a number of people who are closer to you who can say the same. Not that you can't call on me if you want to. Or Doctor Hopper, for that matter."

"Doctor Hopper," Belle repeated.

"Not just in his professional capacity," Whale smiled. "I think there was something to do with a potion and a couple of puppets Marco recently procured from your husband?" He sighed. "He's someone else with firsthand experience regarding your current situation." His eyes looked past her. "Among others."

Yes, well, she and Rumple had already danced about this topic together, or begun to. Still, Whale's reminder wasn't unwelcome. Her husband's hand was still on her arm. She brought her free hand up to cover it and squeeze. "Thank you, Doctor," she breathed. She glanced over her shoulder, found Rumple's eyes, and smiled. Then she focused on Whale once more.

"I… It's a lot to think about," she said vaguely. "But before I do, I suppose I'd best find Merryweather."

She wasn't alone. There were people who understood. People who had made similar—if not identical—errors to hers. Maybe that wasn't enough, but it was a start. And a great deal better than nothing.

Snow waited until David had had his second cup of coffee before she broached the subject of her earlier conversation with Emma. He heard her out.

"You know," he said finally, "she had a point about the timing."

Snow winced. "I know she did. But letting something like this fester… It might get worse."

"Snow," David said, smiling faintly, "this isn't like what happened between you and Regina when you were ten. I mean, this is Belle!"

"I know," Snow said again. "But it could still get worse. I just… I know I messed up. I just think it would be better if she'd let me… I don't know, talk it out? Apologize? Something. Keeping things bottled up never works in the long run, and it is always so much worse when it comes out."

"Which is probably a timing issue," David reminded her. "Look, I'm not saying that your heart wasn't in the right place when you told Moe what happened. But did Belle have to find out last night? She was already dealing with a lot. Just… give her time." There was a knock on the door. He started to get up.

"No," Snow said, "I'll get it."
"Just give her time," David repeated, as she pushed back her chair. "After all, that was what Emma needed after she found out about Maleficent."

Snow opened the door and she felt her heart begin to thunder. "David…" she said hoarsely, as she took an involuntary step backwards.

David twisted in his chair to see who it was that his wife had opened the door to, and felt his own throat go dry. *Speak of the devil*, he thought, as Maleficent swept into the room.
Chapter Forty-Eight

Chapter Notes

A/N: Adam Horowitz has stated that OUAT's Maleficent is not a fairy. I guess that makes her a dragon, regardless of the form she takes.

Dame schools were small private schools for young children. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, they can be viewed as forerunners of nursery/infant schools in England and colonial America. A typical curriculum would include the alphabet, basic reading, religion, and household chores.

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Maleficent shook her head impatiently at their apprehension. Despite what she'd said earlier, part of her might have reveled in it, but she had other matters on her mind. "I'm not here to kill you," she said levelly.

David's eyebrows shot up. "Um… okay," he said, but despite the relief in his eyes, Maleficent noticed that his hand was still moving toward the sword at his hip.

"Really," she snorted, "you don't need that. And," she added matter-of-factly, "if my intentions were hostile, you'd already be dead. But I didn't come here to fight."

Snow swallowed hard, but when she spoke, her voice was almost calm. "Then why did you come here?" she asked.

Maleficent lowered her eyes. "I just… I just want my daughter."

Snow frowned. "She's not with you?"

"She's leaving," Maleficent said, not quite able to conceal a ragged note on the last word.

Some of the tension left David's stance as he extended his hand toward her, still a bit warily. "You think we can help," he guessed.

Snow seemed to collect herself and a welcoming smile curved her lips, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Please," she said, "sit down. I… I'll put some tea on. And we can… talk."

Maleficent's answering nod was stiff, but her smile was hopeful as she approached the table and took the seat that David pulled out for her, murmuring her thanks.

Lily took in the studio apartment at a glance. "You live here?" she asked, trying to sound friendly. Her new friend was either a slob, a pack rat, or both. Clothes were strewn over most of the furniture. Papers littered the floor. Dusty footprints told her that it had been some time since anything had been cleared away to sweep.
"I... hope you didn't bring me back here to hire me as a housekeeper," she quipped. Then she felt her face grow hot, as she realized that she might have just insulted her new acquaintance.

Dopey, however, seemed to take no offense. Instead, his shoulders quivered as he laughed silently and shook his head in a gesture of negation.

He crossed swiftly to a desk where a computer sat, its screen-saver showing dancing red stick figures. He moved the mouse and quickly minimized the document that appeared in its stead. Then he opened a blank page.

Now, he typed, we can talk. He raised an eyebrow and slapped his forehead. I mean, I can talk to you with this. You can just talk to me like you have been.

Lily nodded. "That works," she agreed. "So... do you, uh, usually invite total strangers here?"

Dopey shook his head. There are no total strangers here most of the time. Everyone knows everyone.

"A few days ago," she countered, "Someone asked me if I was a... Sherwood Forest refugee."

Dopey nodded. They are newcomers, but they know each other. And they stick together. You're alone.

Lily sighed. "Yeah," she agreed. "I guess I am."

Dopey shook his head. I meant to say that you WERE alone. Now you aren't.

She smiled. Then she looked at the words on the screen and a puzzled frown came to her face. Dopey might have been clowning about in those tunnels. And the words he'd scratched in the mud had been pretty simple. But as she reread his part of their current conversation, she noticed a few things. Dopey had not made a single typo. Not even an 'accidentally a word'. His prose wasn't very descriptive, but it sounded a lot more mature than his childish smile might have led her to expect. She turned back to face him. "You know, for a guy named 'Dopey,' I think you might be a little smarter than you let on."

Dopey buried his face in his hands for a moment. When he raised it again, he was smiling, but she read apprehension in his brown eyes. You won't tell? he typed, glancing at her nervously.

Lily shrugged. "Who else have I got to talk to?"

Please?

Lily shrugged again. "Sure, if it's that important to you, I'll keep your secret. Mind telling me why?"

For a long moment, his fingers hovered over the keyboard. Then he typed, I'm Dopey. That's all anyone has to know.

"But that's not all you are."

So?

Lily took a step back, shaking her head. Why was this guy letting some... axe... define who he was? Why didn't it bother him? And why the hell was it bothering her this much?

He was typing again. Make yourself at home. I need to finish something. If you want food, check
"Uh… that's okay," she said. "Maybe I'll just sit down somewhere."

Dopey nodded. Sure. Sit anywhere you want. If you need anything else, ask me. Don't wait for me to finish. Sometimes I lose track of time.

"Uh," Lily frowned wondering why he'd shifted gears so suddenly. "Uh, sure. Okay. So… what do you need to do?

Dopey smiled. Work, he typed. Then, he reached for a curtain that Lily hadn't noticed, bunched up at the wall a few inches away from the table. He pulled it forward along a curved rod, sealing himself off from her with a semi-circular barricade.

"Okay…" Lily said slowly. "I'll just… call you if I want you." She looked around at the rest of the room. Nothing she could see appeared remotely valuable. The clothes looked like something she might have picked up at K-Mart, or maybe Walmart. The knickknacks on the furniture looked homemade and not like anything a fence would want. And she didn't want to go poking around in his drawers and cabinets; not when he might come out from behind that drapery at any time.

Finally, she shrugged, swept a heap of clothes from one sofa cushion to the other, and turned on the TV. As she sank down onto the sofa and leaned back, she realized that it really was a relief to sit down again. It felt like she'd been on her feet for hours. She wasn't tired, exactly, but she didn't feel like moving again right now.

Maybe later, she'd suggest they get takeout. Once he left to pick it up, she could do a more thorough search of the place. She didn't really want to rob him, but she couldn't stay here indefinitely and a bit of money—or something to pawn—always came in handy…
Snow nodded sadly. "She was afraid that if she opened herself up to me, I'd let her down like everyone else had. And... ultimately, I did."

Maleficent shook her head. "I'm sorry for your troubles, but they don't help me now. If there's any way that you can... You didn't give her back to me as you once promised you would, but if you can do something now... Please."

Snow nodded again. "Yes. Come on, David. We'll stop by the sheriff station; Emma should be there now." She smiled at Maleficent. "If Lily's still in town, we'll find her. And if she isn't, then Emma will."

Belle had to force herself to approach the clock tower—or what was left of it. "It... Well," she said almost too evenly. "I suppose it was better at night, when I couldn't see the extent of the damage."

Rumple rested a reassuring hand on her arm. "Regina tells me that it will be put aright in short order," he murmured. "If I had a better idea of how to shape my current brand of magic, I would..."

Belle turned to him with a warm smile. "I know. You don't... regret giving it up?" she asked. "I mean, at times like this—"

"At times like this," Rumple cut her off smoothly, "I do wish that I had the power to restore that which was destroyed. I," he shook his head, "I know how much this place means to you and how it must pain you to see it like this."

"It's just a building," Belle said at once. "It's not as important as—"

"No, but it is important to you," Rumple replied. He sighed heavily. "When first I became the Dark One, it was because I wanted the power to save my son and the other children. I wanted the power to end the Ogre War and win the admiration of those who scorned me." He shook his head again. "In short order, though, I came to just... want the power." He let out a breath. "Now, while I wish I did have the power to grant you what your heart desires most, I think it's probably best I don't reacquire it. Not if it leads me down the same path I began to tread over two centuries ago."

His hand was still on her arm. Belle turned slightly to face him and placed her free hand on his shoulder. "You already have granted it," she said smiling. "And it's not the library." Her smile hardened slightly, as she added, "Which isn't something you ought to feel responsible for repairing in the first place. Nor Regina, for that matter," she continued, "though as mayor I can see why she would."

Rumple took her meaning and shook his head, still smiling. "I think you'll have a far longer wait to reopen if you mean to delay repairs until the true culprit comes forward."

Belle sighed. "I don't know that I'm ready to deal with her at the moment, at any rate;" she admitted. "If I see her now, I'll probably do... something else I'll regret." She smiled back wanly. "Actually, I'd prefer it if she just stayed away from the both of us from here on out."

Rumple nodded. "I can scarcely fault you there," he returned. "Well. Maleficent has charge of her now. I imagine those two will spend a few days catching up. And after that? Well, she arrived here unannounced. It's probably too much to expect that she might depart the same way. But we can hope."

Emma fought down a mounting feeling of dismay when she saw her parents at the doorway of the sheriff station office, Maleficent accompanying them. It wasn't hard to guess why they were here.
Still, she forced herself to smile a greeting and listened to what they were saying. Then she steeled herself and took a deep breath. "So, you haven't seen her since she left you in the mine," she stated, looking to Maleficent for confirmation.

Maleficent nodded. "I don't know where to find her, much less how to reach her."

Emma nodded back. "Well, asking the dwarves is probably the best place to start," she pointed out. "Even if they didn't see her, nobody knows those tunnels as well as they do."

"Grumpy's probably at Granny's right now," David smiled. "And if he isn't, we can swing by the pharmacy and talk to Sneezy."


Snow blinked. "You're not coming with us?"

"I've got a lot to do here," Emma hedged. "Besides, you don't need me. Maleficent knows what Lily looks like. And I don't see why two sheriffs need to be on top of this."

"You want me to stay back?" David asked with a puzzled frown.

Emma took a breath. "Maleficent, would you mind if I spoke to my parents alone for a second?" she asked.

The dragon raised an eyebrow, but she swept out of the office, closing the door behind her. As soon as they were alone, Emma said, "I can't get involved in this."

David blinked, startled. "What?"

Emma took another breath. "Look, I'm sorry she and Maleficent didn't hit it off, but Lily's a grown woman. Maybe we shouldn't get involved."

"But she's leaving!" Snow exclaimed.

"Yeah," Emma nodded. "Maybe that's for the best, too."

Snow gasped. "Emma!"

"I thought the two of you were friends," David protested.

Emma half rose from the desk and braced both her hands at its edge. "Well, so did I!" Emma shot back. "Right up until the moment she ruined one of the few decent foster placements I had!"

"But…" Snow gaped at her. "But that was such a long time ago! You can't still be angry after all this time!"

"About that?" Emma snapped. "You're right. I got over it. And… when the Apprentice told us who she was, I admit that I was looking forward to seeing her again. I thought that knowing what I know now about her having my…" she lowered her eyes, "my darkness, maybe I could be a little more understanding this time out. Maybe I could give her a second chance."

"Absolutely," David nodded. "So…?"

Emma slammed down the file folder with enough force to dislodge several sheets of paper. She grabbed them without looking and thrust them back inside. "So, the last time I saw her, she was on the run after being involved in an armed robbery. And before she moved on, she also stole a bunch
"I remember," Snow said. "That was part of what you told Maleficent while she was waking up. But—"

"She hasn't changed," Emma snapped. "She's just added kidnapping and assault to her repertoire. I could try to overlook what she did to the library and to Mr. French—even if Belle might not," she added in an undertone. "I mean, it's not like she's the only person around here who hurt people because they lost control of their… magic?" She frowned for a moment, thinking aloud. "Yeah, shape-changing qualifies. Magic. I know how scary that was for me." Her voice hardened. "But what she did to Gold was beyond the pale. You guys can go find her. I don't want to see her again, unless," her head jerked toward the holding cells, "she's in custody. And since I don't think Maleficent's going to be happy if she sees me slap cuffs on her daughter, I'm sitting this one out."

"Maybe you should," David looked as though he couldn't quite believe what he was saying, "talk to Rumpelstiltskin before you decide. I have to admit he's been a lot more… forgiving lately. And really, it's a similar situation to that with Poseidon and Ursula: an estranged parent trying to reconnect with lost child—"

"Then you talk to him," Emma shot back. "Maybe he'll let Maleficent prick her finger on that globe I used to track you down after Regina's car crash. But after seeing the bruises he sustained after that fall down the storm cellar stairs, I wouldn't bet on it." She opened a desk drawer, pulled out another folder and thrust it toward her parents. "Gold's statement from the other night," she said. "In case you need a refresher, Lily was the one who dropped him down the stairs. Not to mention clobbered him with a lamp inside the shop. I'm not going to ask him to rise above that; not now. Not after we've promised him we're going to start acting like he's part of this town." She took another breath. "Because he is. Lily isn't. And if it comes down to supporting someone who's just recently proven himself to be a true friend over…" Her voice trailed off. "I'm not going to be part of the search effort," she said finally. "But, hey. I've got faith in you guys. You'll find her."

Still stunned, her parents regarded her silently for one long moment. Then Snow nodded slowly and they turned and walked toward the door. One hand on the knob, David looked back over his shoulder. Emma shook her head firmly and picked up the folder she'd been going through earlier. She pretended to be immersed in it for several minutes after the door closed once more.

There was no reason to feel guilty, Emma told herself fiercely. She'd made the right decision, even if it felt like it had been the wrong one. She and Lily had never been friends, not really. Yeah, Lily had come to her rescue when she'd almost been picked up for shoplifting, but practically the first words to come out of the other girl's mouth had been lies and Lily had kept up the trend through the rest of that encounter. Emma didn't know whether her superpower hadn't been working that day, or whether she'd been so happy to have made a friend that she'd disregarded what it was telling her, but the truth—with its attendant anger, hurt, and betrayal—had come out in the end.

She'd given Lily another chance when their paths crossed again, and gotten burned for it. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Emma wasn't going to give her a third opportunity.

That wasn't the only reason she was sitting out, though. If it had been, she probably would have let her parents talk her out of her resolution. After all, Lily was another lost girl looking for a family. Emma almost managed not to roll her eyes at that tired argument. She'd once watched a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's Pirates of Penzance—about a band of privateers whose saving grace was a refusal to harm any orphan that they might come across. Of course, once word
got out, as the operetta's hero had put it, "...Every one we capture says he's an orphan. The last three ships we took proved to be manned entirely by orphans, and so we had to let them go. One would think that Great Britain's mercantile navy was recruited solely from her orphan asylums..."

To Emma, it felt like everyone in Storybrooke had either abandoned a child, been abandoned as a child, or both. Lily, she reflected with some cynicism, was just part of the trend. And then, instantly, she was ashamed of herself. Lily's pain was no less real just because it was common. Neither was Maleficent's. Damn it, she liked Maleficent.

And maybe, she would have let herself be persuaded, if Lily had restricted her deliberate activities here to confidence games and petty theft. She'd meant what she said about being willing to overlook what Lily had done when she'd been out of control (or, as Tia had related to them, under Cruella's!)

But there were other factors in play.

It had taken her some time to recognize the pattern, but once she had, she couldn't unsee it again. At one time or another, just about everyone in town had prioritized their needs, their wants, their pain over Gold's. Maybe they hadn't stated it outright, but the message had come through loud and clear: whatever he needed, whatever pain he was feeling, none of it mattered; it had to be put aside for the greater good. Belle hospitalized with amnesia and a gunshot wound? Never mind that, Whale needed a patient healed. Neal dying (at least, that was what she'd believed), as he fell through a portal? Her parents still asked him to pull himself together and save the town. Enslaved and held captive for months, then finally freed? His tormentor was going to have a second chance and he just needed to… move on.

She'd finally realized the trend when she, Belle, and August had joined him in New York and promised herself that things were going to change from this point onward. More to the point, she'd promised Gold. Maybe not directly, but an apology that didn't carry with it an unspoken promise to try to do better was an empty apology.

And I still asked him to… waive his right to justice and let Ursula go home with her father—and that was less than twenty-four hours after she, Lily and Cruella had kidnapped him. What the hell am I supposed to tell him to get him to back down about Lily? He still might. There was no question that he'd been a lot… nicer since he'd gotten free from the Darkness. But if Emma asked him, then… Then she was still doing what everyone always had; she was just feeling guiltier than usual about it. And seriously, why should he have to be the one who backs down? Is it because we've come to think we have a right to expect it of him? Or do we just think he's easier to strong-arm?

A new thought struck her. Gold still probably wasn't used to having friends. He was used to bargains and deals: he did something for someone; someone did something for him. And if one didn't like the terms, then one didn't strike the deal. Would it seriously be that farfetched if Gold saw friendship as something similarly… transactional? What if he was agreeing to everything she asked of him, not out of selflessness or generosity, but because he was afraid that refusing would lead her to abandon him? Of course, Emma had no intention of doing anything of the kind, but would Gold know that—or believe it if she told him? Seriously? Until he and Belle patched things up this last time, that was pretty much standard operating procedure: he did something wrong; Belle walked out on him; he apologized; and they made up until the next time. What else does he know from?

Emma's jaw set. Forget strong-arming and call it what it is: bullying. If we're pushing Gold into letting people who hurt him get away without consequence, not because he wants to be the bigger person, but because it'll make our lives easier, then like my parents always say, 'Heroes don't do
what's easy; they do what's right.' And when did letting Lily get away with what she did become the right thing anyway?

Her mind was made up. If Lily—on her own—showed some indication that she was trying to become a better person, then—just as she had with Gold—Emma would be there to support her. Otherwise, she stood by what she'd said earlier: her parents could help Maleficent find Lily. And if, when they did, Lily still wanted to leave, then it was probably for the best. And if Emma had to choose between Gold and Lily, right now she could state with more assurance than ever before that Gold had the better track record.

Something was strange, Cecily realized, as soon as she woke up. It wasn't just the amount of sun filtering through the curtains; she knew it was late morning, maybe even early afternoon. Clearly, Mama had let her sleep until now.

No, the strange thing was that the house was quiet. No little brothers or sisters chasing each other through the hallway or bouncing balls against the side of the house, or imitating cars and airplanes as they manipulated their toys. No TV blasting cartoons at maximum volume. No Mama ordering everyone to be quiet or calling to her to 'lend a hand'. Quiet. Blissful quiet. Maybe she was still dreaming.

If this was a dream, though, something should be happening by now, right? She should be showing up at rehearsal totally naked or Skippy should be prancing in with two heads with everyone else acting like it was normal or something. She gave herself an experimental pinch. It hurt. Not a dream, then. And if she wasn't asleep or dreaming, then it was time to get up. She stepped into her slippers and made her way toward the bathroom.

The pounding on the door startled Lily out of her television-induced stupor. She got up quickly and crossed the room to the curtained alcove, but before she could say anything, Dopey emerged looking worried. Holding his right index finger to his lips, he gripped her wrist with his left hand and pulled her firmly into the alcove.

Wait here, he typed at once. Be quiet. Don't touch anything. Not until they're gone.

"W—" His finger was suddenly against her lips, as he released her wrist and gestured to the keyboard.

Don't talk, he typed quickly. Type. The pounding came again and he shook his head. I'll answer after.

Lily nodded. Dopey smiled and ducked out of the curtain and into the apartment proper. I was just going to ask who 'they' were, she thought, sitting very still and listening intently. Maybe she could figure it out. Or at least find out something more about her new benefactor.

"...got to find her!" a gruff voice was saying. "Before her mother lays waste to the town." There was a silence long enough to make Lily wonder if they'd somehow left really quietly. Then the gruff voice snapped, "What do you mean you're not coming? I'm telling you, there's a dragon on the loose! Dragons are full of Dark magic! Some of them can even make themselves invisible! She might be in this room right now!"

Lily tensed and wished she knew what Dopey was telling them. From the way the gruff voice was going on, though, it didn't sound as though Dopey was mentioning her. Which was a relief.
She leaned back for a moment. When she turned to look at the screen, she realized that she must have accidentally minimized the Word document. And Dopey had told her not to touch anything. Well, she could see the application in the task bar at the bottom of the page. She could bring it back up. No problem. She frowned. There were two open documents. One—the untitled one—had to be the blank one Dopey had been 'talking' to her with. But he'd probably had the other one up, too. At least, she thought he probably had.

She clicked on it and her jaw dropped. Holee...

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Mrs. Lapine was carrying one sleepy twin in each arm when she met Cecily at the top of the stairs. "I was going to check on you after I put them down for their nap," she smiled. "If you'd like a real breakfast, I'm sure you know to help yourself, but if you'd like heartier fare, there's lentil soup in the crock pot and Bridget made barley bread; there's a quarter loaf left, if you'd like.

"I didn't know Bridget could bake," Cecily marveled. But when she'd been nine—her little sister's current age—she certainly had.

"She's watched you often enough," Mrs. Lapine replied. "And me. And she's discovered that when a recipe is written down—or printed from the internet—reading it is a sight easier than trying to remember how others before you've done it. Mind," she added, "it won't quite taste like mine. I always use my own ale, and there hasn't been occasion to brew any fresh stock since we came to this land."

"And the liquor store wouldn't sell to her. Or me," Cecily added. Not like back in Sherwood, where there were no laws to forbid selling alcohol to youngsters—though drunkenness was looked upon askance at any age. She'd tried Mama's ale once and remembered wondering how anything that tasted so vile could make barley bread taste so good.

"No," Mama nodded, "they wouldn't. But it seems that Mr. Clark was willing to spare her a measure of the dwarfish variety, once he knew why she was asking it of him." She sighed. "I don't know when she got over her shyness about strangers. And maybe I should have taught Bridget more by now, instead of putting so much on your shoulders. Maybe then, she would have come to me for help instead of seeking elsewhere." She shook her head, still smiling tiredly. "At any rate, the bread's certainly tasty enough and you're welcome to what's left of it."

Cecily nodded. "I had breakfast this morning, so bread and soup sound wonderful, Mama, thank you."

Her mother's smile grew slightly wider. "Go eat, then. I'll join you in a moment."

---

Lily's eyes skimmed the page in disbelief. In the background, she could still hear the gruff-voiced protests. It didn't sound as though Dopey was letting his guest know he had company, but the guy didn't seem able to take no for an answer. Lily frowned. The one-sided conversation wasn't nearly as interesting as what she was reading.

Scratch that. 'Vulnerability assessment of mining subsidence hazards in coastal areas' wasn't really her thing, and although the paper was written in plain English with very little of the jargon she might have expected from what was clearly academic writing, much of it was over her head. But based on everything she'd seen so far, it also should be over—

The swivel chair suddenly spun about and she found herself face to face with Dopey, his face frozen in an expression of anger, his eyes fearful. He lunged past her to turn off the monitor—
though not the computer—in one savage motion.

"Hey!" Lily exclaimed. Then, more softly, "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snoop. But what was that?"

Dopey's hands gesticulated wildly.

Lily shook her head. "I'm sorry. I-I don't..."

He heaved a silent sigh and turned the monitor back on. He was mousing over to the minus sign that would minimize the document, when Lily murmured, "You wrote it, didn't you?" His shoulders slumped. As he had before, he pressed his finger to his lips.

"I won't tell anyone," Lily assured him. "But why?" She pointed to the byline under the title. "Is that your real name?" she asked. "Herbert Simple?"

Dopey chewed his lip for a moment. Then he brought up the other, untitled document in which he'd been typing to her earlier.

*My real name is Dopey,* appeared on the screen as his fingers flew across the keyboard. *Do you know about the Dark Curse?*


A quick nod. He kept typing. *It brought us here, but it made us forget who we were and gave us false names and false memories. Herbert Simple was/is mine.*

Lily nodded her comprehension. "So, if your real name is Dopey, then...?"

Dopey's fingers hovered over the keyboard for another long moment, before they finally typed, *Well, I couldn't use that when I applied to Columbia's Masters in Civil Engineering program. My name is Dopey, not Dumbbell.*

Lily couldn't quite suppress a giggle. Then her eyes widened. "Wait, you've got a master's degree?"

Dopey smiled slyly. *Not yet.* His smile dropped away. *And if I don't finish this thesis, not ever. You won't tell?*

"Uh," Lily blinked. "Sure, it can be our secret. But... why?"

This time the answer wasn't long in coming. *I'm Dopey. Who'd believe you if you told?*

"But why don't you tell anyone?"

This time, there was no hesitation before he typed his reply. *I'm Dopey. Who'd believe me if I told?* He shrugged. *I only applied to see if I could get accepted. I got accepted. Now I want to see if I can finish the program. If I do, he looked up for a moment his eyes flashing a mix of nervousness and wonder. Then he went back to his half-finished sentence, then it will be time to tell people. He frowned. I don't want anyone to ask me how I'm doing or if it's hard or if I really think I can finish. I just want to do it. For me. Not for them. Does that sound stupid?*

Lily shook her head. "No. But," she smiled, "it does sound a little dopey."

A broad grin creased her new friend's face. *That's me,* he typed happily. *A little Dopey.*
Cecily was using a crust of bread to mop up the last of the soup from her bowl when Mama came downstairs. "Your Mr. Quince called to speak with me the other day," she said quietly. "I've been meaning to mention it before this."

Cecily's hand froze, still pressing the crust against the inner curve of the bowl. "What did he want?" she asked, half-dreading the answer. Skippy had been less-disruptive than usual at rehearsals, but he was still disruptive. Especially when tempers ran short because scenes weren't coming together as smoothly as they might be. She knew that her brother's presence was only tolerated at rehearsals provided he behaved himself. And if he'd spoken to Mama... *I'm going to have to drop the play,* she realized.

"He wanted to know whether you'd been a player in the village pantomimes back in our land," Mama remarked. "When I told him you hadn't, he asked if you'd apprenticed with a player's troupe."

"Wh-what?" Cecily stammered.

Her mother was smiling. "I set him straight about that one, too," she said. "And that was when he told me that you have quite the natural talent for acting."

It took the meeting of her thumb and index finger to realize that she'd been pressing down on the bread crust so hard, she'd broken it in two. "Oh," she murmured, looking down.

"Well, you don't have to look so unhappy about it!" her mother laughed.

"I-I'm not," Cecily said. "Not about that," she added.

"Well, what then?"

Cecily shook her head. "Nothing important," she said, looking down again. Mama worked so hard; there was no point in making her feel bad over things that couldn't be changed. And someone did have to look after Skippy and the others. And she was the eldest. "It's okay."

Her mother waited for her to look up once more. "What's okay?" she probed.

"Everything. Really, Mama. If you need me at home, well then, talent or no, of course I'll drop the play. Or if Mr. Quince said Skippy can't come to rehearsals anymore, then I guess that's that." She forced herself to smile. "Family comes first."

Mama locked eyes on hers. "Family does come first," she agreed. "I suppose that all this time, I've been overlooking that you're family, too. And it's not terrible for you to have a few interests outside of schoolwork and housework." Her expression turned stern, but her eyes couldn't quite hide a twinkle. "Mind you, I do still need your help. And in a few months, once this play of yours is over, I'll expect you at home most evenings."

Cecily's eyes widened. "Mama?"

"I hadn't realized that there were afterschool programs at the elementary," Mama admitted.

Cecily bit her lip. "But... don't those cost money?"

"They do," Mama nodded. "But since schooling doesn't, I think I can manage it. And your Mr. Quince said he'd put in a good word with the person who coordinates those activities and arrange for Skippy to take part, even though it is past the deadline for registration." Her mother smiled. "Really, Cecily, even when times were hard, I could generally at least pay the dame school fees."
Though it was a mercy they'd take fruit preserves and firewood when coin was scarce." She took the soup pot from the stove, brought it to the table and held it over Cecily's bowl with a questioning look. When Cecily nodded, she tipped the remaining contents in.

"Don't think you're excused from all your duties," Mama continued with mock severity. "When you're home, I expect you to pitch in as needed. And even if schooling is free, that's no excuse to not take it seriously; if your grades slip, I'll have to reassess your involvement in that play. But assuming that you keep them high, and that you enjoy what you're doing, well, I suppose Bridget's big enough to take on a few of your chores some evenings. So's Skippy, for that matter," she added. "Let's see whether we can't make this work," she continued, matching her daughter's slowly dawning smile with one of her own.

"So, uh, that conversation before?" Lily said carefully. "It sounded pretty intense. Who was that guy?"

Dopey had some sort of document open with tiny text and a number of bar graphs and tables, but he minimized it to bring back the Word page. *My brother,* he typed.

"What did he want?" She asked, not letting on what she'd overheard. She watched her answer appear on the screen.

*He's leading a search party. He wanted me along.*

Lily frowned. "A search party?" she repeated, still playing dumb. "Someone's lost? I mean, look, you don't have to stay here to look after me; I'll be fine on my own." She exhaled through her nose. "I'm pretty used to it."

Dopey shook his head. *Just because you will be doesn't mean you should be,* he typed.

"That's… actually kind of sweet," Lily said, smiling despite herself. "But—"

Dopey was typing again. *I didn't have to join the search party,* his fingers keyed. *Not with you right here.*

"Uh, seriously?" Lily replied as her hands went cold. "I don't want to be a problem. If your brother wants you to help him find, uh, whoever it is, the—" She broke off in mid-word, seeing the new line of text on the screen.

*You,* it read, confirming that Dopey had guessed her secret after all. *My brother is hunting for you.*
A/N: Belle is reading from The Awakening by Kate Chopin (Herbert S. Stone & Co., 1899).

Chapter Forty-Nine

Belle sat by her father's bedside, an Oxford World's Classic paperback in hand, as she read aloud. "Chapter seven," she smiled reassuringly, wondering if any of what she was reading was penetrating the fog of Moe French's medications. Dr. Whale had assured her that this was normal for his injuries; his body needed time to heal. He'd also agreed with Rumple that magical healings might do more harm than good.

"Right now," Whale had said, "pain is a good thing. It's telling us where the trouble is, so we can fix it. Magic can mask the symptoms. For less-severe injuries, that's fine; a deep cut needs disinfecting and stitches. If magic can speed up the process, I'm all for it. Similarly, if it's being used to hide a chronic, non-life-threatening condition—"

—*Like Rumple's limp*, Belle had thought—

—"I'm certainly not opposed. But right now, we're still not sure of all the ramifications of your father's fall. If someone goes blundering in with a patch-up job, it might not address all the underlying causes. This might be slower, but it's much less risky."

And Belle had nodded her understanding and tried to hide her dismay when she saw her father wrapped in blankets and bandages, his glazed eyes only occasionally sparking with recognition. Wincing, she took a breath and continued. "Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions."

Moe grunted and Belle immediately looked up, a smile poised to spread across her face. But her father only blinked and then his eyelids slowly drooped. Belle bit her lip. Then she reached out and clasped Moe's hand in hers. Maybe she only imagined the slight squeeze she felt in return, but she took another breath and, still holding his hand, looked down at the page once more.

"*That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her...*"

Lily felt her heart lurch. "For me?" she repeated, one hand sliding almost instinctively into her jacket pocket for her mace. "What do you mean?"

Dopey shook his head. *The curtain was thin enough for you to hear, wasn't it?*

Lily nodded. "Yeah, but he was talking about a dragon! I mean," she demanded, "do I look like a
Not now, Dopey typed. *Yesterday was different.*

The mace canister was warm in her clenched hand. "You think I'm a dragon," she said, tilting her head at him in disbelief. "Maybe you're not as smart as I thought."

Dopey shrugged. *It's okay,* he typed. *Everyone's wrong sometimes. But I know Maleficent has a human form. Most dragons do. Last night, she brought her daughter to the mine. I met you there. I know just about everyone in this town. Maybe not every name, but every face. Not yours. Now, Maleficent's daughter is missing. The last place she saw her was in the mine."

He started a new paragraph.

*If you want to leave, I'm not stopping you. You don't have to hurt me to get away.*

Lily blinked. Did dwarfs have X-ray vision or something? "Who said anything about hurting you?" she blurted.

*When you can't talk, sometimes you use signs. Sometimes you don't have to.* He glanced up at her with a slight shrug before going back to his keyboard. *Body language. I can't read everything, but I know when someone is getting ready to attack. I really hope you won't. I mean,* he smiled slowly, *if you're going to keep my secret, it's only fair I keep yours."

Lily regarded him for a long moment, her eyes narrowed in a puzzled frown. Then she smiled back with a note of resignation and pulled her hand out of her pocket, opening it to show Dopey that her palm was empty. "Why would you do that?" she asked. "You barely know me. And, if I am who you think I am—and I'm not saying you're right—then I'm dangerous. Why wouldn't you tell your brother where I am?"

*My brother is scared,* Dopey typed. *When he's scared, he doesn't listen. If he won't listen, I can't talk to him. If I can't talk to him, he might try to hurt you. I don't want that.* He smiled wryly. *Especially if you aren't a dragon. But even if you are.*

"But if I am, don't you think I'll be able to defend myself?"

Dopey nodded seriously. *Yes. But you'll be scared. And then you'll probably hurt him. I don't want that either. He's my brother.*

Lily exhaled. "Yesterday," she said slowly, "I was angry. And, yeah, okay, maybe a little scared, too. Maybe I still am. Both. But I didn't want to do… I didn't mean to hurt… I mean…" She shook her head and buried her face in her hands. "I always do this," she muttered.

*Do what?* Dopey typed.

"The wrong damned thing!" She practically spat the words out. "No matter what I do, it always comes out wrong. Even when I try to do better, it blows up in my face." Her shoulders slumped. "I used to joke about being cursed. Then I found out I really was."

She waited for Dopey to respond, knowing that he was going to tell her not to be silly or worse, accuse her of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy or some of the other crap that the therapist at that halfway house had told her, trying to convince her that she was wrong. She'd never shown him the old man's book, of course; telling him that she was Maleficent's daughter and that Snow White and Prince Charming had transferred their baby's potential for Darkness into her body before she'd been born would have earned her some heavy medication and maybe another lockup—one where there'd
be no maximum time she might serve.

*Almost everyone in this town has been cursed at one time or another,* Dopey typed. *It's not the end of the world.*

Lily felt like she'd been sucker-punched. "Sometimes it feels like it," she muttered.

Dopey nodded. *Yeah. Sometimes it does.*

---

Rumple was sitting in the hospital cafeteria studying his Styrofoam coffee cup, when he heard footsteps approaching. He looked up with a welcoming smile as Belle joined him. Then he shook his head sadly. "Still no change?"

Belle sighed. "I don't know," she admitted. "Dr. Whale says everything is normal for the circumstances. Seeing him like this—my father, I mean," she clarified with a pained smile, "it's hard. But he's my father," she added. "I can't not be here for him. Especially since…" She sighed. "I'm being silly, aren't I?"

Rumple blinked. "Silly," he repeated, sounding as though he couldn't quite believe his ears. "That's scarcely a word I'd think to apply to you under any circumstance."

Belle flashed him a quick smile. "I'm sorry," she said at once. "I just… feel as though for every step forward I take, I fall back two."

Rumple raised an eyebrow and took a sip of his slightly-warmer-than-tepid coffee. "I believe I know the feeling," he murmured.

Belle's smile lasted a fraction of a second longer this time. "I thought I was over worrying about what people would think," she said. "That it's not always a question of doing 'the' right thing—as if there could be only one, but 'a' right thing." She waited, gauging Rumple's reaction. It was only when he nodded encouragingly that she continued. "I know that when Father's recovered enough to go home he won't be… happy… that I'll be making arrangements for someone else to look after him."

"Mmm," Rumple said noncommittally. "Given his opinion of me, I shouldn't think he'd enjoy moving in with us either. Still…" He shook his head. "As much as I support your decision—and I do think you're making the right one—if you should change your mind, well, it's not as though the house isn't big enough. Or that I don't spend long hours away. And if all else fails, it will be some time before your father will be able manage stairs. If his company should grow too tedious for me, well, it's no great difficulty for me to change floors."

At Belle's sharp look, he gave her a diffident shrug. "I know this isn't easy for you. Whatever you ultimately choose to do, you have my support."

Belle nodded. And now her smile was warmer, as she shook her head. "But this shouldn't be about what's easy for me, but what's easy for us. And even if you're ready to give way…" She covered his hand with hers, "Do you honestly imagine it would make me happy knowing that he'll be spending his every waking moment sniping away at you, when he's not trying to convince me to leave you?" She made an irritated face. "At this point, I don't even know that he can help himself, but I do know he doesn't want to. He's still the same man who'd rather I was wandering about in the outside world with no idea who I was or where I'd come from than see me with you."

"I suppose I can at least be glad he's never tried to hide it."

Rumple nodded back. "So if nothing has changed since earlier and your mind is still made up…?"
Belle sighed. "I know that Henry made sure you saw my speech at the town line that day that you and Emma went over. So you know I finally admitted to myself—and about half the town," she added with a wry smile, "that a lot of the… the demands I placed on you were less about you than about how I wanted everyone else to see you. And me," she added, almost in a whisper. "I-I don't mean to bring up the past now. Except I feel like I'm doing it again. Like I might change my mind after all, not because he needs me or because I want to… to nurse him back to health myself or because I have some fantasy that if he's forced to spend time with you, he'll eventually have to admit that you're a better person than he gives you credit for—which you are," she added, squeezing his hand for emphasis. "No, I'm afraid of what people will say when they hear that I didn't have him move in with us o-or go back to him for a few weeks."

"Because good daughters are expected to do so," Rumple stated.

"Well, aren't they?"

Rumple covered her hand with his free one. "I'd say that good daughters have a duty to ensure that an ill or injured parent receives the best care possible. It doesn't necessarily follow that those good daughters are the best qualified to deliver that care." His eyes locked onto hers. "You're hiring a nurse. A good one—even with my longstanding opinions on fairies in general, I'm not about to disparage their talents in that area. More to the point, you're hiring a caregiver who will approach the task without the… well, call it emotional baggage, which would make them vulnerable to," he hesitated, "strong personalities."

Belle closed her eyes. "Bullies, you mean," she replied.

"Well, I was trying to be diplomatic," Rumple remarked.

Despite herself a weary chuckle escaped her. "I do wish that things could be different," she said. Then she took a deep breath and seemed to collect herself. "But since they aren't, Merryweather asked me to stop by her office to discuss arrangements. Would you like to come with me or would you rather wait here?"

Rumple smiled. Then he released her hand and fumbled for his cane. He'd follow this woman to the ends of this earth or any other; three floors up by elevator was scarcely an imposition.

"I ought to get some better shoes," Belle murmured, as Rumple unlocked the shop. As Rumple turned to her, she smiled self-consciously. "I guess it's been at the back of my mind since Dr. Whale explained about Cruella. If she hadn't been in heels, she might not have lost her balance." She sighed. "I don't want something like that happening to me."

Rumple nodded soberly. "It's crossed my mind as well," he admitted. "But you didn't ask for my opinion and I didn't want to say anything until you did." He pushed the door open and gestured to Belle to precede him.

Belle sighed. "I've been thinking about it for a while, even before all of this happened," she said. "I mean, I've had to wear runners for kickboxing and I must say they're more comfortable." She winced. "I guess I've never liked being… short."

Rumple chuckled. "I believe I can understand that."

"I know I'll always be a little girl in my father's eyes—which isn't always a good thing," she added. "But being mistaken for a child isn't exactly desirable when one is in their teens." She made a face. "Or older. Heels just put me on a," her lips twitched, "a better footing, I suppose."
"So you came to depend on something that's proving more dangerous than you realized," Rumple nodded. "Again, something with which I've some passing familiarity."

Belle smiled. "I'm not saying I'll be wearing flats from this point onward. But I think I might try lower heels. Or wedges."

"Well. Whatever you decide—"

The bell over the door jangled behind them and both turned as one. Rumple felt his face settle into its usual inscrutable mask when he saw the four newcomers in the doorway. He supposed he should have been expecting them.

Regina took another step forward and Snow, David, and Maleficent followed suit. "Rumple," Regina greeted him. "We need to talk."

"Well," Lily said, getting to her feet, "it's been great meeting you and… thanks for covering for me. But I should be going."

Dopey blinked. You said you didn't have a place to stay, he typed.

"I don't," Lily admitted. "But I can't just move in with you."

Not forever, no. For a few days is different. Or do you have money for a room? I can take you to Granny's.

"Your grandmother?"

Not mine. Dopey's smile was back, as he explained that he'd been referring to the woman who ran the bed and breakfast.

Lily shook her head. "No, that won't work. Look, your brother's right to be scared of me. Not just because I can turn into a dragon. Because even when I don't mean to, I hurt people. Listen. When I was about fifteen, I met someone; a girl about my own age. She was in a grocery store, trying to shove some Pop Tarts into her coat. Let's just say she wasn't very good at it. I came to her rescue, we hit it off, and spent the day together. I'd never had a real friend before—I mean, sure, people were nice until they got to know me, but once they did…" Her voice trailed off. "Anyway, I didn't want it go that way this time, so I tried to be the kind of person she thought I was. She was on the run from Child Services and assumed I was, too. I didn't set her straight. Anyway, we had a blast— until my dad showed up to take me home." She glanced nervously at Dopey, waiting for his face to harden, his eyes to go flat, his hand to point toward the door. Instead, he just nodded.

She took another breath. "Once she knew I'd lied about that, she wasn't interested in excuses or explanations. She didn't care that I was just as lonely and miserable with a home as she was without it. And I guess maybe I could understand that, but I still felt closer to her than I had to anyone else. Anyway, a few months later, I tracked her down at her new foster home. This time I really was on the run. See, my folks had kicked me out. They called me 'unmanageable' and I guess I was. I took up with this guy; he looked out for me and we had some good times. Until we decided to hold up a Tom Thumb…"

"Let's not bandy words," Maleficent said quietly. "I've been apprised of my daughter's recent activities and I'm here to discuss reparations."

Rumple raised an eyebrow. His gaze flickered to Belle, who pressed her lips together firmly and
gave a slight nod. "Do tell," he replied.

Maleficent took a step forward. "I want to get to know my daughter. Something that's not likely to happen if you're out for her blood. So. What will it take to get you to back off?"

Rumple frowned. "I must admit that I wasn't expecting this delegation," he murmured. "But it seems to me that I'm not the only wronged party and," he locked eyes on Regina, "it's certainly not my place to speak for others with similar claims." A faint smile came to his face when Regina flushed and lowered her eyes. "So, if you'll excuse me for a moment," he continued a bit more pleasantly, "my wife and I need to discuss your query in private." He held out a hand to Belle, motioning toward the back office with his other one.

"We'll try to be brief," he added. "And I trust you'll touch nothing in our absence."

It wasn't a request.

As the two disappeared into the other room, Maleficent looked at the Regina, nonplussed. "Not one of the reactions I was anticipating."

"Times change," Regina murmured.

"So I'm learning."

"So," Lily sighed, ending her account by describing how she'd stormed away from her mother and met him, "are there any bridges left in this town I haven't burned? Or should I just cut my losses and clear out before I'm facing down a mob with torches and pitchforks?"

Dopey pressed his lips together and pushed them in and out. That's why I didn't tell my brother you were here, he typed. He hesitated for a moment before adding, Maybe taking you to Granny is a bad idea, too.


That doesn't mean you should go, Dopey typed.

"Yeah? Give me one good reason I should stay."

Running away doesn't solve anything.

"I dunno, it's been working out pretty well, so far," she muttered.

Really?

"No. But what choice do I have? After everything I've done, even I wouldn't give me a second chance. And if I did, I'd blow it anyway."

Dopey regarded her soberly for a moment. Then he nodded. Probably. Lily opened her mouth to respond, but stopped when she realized that he wasn't finished. Just like Emma, Rumpelstiltskin, Regina, Belle, Hook... Do you want me to keep listing names or do you have enough examples?

Lily shook her head. "I've got enough."

You aren't the only person in this town with a bad history. They'll understand. He frowned. But you should give them some time to calm down. You did manage to tick off just about everyone on that list yesterday.
"Great."

Dopey frowned. *Your mother might help.* Lily snorted, but he kept on typing as though he hadn't heard her. *She knows Regina and Rumpelstiltskin. She might be able to talk to them.*

Lily swallowed. "After the way I left her, she probably doesn't want anything else to do with me." She took a breath and let it out. "All she wanted to do was know me. But nobody who does ever sticks around once they find out what I'm really like."

*She's your mother.*

"Yeah, so think about how it would feel if she decided she'd wasted all these years worrying about me and that Snow White and Prince Charming had done her a favor after all."

Dopey shook his head. *I don't think so. My brother told me that she went to Snow White and David; his name isn't Charming, by the way. She wants their help in finding you. That was after you left. She hasn't given up. You shouldn't either.*

"Yet," Lily said gloomily. "She hasn't given up yet. She just met me today. Give her time."

*Give her a chance. Don't be afraid to take one for yourself, either.*

"Who's afraid?" Lily demanded.

Dopey regarded her soberly. *You.*

"What, of her? Of them? Please."

Dopey shook his head. *A minute ago, you were saying you burned bridges. Now that I tell you that you can probably get another chance, you're holding back. If you're not afraid, then he stopped typing and looked at her again. Then we already know I'm Dopey. Help me understand.*

"Will you quit doing that?" Lily snapped. "You keep falling back on your name like it has to define you. It doesn't!"

Dopey shrugged. *You keep falling back on your Darkness like it has to define YOU. Why should it?*

Lily sucked in her breath. Then she exhaled noisily. For several long moments, her eyes darted back and forth from the screen to the dwarf to the floor. Finally she muttered, "Sheesh, I don't know which one of us is the bigger dope here."

Dopey grinned. *Me. Obviously.*

Lily laughed.

Belle and Rumple weren't in the back room for more than five minutes, but it felt like a good deal longer to the delegation that awaited them on the shop floor. When they emerged, the others leaned forward expectantly. The two exchanged a resigned glance, faintly-concealed exasperation evident on both faces. It wasn't until Belle nodded, her mouth a thin line, that Rumple smiled and locked his eyes on Maleficent.

"As far as restitution for what was done to me..." Rumple spoke slowly and deliberately let his voice trail off. He sighed. "While I do have a valid claim against your daughter, I'm not forgetting a certain incident in our shared past. One that involved a chernabog?" He waited until he saw recognition spark in the dragon's eyes. "It would appear that, just as I have a grievance against your
daughter, you have at least as strong a complaint against me. Perhaps, one might make a case that the two grievances would… cancel one another out?"

Maleficent blinked. Then a faint smile curved on her lips. "One might," she agreed, just as slowly. "Is that a case you're willing to make?"

"That I relinquish my claim against your daughter, providing that you relinquish yours against me?" Rumple nodded. "I am. However, as I stated earlier, this is only with regard to my claim. I don't pretend to speak for anyone else involved."

"I understand," Maleficent nodded. She turned inquiringly to Belle.

Belle shook her head. "I have no quarrel with you. Not anymore," she said firmly. "As for your daughter, I'd want to speak with her before I decide anything." It wasn't the entire truth. The events of the last couple of days were still too fresh and raw in Belle's mind for her to display any degree of magnanimity. Her father was still sliding in and out of consciousness. The clock tower and library were a ruin. And as for what Lily had done to Rumple, well even if Rumple could forgive it, Belle didn't know that she could. She kept picturing how she and Emma had discovered him in that cage, and the shape he'd been in when they had, and each time she did, she felt her anger boiling anew. She needed more time and she was stalling for it—something Rumple had suggested when she'd made her feelings plain. One day, somehow, she knew that she would find a way to forgive all of this. After all, Good didn't seek vengeance or retribution. One day, she'd understand how. But not today.

Maleficent nodded again. "I suppose that's fair enough," she admitted. "At the moment, though, I'm afraid I don't know how to find her."

David spoke up then. "We were hoping that a locator spell might—"

"—or that sphere you used to find David," Snow interrupted.

Rumple shook his head. "That would work for a broader expanse of terrain," he said. "But this town is but a speck on a rather large map. The sphere would only tell us that she's in it, not provide an address. As for a locator spell," he turned once more to Maleficent. "Do you have anything of hers?"

Maleficent shook her head sadly.

Rumple sighed. "Well, there is something else we might try, but it would be a great deal less reliable."

"Less reliable is still better than nothing," Regina pointed out.

"True," Rumple agreed. He turned to his wife. "Would you feel up to managing the shop?" he asked. "I'll need to obtain certain materials for this. One can hope that the queen's vault will furnish all of them, but if any are lacking, I'll need to stop off at home and pick up what's needed from the basement."

Belle really would have preferred he stay with her. If the hospital should call with news of her father, she'd much rather he be close by. Still, she forced herself to smile and answer, "Of course."

Belle looked up as the bell jangled, interrupting her in the middle of her book. Her face relaxed in a smile when she saw Emma. "Rumple's not here," she said quickly.
Emma smiled back. "That's okay. I came by to see how you're holding up, too." Her smile dimmed slightly. "How's your father doing?"

Belle sighed. "Dr. Whale's optimistic," she murmured.

"Well, that's something. But between that and the elevator and..." She shook her head. "I'm not even going to pretend I have any idea what you're going through, but..."

"Emma?"

Emma shook her head. "I heard somewhere that you shouldn't just ask if there's anything you can do; you should come up with something more... I don't know, concrete? Specific? Only I can't. So, uh..." She shrugged apologetically. "If there's anything I can do...?"

Belle exhaled. "You know, besides Rumple, I think you're the first person who's even asked that much. Thank you."

"How are you holding up?" Emma asked seriously.

Belle started to murmur that she was fine and thank Emma for asking, but to her own surprise, the words that actually emerged were, "Horribly. I'm trying to be strong for Rumple, for what's coming for my father, for whatever Lily o-or Maleficent might be planning or whatever comes next, but I'm not! I'm sorry, but I'm just not that strong! A-and now, Dr. Whale says that I'm not even really responsible for Cruella, so I feel like I have to pull myself together and I slept in this morning and missed my kickboxing and I could really stand to kick something right now and..." She glanced nervously at Emma.

Emma regarded her patiently and Belle couldn't quite read her expression. "I didn't know all of that was going to come out," she finished with an embarrassed mutter.

Emma shrugged. "I think it had to, sooner or later. Do you need to be here? I mean, are you doing anything that can't wait, or do you want to get away for a bit?"

Belle hesitated. "I have my phone," she said. "So if Rumple or the hospital need to get in touch with me, I," she squared her shoulders. "I suppose I could lock up. Why?"

"Well, I don't know much about kickboxing," Emma admitted. "But I've taken a few women's self-defense classes. If you're looking for a sparring partner, I think I could fit the bill." She smiled. "And if that doesn't work, I can show you how to dismantle a toaster; that's what I sometimes do when I'm ticked off."

"And put it back together again, I hope," Belle murmured, smiling just a bit as she came out from behind the counter.

"Yeah," Emma nodded, "I ought to learn how to do that part too, one of these days."

Rumple trailed a half-pace behind the others until they were actually inside the vault. Then he stepped to the fore, having eyes only for the contents of her shelves. Regina and the others observed as he took down a hollow glass sphere from one nook, a jar from another cranny, and several pouches from various ledges and niches.

"This wouldn't be from a flaga, would it?" he asked, lifting a squat round jar, in which a single eyeball floated in viscous fluid with a faint amber tinge."
"I should hope it is," Regina replied tartly. "Otherwise, there's a certain peddler I'll need to have a few choice words with, even at this late date. Why?"

Rumple cleared his throat. "To see your daughter's past," he said, turning to Maleficent, "would be easy enough. With an object that was earmarked for her use—whether or not it actually came into her possession—I could pull that up easily enough." He smiled. "As it happens, there is such a bauble currently residing in my shop; we discuss returning it at some later time."

Maleficent's eyebrows shot up. "Am I to understand that a teething rattle I thought left behind in our land made the crossing with the Dark Curse?"

"It did. And it's certainly of no use to me, though I'm sure I could find a buyer if you're not interested." He shrugged. "Your daughter's rather past the age when it would be of use to her."

"It's been in my family for generations," Maleficent said, and though she tried to suppress her excitement, Rumple detected it easily enough. "I'm loath to part with it unnecessarily. But as to the task at hand?"

Rumple nodded. "Unfortunately, a locator spell wouldn't work on an object your daughter never even saw, let alone touched. But I believe that I can craft something that will. I don't imagine that either of you are familiar with divination spells?"

Regina shook her head slowly. "I know we touched on them briefly when you were teaching me," she said, "but I wasn't much interested in pursuing them then. And later, when I keeping tabs on the object of my hunt," her smile was slightly apologetic, though her tone was light as she and Snow glanced at one another briefly, "well, I had Sidney. He was reliable enough and it was his own power that trapped him in my mirror, so while all magic comes with a price, I much preferred having the payment devolve on him."

"A fair point," Rumple nodded approvingly. "Maleficent?"

"Sadly, not my area of expertise" the dragon admitted.

Rumple sighed. "Well, no matter, I suppose. I know how to fashion the device we need. But as my own magic is less reliable than I'd like for this sort of work, I'm afraid that shortcuts are out of the question." His lips curved in a faint smile. "If your Majesty has any crossword puzzle magazines or Mills and Boon novels at hand, I'd suggest producing them. We're going to be here for quite some time."

"You're upset," Astrid said with some dismay, taking in Leroy's scowl. "I suppose I could just keep staying at the convent until the clock tower's repaired; it wasn't so bad last night." She sighed. "Though if Blue comes back…"

Leroy shook his head. "I'm not really upset, sister. Astrid," he amended. "And I know that after my brothers and I took Snow in when she was on the run from the queen, it's not like I've got any room to talk. But the town will."

"Sorry?"

Leroy sighed. "You're a single woman, sister. Robin Hood's a widower. The two of you sleeping under the same roof…"

Astrid released a startled laugh. "B-but he's with Regina!" she exclaimed. "And I certainly don't have any romantic feelings for him, nor he for me. This is just… business," she sputtered.
"Someone has to look after the baby when he can't, and with Zelena loose…" Her voice trailed off for a moment. Then she added, "Anyway, it was Regina's idea, so I'm sure she doesn't believe—"

"I know," Leroy held up his hands in a placating gesture. "But tongues flap and reputations get ruined sometimes. Remember what happened a few Miners Days back, after Katheryn found out about Mary Margaret and David."

"That's hardly the same thing," Astrid protested. "I mean, they were married; they just didn't remember it!"

"And neither did anyone else," Leroy pointed out. "That's not the point. The point is that Kathryn stormed over to the elementary and slapped Mary Margaret in the middle of lunch—say around 12:30 for the heck of it—and blasted her for having an affair with the man everyone thought was her husband. By the time school let out at 2:45, everyone had their version of the story and Mary Margaret's name was mud. It took less than three hours—not even half the afternoon." He sighed. "Look. I'm not saying you can't watch the kid. But I don't think moving in with him is the best idea. You still have that job working for Mrs. Herman, right?"

Astrid nodded. "I took today off; after last night, I wasn't sure I was in any frame of mind to go in, though looking after the little ones might have distracted me. And then, Regina and Robin approached me and… I've been debating." Her face fell. "I guess you're right."

"Hang on, sister," Leroy said, placing his hand on her arm. "Just because I don't think you should move in doesn't mean I think you can't help." He smiled. "You work at a daycare, for crying out loud. No reason you can't watch the kid there. And after hours, there's no problem with your babysitting her, whether at Robin's place or at the convent. The problem's with you and him spending time alone together, not with your looking after a baby."

"He also asked me if I'd mind keeping an eye on Roland, now that they'll be in town, away from the Merry Men," Astrid murmured.

Leroy shrugged. "Still not a problem."

Astrid smiled. "I guess I wasn't thinking. Nobody expects fairies to have… feelings," she admitted. "Not like the kind I have for you. And the same applies to nuns. It just… didn't occur to me."

"I know," Leroy nodded. "If I hadn't seen it with Mary Margaret, it probably wouldn't have occurred to me either."

"I'll call Robin then," Astrid said, "and tell him what you suggested. I guess I can stay at the convent for now, at least." She smiled a bit apologetically. "Leroy?"

"Hmmm?"

"As long as I am staying there, Merryweather said I need to abide by the old seven o'clock curfew, unless my work schedule conflicts. It's already a quarter past six."

Leroy nodded and reached behind him for the coat he'd draped over the back of his chair. "No problem, sister. I'll walk you."

"Leroy?"

"Hmmm?"

Astrid's cheeks took on a pinker glow. "Just because I have to be back by seven doesn't mean the
night has to end. I mean… if you'd like to stay for a bit, I can put some coffee on. Or maybe you could." She ducked her head. "Honestly, I've never been able to get the coffee machine to work right." She added quickly, "And it's not like we'd be alone together; I mean, the other fairies will also be in—those who aren't on night shift at the hospital. So, there's no worry about reputations." Her eyes widened. "Or should we be worried about yours?" she asked. "One man alone with all of us women…"

Leroy blinked. Then he caught the telltale twinkle in her eye and laughed. "Town lothario instead of town drunk?" he deadpanned. "Sounds like a step up to me."

Belle was smiling as she unfastened her seatbelt. "This was a good idea," she admitted. Once she'd stopped worrying about accidentally injuring Emma—or worse—she'd begun to enjoy herself. Emma had proven to be a strong opponent, countering most of her attacks and responding with a few good ones of her own. Belle had been surprised—and pleased—to learn that the kickboxing practice drills were paying off; her own body reacting before her mind could fully process what Emma was about. (She knew that Emma must have been holding back a bit, but she didn't mind.)

Emma nodded. "If you want, we could do this again in a day or so." She grinned. "Seriously, at the end there, you were making me work for it. I think I'm getting rusty and I don't want to get too dependent on magic," she admitted.

"In a day or two," Belle agreed, rubbing her elbow. "It's not just magic that comes with a price and I feel like I've just been handed a bill for the afternoon."

"I could—"

Belle shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I've had worse aches and pains after most classes. And… you might want to hold onto your power for a time when you really need it."

Emma nodded again, taking her point. "Okay. But if there's anything I can do…"

Belle nodded, smiling. "Thanks. I'm just going to have a quiet night in; Rumple texted me to say that he was going to be a while. I should put some supper on."

"Yeah, my mother sent me a similar message. I guess I'd better stop off at home for the car seat and then get Neal from Granny. Good night."

"You too."

Belle was smiling as she made her way up the walk. She was feeling better. It wasn't just that she appreciated Emma's stopping by to make sure she was okay—though she did appreciate it. And it wasn't just that she'd actually had fun this afternoon—though she had had fun. It was also that she'd realized that Rumple had been right earlier. Helping Maleficent was the right thing to do. No matter what Lily had done, Good didn't exact vengeance. At the time, she'd forced herself to smile and agree, all the while thinking that there had been a time when she would have cheered to hear Rumple say those words aloud and mean them. She'd swallowed her own anger, told herself that she didn't really want to hurt Lily, and done her best to stifle the traitorous inner voice that had piped up with an, 'Oh yes, you do!'. And really, could anyone blame her for thinking it after all the pain and damage that Lily had caused?

But somewhere on the drive to the gym, while Belle had been bitterly running through the catalogue of harms that Lily (and Ursula and Cruella) had committed, she'd realized that she ought to follow Rumple's example and eschew any thoughts of retribution. She was Good, after all. And
Good didn’t exact vengeance…

…At least, she smiled, not when Wicked was almost certain to…

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